

Asha Rajatalab

(25 Years of Conflict and Creation ...)

Address: Asha Social School and Public Committee Ashram

Village: Nagepur, Post - Benipur, Rajatalab

District - Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221307

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Work Area: Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi district's Araj Line block

Objective:

- **Linking the children deprived of education to the mainstream of education.**
- **Empowering and developing leadership skills among Kishori citizens through self-help groups and education**

Background:

The ancient city Varanasi in India is famous all over the world for Banarasi Saris crafted by skilled weavers. However, few people are aware of the poor socio-economic and educational background of these weavers. Most of them are illiterate and extremely poor. Some forward-minded weavers began to consolidated efforts to uplift their children out of the miserable conditions through education and connecting children belonging to well off communities with weavers' children labouring in workshops in the weaving community. Asha Rajatalab was established in 1994. Since then, the institution has constantly strived to connect children participating in the mainstream growth and development of the country with underprivileged children belonging to the weaving community.

Asha School began one evening in the village of Nagepur in the year 1994, when four children from family of weavers began to attend informal teaching centre held in the evenings. Inspired by the small revolution, young weavers from the neighbouring villages also took similar initiatives in their respective villages to educate their children.

When Asha's initiative began in Nagepur, the village was struggling with illiteracy and bonded and child labour. However today, after 25 years of persistent efforts, Asha has contributed a fundamental change in the educational status of children and adolescents and has eliminated evils such as bonded and child labor from the village. Furthermore, Asha has continuously pressed educated young minds about important social issues such as gender discrimination and equality, violence against women, women as leaders, women's empowerment, education, environmental protection, and human rights.

Current activities operated in Asha Rajatalab:

Asha Social School (ASV): Inaugurated in 1994, informal learning centres in more than 10 villages to rescue children from child labour in weaving communities. Initially, children spent 3 hours daily evening studying, and after the word got out to other children and people of neighbouring villages, parents expressed the need to build a permanent school for the children. In response to this need, Asha established Asha Social School in Nagepur village in the year 2000-2001, where children were educated from LKG level to grade 5 level. More than 3000 children have successfully completed their primary education from this school. Currently, about 200 children are studying at Asha Social School.

Features of Asha School: The weaver families that Asha seeks to help are financially extremely poor. Moreover, the weavers are very conscious about investing in education. Government schools exist in the neighbourhood, but parents do not wish to send to children to these schools because of the poor quality of education. There are private schools in the vicinity, but the cost of education exceeds what an ordinary weaver family can afford. Thus, arose the need to establish Asha Social School. Asha Social School consists of trained teachers who deliver quality education. Asha Social School hosts amenities such as classrooms, chairs and tables, play grounds, clean drinking water, gender separated toilets, library, computers, music instruments, fans and other basic need fulfilling architecture. The school campus is absolutely green, quiet and, thus, conducive for learning.

Special achievements: Asha, working together with the local weaving community for the past 25 years, has gotten rid of inhumane practices of bonded and child labour. Children, who had earlier not even imagined entering through a school door, were empowered to complete college level education. Today, those children are self-reliant and successful in life. Many children who studied at Asha, have returned to Asha to give back to the community. They teach younger children and are leading by example.

Children with studies focus on human values and other social issues: Asha delivers quality modern academic education to children through qualified and well-trained teachers. Along with academics, children are taught moral values. This ensures a well-rounded education and nurtures self-reliance in the children.

Children are taken on trips to places of historical, social, and religious significance. Children are also lectured on contemporary social and political issues. Here is a slogan by the children: “Speciality about the Asha Social School is that, we learn how to fight along with learning about how to read and write.”

Free Education: So far children are given free education at Asha School. For the maintenance of the goods and for some programs, some children are requested to pay a 40 rupees per month fees. However, only 50% of the students are able to afford the fee. However, children's reading books, school clothes, food and other necessities are borne by their family members themselves.

Asha’s first school in India that earned recognition under the RTE Act, Asha Social School Nagepur is India's first school that met all standards in law and, in-line with the RTE Act, earned permission from Uttar Pradesh Government to school children from grade 1 through 8.

From this session (2019-20) onwards, Asha Social School has started studies from class 6 in the Hindi English Medium format under Secondary Education Board, Uttar Pradesh.

Asha Bal Pustakalay (Library): Asha Rajatalab Centre has a library for children and consists of grade 1 through college level textbooks. Books for preparing for different competitions and applying for jobs are also available. Furthermore, books on social issues, films, letters, magazines, novels, stories, newspapers etc. are available.

Apart from the children attending Asha Social School, more than 250 students from neighbouring schools and villages visit and use the library. The book is lent to students for a week or two. From time to time events are organized to spread awareness among and help students to prepare for their studies, career and academic competitions. Learned and distinguished individuals are invited to talk to and counsel students. Awareness workshops, seminars, training sessions, public meetings etc. are also organized on various social issues to develop students physically, mentally and intellectually. The responsibility of maintaining the resources of the library, lending resources, and organizing events is done by the children themselves.

Kishori Chetna sewing Training Centre: In the area where we are working, the situation of girls in weavers’ families is pathetic. Most girls are illiterate here, because not much attention is given to educating the girl child in this area. Girls education is interrupted early in life and they are married off at a young age. Discrimination in the upbringing of boys in the girls prevalent, as a result of which female health in the region is below acceptable. Asha Rajatalab is actively working with adolescent girls from 20 villages of Araj Block, Varanasi, with the objective of making them independent, self-reliant, and healthy. To that effort embroidery training centres have been established in 10 different villages, and more than 250 girls are actively learning the art of embroidery. On a monthly basis, girls have attended lectures, workshops, training sessions, public rallies, awareness campaigns and rallies about women’s rights, gender equality,

child marriages, domestic violence, adolescent women health, employment and more. Such activities and events have greatly helped girls gain awareness about their rights, health, education, and self-reliance. Child marriages have reduced a lot, many girls have started going to school, and some have completed college studies as well. Embroidery has given girls not only a way of life but also self-confidence. For the past few years, efforts have been focussed on issues like gender discrimination, domestic violence and menstrual health, for example, girls have been taught to build sanitary napkins at the teenager centre. This has brought about a very positive change in their lives.

Kishori Summer Camp organized: Over the past few years, girls have become more aware about their rights and education, and many girls have started attending school. At the same time, we have felt that there is lack of facilities like technical education and professional training for females especially in the villages. To alleviate that lack of facilities Kishori Summer Camp was initiated 10 years ago. Every year this event is held for one month during the summer holidays. Women are taught to work on computers, speak English, ride motorcycles, dance and music, create handicraft, do makeup art, self-defence

Apart from this, special attention is given to teach females rights, female leadership development, female health and female participation in society. Every year more than 100 girls attend the Kishori Summer Camp. After completing the camp, the attendees are awarded a certificate. It has been observed that participating in the summer camp has positively affected leadership skills and confidence among the women. So far about 200 girls have become self-supporting and self-reliant.

Women Self Help Groups (SHG) and Women Empowerment: 50 villages are working with the objective of empowering women and making women more self-reliant and self-confident. In the areas where the Asha Rajatalab works, the situation of women is not very good. Usury in the area is fierce and women are victims of domestic violence. Society still considers women weak and less capable than men. Women are not fully aware of their rights because they are illiterate, and on top of that they are also financially extremely poor.

From the beginning, we started the work of organizing and educating women. One by one we visited villages, met with women and helped them form their organization. Through various programs, we made them aware of their rights. Today there is a strong organization of women in the villages, and more than 3000 women are members of the organizations. They have created their own identity through their organization. Through the organization, women have put up a tremendous fight against the society and the government to demand for their rights and enforcement of laws against domestic violence and gender discrimination. Due to this collective action, women's prominence in the society has increased, they have had a say in government schemes, and there has been a decrease in female oppression. Today, women are conscious of their rights.

The women self-help groups were created with the aim of ending usury and making women self-reliant. Currently, about 75 such groups exist. Every month these groups save small amounts of money. Today, all the women self-help groups have together saved more than ten lakh rupees. This has given women great freedom from usury. Now, they take help from their group to fulfill their small needs. Women have become more self-reliant through these self-help groups. In the future, it is planned to create a federation for the women self-help groups – called Meena Bank.

Other programs run by Asha Rajatalab :

- **Building a Public Committee organization (Lok Samiti) in villages**
- **Eliminating gender discrimination through youth organization**
- **Conveying the rights of the workers through the labour union.**
- **Creating awareness and implementing creative programs for environmental protection.**
- **Implementing awareness programs water conservation techniques.**
- **Organizing a group to promote dowry-free marriages and prevent child marriages.**
- **Raising awareness about citizen rights such as Right to Education (RTE), Right to Work (MNREGA), Right to Food (RTF), and Right to Information (RTI).**
- **Programs to build protection against human rights violation**
- **Cultural awareness through cultural centre Jan Chetna Kala Manch.**

Asha Rajatalab's team: Asha Rajatalab is a strong team of 30 trained, experienced youth from Rajatalab who function as teachers, program coordinator, teen teachers, field workers, school in-charge or office in-charge. Each member contributes approximately 7 hours per day through various responsibilities. Apart from this permanent team of 30, there are more than 200 volunteers belonging to different villages who assist Asha Rajatalab in its efforts.

Economic cooperation for Asha Rajatalab's program: Since 2001 Asha Chicago had been helping Asha Rajatalab in its initiatives such as Asha Social School, Kishori Embroidery Training Center, Women's self-help group, Manrega union program and sustainability. Also, honorarium for teachers, program coordinators, teen teachers, field workers, and school and office in charges have been funded by Asha Chicago. The rest of the programs were done with local public assistance.

Current Financial Crisis and Challenges: Since April 2019 Asha Chicago has closed financial help completely under the NJSS project. Asha Chicago announced that it is closing its chapters and, thus, will be no longer able to financially support Asha Rajatalab. Asha Chicago has requested Asha Rajatalab to seek help from other chapters of Asha, local public cooperation, and other sources.

Asha Rajatalab has served the community well for the past 25 years. It brought mainstream education to impoverished and neglected children, especially girls. Asha's efforts have helped children support themselves and become more self-reliant, but situation is far from ideal and Asha's tireless efforts need to continue to ensure a better and more secure future for the children.

Appeal: Hope Asha Rajatalab is currently facing a financial crisis after the financial closure of Asha Chicago under the NJSS project. The crisis threatens to disrupt Asha's efforts to educate the teenage girls, as a result of which the future of children and adolescent girls may be extremely vulnerable. Furthermore, Asha Rajatalab team has been working tirelessly and honestly for the social cause and Asha has supported families of those who have actively supported the efforts. Therefore, the looming financial insufficiency presents a crisis not only for the children and adolescent girls but also for the families of Asha Rajatalab Team for whom working under Asha's support is the only means of livelihood. All teachers and staff workers and other people in Asha Rajatalab efforts along with their families will be in a state of hunger. Therefore, I, on behalf of Asha Rajatalab team make an appeal to financially support Asha Rajatalab efforts for a healthy continuation of learning centres and other social programs run by Asha Rajatalab.

Yours faithfully

Nandlal Master (Program co-ordinator)

And

Asha Rajatalab team