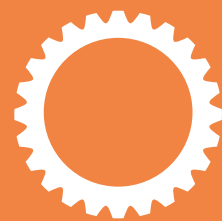


# Annual Report

2019



**Asha for Education**  
Bringing hope through education



# Our Voices



Asha for Education  
Bringing hope through education



# Our Voices

## Who We Are

Asha for Education would not function without its broad base of volunteer support, and the generosity of its patrons.

Here, we share the voices of various Asha volunteers - those who have worked alongside project partners on the ground, a site visitor, and volunteers here in the U.S.

We also hear from long-time Asha for Education patrons and get insights into what keeps them continuing their financial support of Asha over the years.

1500+  
Asha volunteers  
across 46 chapters

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\$3.2 million USD  
funds raised in  
2019 due to the  
generosity of  
thousands of  
donors



# Snapshots from volunteers visiting Asha projects





# 01 Volunteer Perspective What is Education?

By Padmanava Sen

*Padmanava Sen joined Asha for Education in 2006 after seeing a flyer for the organization at Georgia Tech, Atlanta. Since then, his life has been shaped in many ways by the organization. For the last 15 years, he has volunteered in different chapter and central team roles. Padmanava has had a keen interest in learning from grassroot projects and bringing new ideas into Asha projects. To better understand these areas, he taught voluntarily in formal school and open school settings during his time in Bangalore. Additionally, he has visited and spent more than three months at different project sites across India. He has also spoken to thousands of students across different age groups and discussed with teachers what is not working and what could potentially be improved upon in the current education system. Padmanava is currently a volunteer with the Asha Bangalore chapter and is also the 2020-2022 Asha-wide Projects Coordinator.*



I am still learning how to balance ideal goals with the harsh reality of a developing country when it comes to education and livelihood. This article is an attempt to share with you the balancing act, in order to answer this question that we face in our daily lives. A more personal account of my thoughts is given in [my blogpost](#).

## **The ideology**

I always felt 'Education' represented a long life of learning. Our education starts from Day 1 under parental supervision. Our teachers, friends and other elders add to the list as we grow. The goals of educational institutions are meant to ignite our interests and to create some level of confidence within us so that we can face the world with that knowledge.

The knowledge does not come only from parents, teachers or books. The learning is not confined to the boundaries of school or college. The learning should not stop after securing a job. All in all, formal education is merely a start to learning when the mind is fresh and has fewer distractions!

**FOR THE ECONOMICALLY EMPOWERED SEGMENTS OF OUR SOCIETY, THERE ARE STILL CHALLENGES AND THOSE ARE TO MEET THE EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR PARENTS. BUT, THE REST ARE STRUGGLING JUST TO GET THEIR BASIC NECESSITIES MET AS THEY GROW UP.**

### **The harsh reality**

Unfortunately, the reality of education is very different for most children in India. There is no training for parents to tackle issues while raising and educating children. Corporal punishment is still practiced at large. There is little awareness of proper food habits during pregnancy. Early childhood developments are hampered by malnutrition, poverty and lack of awareness. The at-home academic support is missing for the children of first-generation learners. In the Government and private schools, the dismal teacher-to-student ratio is causing a major lack of personal attention to mediocre students. Most teachers prefer teaching only to the front row, and ignore the rest of the class. The real purpose of education goes missing. With hypocrisy built into our system, education has turned into a lucrative business, and good quality education has become a privilege of a lucky few. For the economically empowered segments of our society, there are still challenges and those are to meet the expectations of their parents. But, the rest are struggling just to get their basic necessities met as they grow up.

During my project site visits, I heard stories of many students dropping out of college or higher classes of school because they could not arrange a meagre amount such as 1000 INR to pay for their studies. I would hear of female students being married off because their school admission fees were too high. Many students could not secure jobs because they did not speak a language that was not their mother tongue (i.e. English).



Currently, students in the system get free education until Class 8. They start facing the harsh reality from Class 9, when almost everything is decided by the quality of school, the bank balance of their parents, the teachers they come across, some inherent merits and sheer luck. Government scholarships and schemes, while available, are not enough to adequately counterbalance these other factors.



## The balance

The situation is not all negative, as on the other side of the spectrum, India is making great progress in science, technology, manufacturing and many other sectors. However, somehow, a big chunk of the population is being left out and forced into doing something for which they are not ready.

We need to accept the practical limitations of the infrastructure while preparing the not-so-privileged children for the harsh realities they will likely face. It has to come from both sides - rapid infrastructural and quality-of-education improvements from the Government, as well as a reality check from students and parents. On one end, we need to make graduates employable, and on the other end, we need Government policies that will create jobs for all sections of society. Otherwise, we risk becoming a country of even greater inequality, a country where formal education does not ensure anything.

## How Asha for Education can bring the balance

Over the last 10 years, after the [Right-To-Education \(RTE\) bill](#) came into place in India, Asha for Education's role in the educational landscape within India has slowly started to change. For example,



1) To address the quality of education: We had initially started by supporting formal schools, but now many of them have transformed into after-school academic support centers.

(2) School dropout rates: We started offering special scholarship programs in order to prevent student dropouts due to financial reasons with special consideration for gender inequality.

(3) Gender-bias: We started female empowerment programs to enable girls to tackle and negate the gender biases they face in society. We are slowly graduating to gender-sensitivity programs for both boys and girls in select centers.

(4) Employment: Where there is a need for skills-based training (vocational training, computer training), we have supported training centers to mobilize communities.

(5) Filling the gaps: Where there is a lack of motivation among teachers and students in a marks-driven education system, special teacher training programs have been integrated into formal schools. Additionally, we are adding digital learning tools as needed.

Fixing the lives of millions is beyond the capacity of a single organization. It is only possible through the work of the Government and the people themselves. However, our grassroot interventions enable one child at a time to take the first steps towards the needed balance. It also helps create successful models that can be scaled and in future, taken over by the Government on a large scale.

With that balance in place, for our children, education can become a source of confidence imparted by knowledge. It can be their motivation to be considerate and respectful. It can provide the strength that helps them take care of themselves and contribute to the greater family to which we all belong. If we can instill that confidence amongst the students with whom we work, then they will be much better prepared for the life ahead of them. I would appreciate readers' feedback and comments.

*Please feel free to reach out to me at [padmanava.sen@gmail.com](mailto:padmanava.sen@gmail.com). Thank you.*



# 02 Volunteer Perspective

## Nurturing Government School Teachers

By Melli Annamalai

*Melli Annamalai is a long-time Asha for Education volunteer, having joined the organization in the late 1990's, and has been actively involved in shaping Asha's Projects strategy and focus over the years. Melli has taken on many roles in her tenure with Asha, and was the Asha Worldwide President from 2000-2002. Her experience has given her a deep understanding of the educational landscape in India, and particularly that of the role and challenges of the Government school system. Here, she shares with us a case study that highlights the importance of getting government school teachers connected to the joy of learning and teaching, and how this can make a tremendous impact in the way they approach education themselves and the students they seek to serve.*



Hedathale Village is in Nanjangud Taluk in the Mysore district of Karnataka, India. Like the hundreds of other villages that dot the countryside, it has a government-run high school. All high school children from Hedathale and the surrounding villages attend this school.



Photo: A high school in Hedathale Village

The challenge that arises with this school, and many others like it, is that the kind of education the children obtain does not adequately prepare them for life after school. When they finish a class, do they have a grasp of the basic mathematical concepts? Typically, no. Are they passing the class exams by repeating a few memorized answers? Likely, yes. Are they equipped with skills for life after school? Often, not.

Teachers are often blamed for these problems, with phrases such as “Government school teachers are apathetic” ; “They don’t work hard” ; “They are not doing their job” often being attributed to them. The question we ask as Asha volunteers is, how can we address these challenges and what can we do to create change?

To begin to address this question, we would like to highlight the transformation of Mr. S Harsha, a Mathematics teacher at this school, and share his amazing journey as a teacher, his motivators and influencers, and what this can mean for other teachers like him.



Photo: Mobile Science Van

Our story starts in 2009, when the [Mobile Science Van project](#) was initiated with the Asha Boston chapter partnering with Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM) to improve the teaching of Science in village high schools in the area.

Praveen Kumar Sayyaparaju was the Coordinator of the Mobile Science Van project at SVYM. The government school teachers (Mr. Harsha among them) found in Praveen a friend, a partner, a motivator. With Praveen, they began to explore the subject of Science together and integrate these learnings through explorations of the world around them.



Photo: Science Fair organized as part of the Mobile Science Van project



One of the early activities they partook in was to visit a local dam over the Kabini river, not just to admire the beauty of the gushing river below, but to also think about and discuss the Science behind the dam. Another activity was a night-time gathering to observe planets and stars, and a partial lunar eclipse. These might be common activities for teachers in some parts of the world, but it had not been the case here.



*Photo: Praveen (right most, gray polo shirt with white piping) with teachers (Harsha is on Praveen's right).*

The discussions of Science soon graduated to Praveen holding regular sessions amongst the teachers over WhatsApp, generating many vigorous discussions. The teachers felt comfortable asking Praveen any question, because SVYM and Praveen worked with them as partners. They were not afraid and they were not shy.

It was as though the floodgates had opened and their curiosity had come flowing out with force. Sessions were held on a variety of topics from electricity i.e. "How does charge move from the switch to the light bulb?" to light i.e. "Why is the sky blue when we see it but in movies like Gravity everything is black?" to biology i.e. "I am supposed to show this specimen, but what concept am I illustrating exactly?".

These activities unleashed in these teachers the innate curiosity that we all have. It strengthened the teachers' own understanding of concepts. Best of all, it showed the teachers how much fun learning can be. In the many years prior, when the teachers had busied themselves with taking and dictating notes and memorizing information for exams in their own education, they had forgotten the joy of learning, which they could now see. "I enjoy teaching more, now that I teach concepts instead of exam questions and answers," says Mr. Harsha. The teachers' attitudes towards learning transmits to the classes they teach, and they are no longer apathetic about these subject matters.

These teachers want to be in a system that recognizes them and helps them move ahead. They don't want to be just passive recipients of countless training sessions that are thrust down their throats. Says Mr. Harsha, "When I attended training programs as a new teacher, I used to think - how can I be on the other side, on the stage, as a resource person teaching other teachers? Today, if I have become a resource person myself, a large part of it is because of SVYM and Praveen. They helped me improve myself as a teacher."

## **WHEN YOU HEAR MR. HARSHA SPEAK, YOU CAN SEE WHAT A TREMENDOUS IMPACT THE RIGHT KIND OF INTERVENTION CAN HAVE.**

When you hear Mr. Harsha speak, you can see what a tremendous impact the right kind of intervention can have. As he puts it, "We lived in a well, and we thought the well was the world and that we lived in a wonderful world. But, now we see the world has ponds, lakes, rivers, oceans. We have come to the level of a pond, and we have the confidence we can continue." What this project has done successfully, where numerous other interventions of working with government school teachers have failed, is bring out the teachers' own potential, and stir their interest so that they want to be better teachers.



*Photos: i) Mr. Harsha leading a workshop for new teachers, ii) Mr. Harsha speaking at a stall during an event for teachers, iii) Mr. Harsha receiving an award along with teacher Kiran*

Mr. Harsha continues to show tremendous initiative. From regularly working with Praveen to constantly working on improving himself, he has shown leadership in a variety of ways. The latest is through the creation of his own YouTube channel (@hardeepmysore), which has taken on new importance as distance learning grows (in the context of the pandemic). He is indefatigable in pursuing new ideas and he has begun winning awards locally for his work - and was even a finalist for a prestigious national award.

With support, encouragement, and a partnership relationship, government school teachers can blossom. Without the right kind of support, teachers end up languishing in their positions, unrecognized by their peers or their headmasters/headmistresses, unrewarded, so that they grow, yes, apathetic. It is possible to change the structure of the government school system so that the government school teachers are motivated, and they flourish and become leaders. This project shows us how.

To address the education challenges in front of us, let us focus on how we can nurture government school teachers. It does not require expensive infrastructure or radically new ideas. All it requires is working with them as partners, helping them become learners, and guiding them to achieve their goals and dreams. We CAN transform the government education system.

*Melli Annamalai can be reached at [annam38@yahoo.com](mailto:annam38@yahoo.com).*



*Photo: Volunteer Melli Annamalai after a lunch meeting with Praveen, Mr. Harsha, and other government school teachers.*







# 03

## Site Visitor Perspective Suhas Satheesh

Asha Silicon Valley [SV] Volunteer

*Asha Silicon Valley [SV] volunteer Suhas Satheesh shares with us some of his learnings and take-aways from his visits to three project sites and one Asha Fellow that he conducted in 2019. He describes how seeing the students go about schooling without even basic necessities in place - such as on-site toilets - impacted him, and how this allowed the Silicon Valley chapter to better define the priorities and goals the chapter wanted to have in-place moving forward for all of their projects.*



In 2019, I had the opportunity to visit three projects and one Fellow supported by Asha for Education. They were:

[VARUN](#)

[Shakthidhama](#)

[Deenabandhu Trust](#)

[Vallabhacharya \[Asha Fellow\]](#)

In this article, I would like to focus on the details and outcomes of my four-day visit to the Voluntary Association for Rural Upliftment and Networking [VARUN] project. The time I spent there certainly reinforced in me the importance of the work we are doing in trying to make education accessible to every child in India. But more importantly, it helped me connect with the cause in a profound way that no amount of 'remote stewarding' could have enabled.



For instance, before visiting the project, I already knew that the schools had no toilets, but seeing children urinate on the broken compound walls left me with images that I cannot forget. Before visiting the project, I knew that the children had no easy access to clean water, but watching them carry and consume buckets of iron-contaminated water stayed with me until well after my visit.

The same goes with seeing students experience the lack of other basic necessities like access to lights, fans, books, healthcare, etc. Empathizing with children in such trying conditions was possible only through the human experience of eating, sleeping, playing, and spending a few days in the classroom with them.



Once I returned to the U.S., I started discussing with the rest of the chapter about how we could address these issues. Our discussions eventually expanded to take stock of the situation at all of SV's projects. We have now formalized the process of ensuring that children across all of the projects backed by our chapter have access to these basic necessities:

- Easy access to clean drinking water.
- Easy access to clean toilets.
- Continuous supply of lights and fans through electricity or solar.
- Availability of first aid kits at school/project premises.
- Annual medical check-ups for all the children.
- Library with minimum of 2:1 ratio of books to children.

## **WE HAVE MOBILIZED CLOSE TO \$70,000 IN FUNDS SPECIFICALLY TO PRIORITIZE THESE INITIATIVES ACROSS OUR PROJECTS.**

We have mobilized close to \$70,000 in funds specifically to prioritize these initiatives across our projects. We hope to finish the year 2020 with all Asha SV-supported children having access to these basic necessities.

As volunteers, we may feel hopeless and helpless about the state of affairs on the ground at times. But if we use that as an excuse to give up, the lives of these children will only get harder. We are part of an ecosystem of governmental and non-governmental organizations that is slowly but surely moving the needle. Asha backed projects and Fellows have reached children in communities that are otherwise neglected. Amidst all the hardships, these children carry in them hope and desire to break out of the shackles. They are different from our very own children in that they have several more obstacles to surmount, but they are the same as our children in that they also want to study, play, fight, love, and grow up to become lawyers, farmers, and doctors. We are all in this together.



***Here are clickable reports and video summaries from my site visits:***

***Shakthidhama site visit***



***Deenabandhu Trust***



***Meeting w/Vallabhacharya Pandey***



***VARUN site visit***



*For more information about the Asha Silicon Valley chapter, please visit <https://sv.ashanet.org/>. You can also reach the chapter volunteers at [sv@ashanet.org](mailto:sv@ashanet.org).*



# 04 Volunteer Experiences Harnessing Today for Asha Berkeley's Tomorrow

By Rithika Neti, Asha Berkeley Volunteer

*Asha Berkeley volunteer Rithika Neti shares with us her experience as an Asha volunteer in Asha's oldest Chapter, at the University of California, Berkeley. Hear from Rithika as she reflects on what her time within her 'Asha Berkeley family' has meant to her and how it has allowed her to make a meaningful impact. Rithika also shares with us the work the chapter is doing to raise awareness around the campus about various issues affecting the South Asian community.*



Like thousands of other students, I had to fly home on March 15, leaving my second home at the University of California, Berkeley. As I now find myself at home while the world suffers from a global pandemic, I've been reflecting on and cherishing things I never did back when I was still on my college campus. One of the things I miss the most is my Asha Berkeley family. As the oldest Asha chapter, Asha Berkeley continues to serve as the nexus between culture, innovation, and the general mindset to help those in need.

**COMING TO BERKELEY, I WANTED TO FIND AN ORGANIZATION THAT WOULD NOT ONLY CONNECT ME WITH MY ROOTS BUT ALSO HELP ADDRESS SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES THAT FACE INDIA TODAY.**



*Photo: Annual Asha Berkeley retreat to Lake Tahoe*

Coming to Berkeley, I wanted to find an organization that would not only connect me with my roots but also help address some of the significant challenges that face India today—malnutrition, education, poverty, and gender inequality. Often, it can be difficult to integrate future professional plans with a passion for social good, especially in a university setting, but at Asha Berkeley, we have the opportunity to host fundraisers and events in our community, develop and practice essential life skills, and of course, serve as volunteers for our projects.

Being a university chapter, the biggest barrier that remains is that as undergraduate college students, we cannot significantly contribute financially ourselves nor can we persuade other students to do so; therefore, our chapter mission strives to not only act as stewards for our projects but also increase awareness of these underlying socioeconomic conditions that exist in India. In line with these objectives, we often find ourselves hosting small-scale fundraisers that appeal to the general college population. This includes selling mango lassi, samosas, Indian sweets or jewelry as well as roses on Valentine's Day and at our increasingly popular Bollywood Karaoke Night. We leverage both what college students crave and enjoy, and partner with other South Asian and social good initiatives on campus.



*Photo: Attendees at Asha Berkeley's annual forum*

This year, we had the opportunity to organize one of our largest events to date —our annual forum. Forum both advances Asha's cause and raises awareness of a key issue within the South Asian community and its diaspora. Previous forum topics have included water and sanitation issues in South Asia, caste and religious conflicts in modern India, and the stigma surrounding sexual health for women.

This year, we decided to address colorism in India, the idea that darker skin is less desirable or beautiful. This is evidenced by the over 200+ tons of skin-whitening and skin-bleaching products that are consumed every year in India. Our event featured an interdisciplinary and knowledgeable panel of experts, engaging in a conversation around colorism and its impacts in the beauty industry, on human development and psychology, and its socio-economic/caste implications. Forum not only allows us a platform to promote the incredible work that Asha does but also fosters dialogue about key issues that serve as barriers to an equitable India. Along with Forum, we host Images of India, a large-scale cultural benefit, where besides delicious food and highlights of Asha Berkeley's projects, talent from all across the Bay Area and within the UC Berkeley community perform.

I've had the pleasure of being involved in Asha Berkeley for the past two years, and have been able to explore all the different facets of our student organization. As we now revamp our fundraising and sponsorship divisions by connecting with corporate partners as well as hosting Images of India, we continue to explore more creative outlets such as an Ideathon for Social Good competition or college consulting initiatives. Our future plans include building and developing our relationships with other Asha chapters and alumni, giving Asha Berkeley alumni the chance to continue to be involved in our causes.



As we approach 2021, the 30th anniversary of Asha Berkeley, we hope to strengthen these bonds for both professional development and project involvement.

Going forward, it gives me great pride to see Asha Berkeley, the very first chapter, making strides towards reaching its highest potential. I am honored to be a part of this chapter's transformation as we aim to learn, grow, and revolutionize our efforts in raising money and awareness. The founders of Asha themselves used the ingenuity, passion, and vibrance of the Berkeley community to build this remarkable and impactful global organization, and I speak for our whole organization when I say that we strive to follow in their footsteps and use not just our time in Berkeley but also our future careers to advance Asha's mission of catalyzing socioeconomic change through education. We are always looking for avenues of partnership or mentorship and would love to hear your thoughts and commentary. Please feel free to reach us at [berkeley@ashanet.org](mailto:berkeley@ashanet.org). Stay safe. Stay healthy. And as always, Go Bears!



Photo: Asha Berkeley family

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ashaberkeley/>  
Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/asha\\_berkeley/](https://www.instagram.com/asha_berkeley/)

*Rithika Neti is a rising junior at the University of California, Berkeley studying data science and public policy in hopes of going to law school and has been involved with Asha for Education, Berkeley since September 2018. She can be reached at [rithika.neti@berkeley.edu](mailto:rithika.neti@berkeley.edu).*

*For more information about the Asha Berkeley chapter, please visit  
<https://berkeley.ashanet.org/>.*

# 05 Volunteer Experiences

## Asha Cornell Volunteer Perspective

By Maanav Shah, Asha Cornell Volunteer

*Asha Cornell volunteer Maanav Shah shares with us how he got involved with the Asha Cornell chapter and how he's been inspired by the level of commitment and hard work that other Asha Cornell volunteers have put in to help support Asha's cause, all the while having fun and creating a welcoming environment.*



I still vividly remember my first meeting with the Asha Cornell volunteers. It was on the fields right by the student dorms. Almost all Asian organizations had set up their stalls for the Fall ClubFest, wherein they were enticing freshmen to join their clubs. At first, my friends and I were just stall-hopping, covering as much ground as possible. But then we were reeled in by this Indian organization: 'ASHA FOR EDUCATION', the banner read. The volunteers described their organization in detail, convincing us to attend the orientation. I decided to give it a try.

Asha's cause is inspiring, and I strongly believe in it. Even before college, I often visited different NGOs to teach younger students. However, that is not the primary reason as to why I joined Asha. I joined Asha mainly because of the volunteers. Whenever they spoke about Asha, they exuded passion and zeal. They seemed incredibly committed to the cause. At the same time, they were welcoming. I completed the 'Asha Cornell New Membership' survey without thinking twice and reported for my very first Asha Cornell meeting in Fall 2019.

Over this past year, I can safely say that I made the right decision. Whenever I hear about the different projects that Asha Cornell is supporting, I realize that what we are working for is more significant than any of us. Just the fact that we positively impact the lives of underprivileged students is unbelievably fulfilling. Of course, such an ambitious goal has its own set of challenges. I quickly learned this through the events that Asha Cornell organizes every year - its 'Fall concert,' and 'Spring dinner.'

Unfortunately, I never got to experience the 'Spring dinner' (chalk it up to a non-existent spring semester due to the COVID-19 crisis), but I did get a taste of what the 'Fall concert' was like. For this annual event, Asha invites Indian artists to perform at Cornell. It is an excellent way of introducing people to Indian music. In the past, Asha Cornell has hosted the Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna, as well as the Berklee Indian Ensemble. This year, we hosted Prateek Kuhad, an acclaimed singer-songwriter and musician, recognized by the BBC. This list alone shows the uniqueness and diversity of all the artists that Asha Cornell strives to bring in for the 'Fall concert.' I was honestly awestruck by not only the volunteers' resourcefulness but also their continued diligence with finding different artists.

However, I think the most impressive aspect of the entire event was the sheer amount of commitment, dedication, and conscientiousness the volunteers displayed. The way they juggled their academics and event planning to make the concert a success was nothing short of a feat. I still remember the planning process for the euphoric mayhem that it was. There were innumerable, brightly color-coded spreadsheets projected before the start of every meeting. The Treasurers were going through every funding source to ensure the availability of adequate funds for the event. The PR team was continually coming up with new ideas to promote the concert. And the chapter coordinators were trying their level best to guide all the other volunteers, including me. However, amid all the commotion, they never stopped smiling. Someone or the other always brought in a new food item for the meetings. Or they cracked a lot of inside jokes (most of them flew over my head). They never stopped having fun.





I, personally, was not as involved as I would have liked to have been with the Asha Cornell chapter last year. It was probably due to some apprehension and nervousness on my part. But the other volunteers ensured that I always felt comfortable. So, whenever someone asks me why I joined Asha and what Asha means to me, I always tell them that Asha really is much more than just an organization. It really is a family (as advertised), made up of diverse members motivated by a common goal. And it really is a place where people change for the better. I am incredibly pleased to have been trusted with the post of a co-Treasurer for the upcoming academic year, and I am looking forward to another incredible year.

*For more information about the Asha Cornell chapter, please visit <https://cornell.ashanet.org/>. You can also reach the chapter volunteers at [cornell@ashanet.org](mailto:cornell@ashanet.org).*



***Project In Focus:*** Ek Kadam is a residential educational project for migrant worker's children run by Asha Trust. Prior to their arrival at Ek Kadam, these children worked to help their parents in the brick kiln industry. For more information about this Asha project, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=990>.



# Drawings from Asha children





# 06 Volunteer Experiences

## Asha Cornell Volunteer Perspective

By Mihika Badjate, Asha Cornell Volunteer

*Asha Cornell volunteer Mihika Badjate shares with us what Asha has meant to her and how it has provided her with a sense of community as a Cornell undergrad.*

When I wandered through the overcrowded hall at Asha Cornell's Spring Club Fair, I had no idea what I was looking for. I smiled and nodded at the dozens of academic organizations, all the while wondering where I would find my new home in college. Little did I know that out of the dozens of flyers I had picked up - knowing they would all too likely end up in the recycling bin - Asha Cornell would be the one that would stick.



Fast forward two months, and I'm back home from college, staring into an endless black void of muted Zoom screens for class lectures every day. But there's one day a week that I don't immediately mute my audio and turn off my video upon joining, and that's during the weekly Asha Cornell meeting.



Over the course of the semester, with all its rocky twists and turns, Asha has kept me grounded and helped me navigate college life. Whether listening to a Treasury run-down, tasting chili-paneer for the annual dinner fundraising event, or attending an early morning Zoom call, I look forward to Asha meetings for the sense of community that they bring. And, in the past months, with the coronavirus taking hold around the world, being involved with our projects in India helps me keep perspective - while I'm here missing my friends in college, many of the projects are struggling with acquiring adequate food and hygiene supplies. Asha has allowed me to find my place within Cornell while also working for a good cause. I'm thankful to have found such an amazing group of people with whom to share the next four years.

*For more information about the Asha Cornell chapter, please visit <https://cornell.ashanet.org/>. You can also reach the chapter volunteers at [cornell@ashanet.org](mailto:cornell@ashanet.org).*



**Project In Focus:** *Door Step Schools. Migrant laborers in Pune face difficulty sending their children to school because of the uncertain nature of their lives. As a result numerous children end up not attending school. Door Step School steps in to fill this void by providing basic education to these children, at a location close to their home. For more information about this Asha project, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=58>.*

# 07 Volunteer Experiences

## Asha Cornell Volunteer Perspective

By Sambit Saha, Asha Cornell Volunteer

*Asha Cornell volunteer Sambit Saha shares with us how he got involved with the chapter as a volunteer and donor, the fulfillment he's gotten in the Asha project steward role, and the friendship and bonds he's built with other Asha volunteers as they all work together towards a shared mission.*



When I joined the Asha for Education family in 2015 as a volunteer and donor. After spending a number of months that same year raising funds for the SEVA Foundation to support relief efforts for earthquake victims in Nepal, I realized how essential it was to support community-based projects in South Asia that helped to build communities from the ground up by imparting skills and education to those least likely to attain it, owing to their disadvantaged economic and social situation.

As I felt that I would be able to contribute most to education or livelihood-based projects, I decided to volunteer for Asha for Education, which was entirely run by volunteers, had minimal overhead costs and was rated highly by charity evaluators like Charity Navigator. Since I lived in central New York and close to Cornell University, which I would visit frequently for professional reasons or to enjoy various performance art programs that the University would host, I contacted the Asha Cornell Chapter President at that time, Madhura Raghavan, to find a role for me in Asha-Cornell supported projects where I could do some hands-on work. She assigned me project steward responsibilities for the Sabuj Sangha KSSN project in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal, India.

Volunteering for Asha for Education has been an enriching learning experience for me. As a project steward, I have had the opportunity to interact with children and help them in their learning process. I have also visited various Asha Projects and seen first-hand how much the support that Asha provides makes a difference in the lives of underprivileged children. In 2018, during a site visit to an Asha-Cornell supported project, Shishur Sevay, I met Dr. Michelle Harrison and returned with a feeling of inspiration. Dr. Harrison had made the cause of special needs children a mission in her life many years ago and had moved permanently from New Jersey to Kolkata to live, raise and mentor children that were disabled and abandoned.

I have also had the good fortune of building friendships in our Asha for Education family with people who share a passion for being there for others. As Asha-Cornell is a student-run chapter, all volunteers in our chapter are much younger than I am; however, over the years, I have come to realize that age is not a barrier to friendship and camaraderie when goals and missions are the same and shared. We have fun together while working together.

Volunteering with Asha for Education has helped me grow as a person and has helped me understand and appreciate better the perspectives of other people who did not have the same opportunities in life as I did. It has also helped me form friendships with many wonderful people that I will value throughout my life.

*For more information about the Asha Cornell chapter, please visit <https://cornell.ashanet.org/>. You can also reach the chapter volunteers at [cornell@ashanet.org](mailto:cornell@ashanet.org).*





# 08 Donor Share

## Rajesh Soy

*Rajesh and Archana Soy are Asha for Education patrons who have been involved with our organization for 22 years! Below, Rajesh shares with us how he got introduced to Asha, his past involvement helping put on Asha events for the Seattle chapter, and what has had him support our organization over the years. We thank Rajesh for sharing his perspectives as a long-term Asha patron, and for his generosity and support to Asha over the past two decades!*



### How and when did you get introduced to Asha for Education?

**Rajesh:** *Archana and I got introduced to Asha for Education through our friends, Jayashree and Bash. Jayashree was a colleague at Microsoft and invited us over to one of the Asha Seattle chapter meetings. The meetings were held in the Bellevue downtown library then - I think this was circa 1998!*

### What got you initially interested in supporting our organization?



**Rajesh:** *Both Archana and I were very keen on doing events, and doing events for Asha for Education was our passion at that time. We helped organize Asha picnics earlier on, and then the 'Allgorhythms' show at a later point. Through putting on events, we got to learn a lot about the good work being done to enable education, and that energized us to contribute more towards the fundraising efforts of Asha for Education.*

**There are so many non-profit organizations out there working on many great causes. Why has Asha for Education stuck out for you as one that is important to continue supporting?**

**Rajesh:** *I think it has to be because of the reach of the projects that Asha for Education supports, the organizational structure that is in place, and in general - the people connection we have had over the years.*

*Asha for Education wants to thank Rajesh and Archana for their time and gracious support over the years!*



**Project In Focus:** *Samerth Talim Kendra is a center for special needs children in Ahmedabad. They provide support and services to these children in an effort to help them lead an independent life. They also help create awareness regarding disability in the community, encourage early detection and dispel myths and misbeliefs associated with it. For more information about this Asha project, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=1256>.*

# 09 Donor Share

## Maya Subramaniam

*Maya Subramaniam and Ranjit Varkey have been Asha for Education patrons for 22 years - covering a large portion of the time that Asha's been in existence! Below, Maya shares with us how she got introduced to Asha, how she and Ranjit put together and evaluate their 'giving portfolio' each year, and what has had her continue supporting our organization over so many years. We thank Maya for taking the time to share her perspectives as a long-time Asha patron, and for her generosity and support to Asha over the past two decades!*



### **How and when did you get introduced to Asha for Education?**

**Maya:** *We got introduced to Asha by a friend in the Seattle area in 1998, a few months after we moved to Redmond, WA from India. We attended our first Asha meeting at the local library.*

### **What got you initially interested in supporting our organization?**

**Maya:** *I was supporting similar organizations in India before I moved to Redmond. The key factors for me in committing to Asha were the fellow MSFTies (employees of Microsoft) who were part of the Asha Seattle chapter, the mission of Asha, and its' similarity to the organizations and missions I was supporting in India.*





**There are so many non-profit organizations out there working on many great causes. Why has Asha for Education stuck out for you as one that is important to continue supporting?**

***Maya:** Over the years, we have developed a giving portfolio, similar to an investment portfolio. We review it each year and update it as necessary, based on how the world is changing and our own growth, understanding and evolving perspectives of the world and our place in it. As a result, this portfolio has a set of causes and organizations that we've chosen based on a lot of different criteria, and we allocate dollars to it at the start of each year. Very simply put, we try to give to reputable local, national and international organizations. We also try to keep a balance between direct and indirect service organizations. We focus on basic human rights - education being one of them, and shelter, food and safety being others. Everyone - humans and animals - are important, with women, children and various oppressed minorities near the top of the list. We also set aside money to respond to various crises, such as earthquakes and COVID-19. Asha fits the "international-indirect service-education-children" bucket perfectly, and has zero overhead costs, known local volunteers and a great reputation. This is why Asha has been in our portfolio since 1998. While the dollar amount that we allocate to Asha each year may change, it has been the only constant charity to which we've contributed for 22 years in a row.*

**What do you feel that Asha is doing well?**

***Maya:** Honestly, we like to pick a great organization, and keep supporting it unless the organization has given us a good reason not to. So, we hope that the organization stays great as much as the organization hopes to stay great. For us, if Asha stays true to its mission, and avoids avoidable problems, we are happy. We keep our eyes and ears open, and as long as we see healthy metrics, well-run events and messaging, and great & happy volunteers, we assume the best and keep supporting the organization.*

## Where do you want to see Asha go with its work?

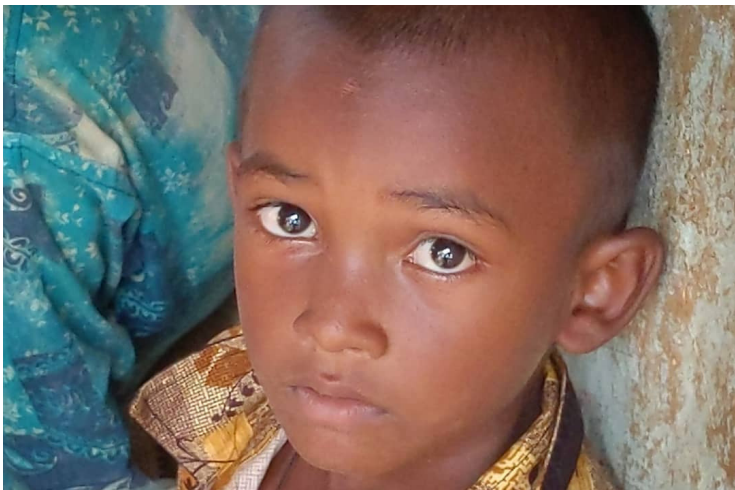
**Maya:** *I want Asha to continue to stick to its core mission and core values, while responding to the evolving realities of India and the world.*

*Asha for Education wants to thank Maya and Ranjit for their time and gracious support over the years!*



**Project In Focus:** *Human Uplift Trust runs a home for AIDS affected/orphaned homeless children in Perambalur district of Tamil Nadu. The project was started in 2007 exclusively with the support of Asha for Education. The project currently support 100+ children, providing them with food, shelter, periodic medical check ups and quality education. For more information about this Asha project, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=805>.*









Every child, no matter their background, should have the opportunity to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment with access to quality education.

Together, we can build a better future for these children.



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