



2006

## SPRING 2006

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### Letter from the President

Archana Iyer ([asi104@psu.edu](mailto:asi104@psu.edu))

*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter – Martin Luther King Jr.*

*We must be the Change we wish to see in the World.  
– M.K Gandhi*

At AID, we share the vision with such great leaders and believe in the power of small beginnings. We volunteer our time to raise funds and support grassroots projects that attempt to make the world a better place.

### Warm Greetings from AID State College !

In the recent years, the increasing interdependence and connections that bind us across our global village has become evident. Perhaps no one appreciates these linkages more than the grassroots communities who benefit from such connections to deepen and strengthen their work. AID is among the few foundations that actively support projects related to grassroots development. I take pride to inform that in 2005-6, AID SC reviewed and supported 8 such initiatives. These initiatives have come from non government organizations (NGO) in different parts of India.

AID was deeply moved by the loss of life and property after Hurricane Katrina. We immediately sent out appeals to our volunteers and friends to contribute to relief organizations on the ground. Volunteers at AID Baton Rouge were involved in helping actively. AID SC organized a 2 week collection drive in various departments on campus for relief materials to support the Katrina Survivors. On October 8<sup>th</sup> 2005, a devastating earthquake struck parts of Pakistan and Northern India. AID India was involved with relief and rehabilitation efforts with organizations in India and Pakistan. We appealed to our community of well wishers here and informed them on how contributions could be made towards relief efforts in both countries.

Every year we support the spirit of the Penn State football games and volunteer time and efforts to

manage a stall at the Beaver Stadium. This year we had a good turn out of volunteers who had great fun in the process. We organized a candle light vigil on August 15<sup>th</sup>, at the steps of Old Main to mark the Indian Independence Day. AID SC participated in the National Gandhi Day of Service (NGDOS) held on campus. On this occasion we screened the movie, 'Khamosh Pani' (Silent waters) which highlighted difficulties faced by families, separated during Indo-Pak partition. The movie was relevant in the ongoing efforts to diffuse Indo-Pak tension.

In 2005, two grassroots activists Chandra Anil and Michael Mazagaonkar from India visited AID State College. Chandra Anil, an active volunteer at AID Chennai (India), shared the involvement of AID in Tsunami relief efforts. It was heartening to know that AID Chennai continues to work in Tsunami affected villages on rehabilitation projects long after many other organizations had moved out. Michael Mazagoankar, an engineer, has been working for the past 15 years with tribals in Gujarat on issues related to self sustenance, renewable energy and environment. Details on Chandra and Michael's talk are included in this issue. In addition, we had a senior AID volunteer, Kiran Vissa, share his experience with us.

An impressive number of new enthusiastic volunteers (~ 25) joined AID SC in 2005. Many of them have taken keen interest in projects. The project review process involves an in-depth analysis by project teams, followed by presentations and discussions in the CSH (Community Service Hour a.k.a weekly AID meeting). A site-visit report is mandatory before we take the final decision for funding. A number of our volunteers, during their trip to India, visited the projects that were under review. (Anand Narasimhamurthy - 'Jagruta Mahia Sanghatan', Pratik Mankidy - 'Shayog', Shankar Shastry - 'Prerana', Uma Asher - 'Parivartan School', Sameer Marathe - Venumadhuri Trust ). Site visit reports are included as separate articles in this issue.

Most of our active volunteers, who left State college in pursuit of professional careers, have continued their involvement with AID. Rushabh Mehta, currently based in Mumbai, introduced us to

'Parivartan Shikshan Sanstha', a nonformal school for 100 children in a slum area. Alok Sharan, currently in India, visited our projects in Mumbai and Raichur. His feed back has been helpful to guide us in the review process.

For over 5 years now, AID SC has been supporting the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment and self sustenance of Jagruta Mahila Sanghatan (JMS) – A Dalit women and agricultural laborers organization, in Raichur. The progress made by them is remarkable and we consider JMS as a long term partner. AID SC has decided to continue to support their third proposal and offer group fellowships for the fulltime activists. Kavita and Vamsi Veeramachaneni, now in Bangalore, India visited JMS and agreed to strengthen the partnership between AID Bangalore and JMS.

Supporting these projects would not have been possible without the backing of the State college community. For the past 8 years the community members cook and donate food for the Indian food festival. The proceeds from the festival go towards funding our projects. We appreciate this support and like to thank our advisor, Jayashree Sonti and the community members for their active involvement during the food festival.

Last year, a community member, Dr. Latha Bhushan, introduced us to "Prerana" an organization that provides mobility training and rehabilitation for adolescent girls with disability. We agreed to fund a part of the proposal for the purchase of a van that will facilitate "Prerana" to take the blind & disabled girls to the factories/ industries for the Job Training. AID needs your support. Our project and fund raising teams welcome the diversity of background and talent. We look forward to working with other like minded individuals and groups in State college.

On a personal note, volunteering for AID has been a valuable learning experience for me. It has helped me realize that although we may not have much control over the bigger things in life, the significance and power of small beginnings cannot be underestimated. I would like to thank all AID SC volunteers, community members, and donors who have believed and supported this power.

Thank you,  
-Archana Iyer  
President AID State College

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### **Tsunami relief in Tamil Nadu: AID Chennai's plans for long haul**

*Original report by Balaji Sampath-AID Chennai  
published on [www.aidindia.org](http://www.aidindia.org)*

Armed with wisdom from the grassroots, AID Chennai is working on long-term rehabilitation programs directly in 28 villages in Koovathur and Kelambakkam. In addition, they are collaborating with other NGOs and people's movements on immediate and medium-term relief programs in more than 65 villages in Nagai, Cuddalore, and Pondicherry districts.

Aiming to deliver quality in all the programs they undertake, AID Chennai is approaching this vision from 3 different angles:

1. Integrated Block Development – Run programs on education, health, women's rights, income generation, agriculture, and alternate technologies in a few blocks, each consisting of 40-50 villages, with the idea of developing scalable models.
2. Resource Groups - Develop resource teams having a deep understanding of the problems and intervention options. Resource groups in primary education, science education and health already

exist. Two more on agriculture and income generation under consideration.

3. Supporting Other Groups - AID Chennai will work with a few other NGOs and movements helping them build capacities, develop new programs and arrange funding.

The long-term rehabilitation program has been divided into 7 components, each having a different set of activities:

1. Pre-primary and primary education – Setting up libraries, toy vans, teacher’s training modules, model primary schools.
2. Middle school education – Setting up science labs, vans and exhibitions, tuition centers, night schools, teacher’s training programs, and producing science concept booklets.
3. Health and Women’s Empowerment – Running women’s and adolescent girl’s health programs, health camps and vans, counseling and support networks; improving sanitation and setting up health resource centers.
4. Income Generation and Vocational Training – Establishing block-level enterprise network and folk-mart.
5. Agriculture and Ecology – Undertaking desalination measures, alternate cropping strategies, eco-protection of coastlines, waste-land management and organic farming.
6. Equitec Technology Interventions – Bringing information technology, computer training and community radio to the village-youth.
7. Sports, Street Theater and Youth Groups – Forming youth and street theater groups and running self-defense classes for girls.

The Story So Far . . .

245 temporary shelters constructed  
70 health camps organized  
80 counseling centers started  
185 boats and engines repaired  
1 model primary school started  
150 primary support classes started  
20000 Tsunami booklets distributed

\$335000 sent for immediate relief/rehab  
\$2.9M proposal under review for long-term rehab

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## 2005 Football Games Volunteering

Gagan Gothaniya ([gug114@psu.edu](mailto:gug114@psu.edu))

*“Come volunteer, have fun, meet new people”*

Well, it all started with meeting Pratik at the AID desk during the international student’s orientation last fall. He explained what AID does and how I could help raise funds by volunteering for football games, I had no idea what it would be like but I said to myself “sounds fun, lets see”.

Now after having volunteered for most of the games last year I know it really is a lot of fun. On a typical football weekend, we meet at Beaver Stadium 2 hrs before the game starts, arrange our stall and get ready for the action!!



Purdue vs. PSU game

Once the game starts it is the “action time”!! There is a lot to do, from handling the cash at the counter, running and getting things to the counter, making soda, pretzels, hotdogs, sandwiches and yummy yum hot chocolate. If you are a football fan you can go hawking in the stalls and watch the game. There is lots to do and every one around you is full of enthusiasm which makes the whole thing fun.



Wisconsin vs. PSU game

This is what the volunteers had to say after the first game

“It was cool! new experience. I liked that. May be I’ll do the hawking on next match too.” – Navid Hassan (Hawking)

“*They were really HOT!!!*” – Vipul Mehta (Hot Dog Guy)

“*Tiring but enjoyed a lot*” – Ajeet (Soda guy)

“*It was cool*” – Sanjeevakumar (Hawking – Cold Water)

“*It kinda rocked!*” --Rohan (Hot Dog Guy)

“*It was total fun!!*” – Gagan (Soda Guy)

“*It was satisfying*” – Dhruv (Runner)

“*Lot of work! But feels good!*” – Deepti (Pretzel gal + Ms.Clean)

“*Had great fun*” – Chandra Sekhar (Runner + Hawking)

“*Totally loved the atmosphere!!!*” – Badri (Hawking)

“*Chala interesting & (tiring) experience*” – Charu (Runner + Hawking)

A glance at the pictures and what volunteers say and you know what it is like to be there!!

At the end of the day you have a feeling of having devoted your day for something useful, something worthwhile, and it’s not just that, you get to meet a lot of new people, make friends. It won’t be an overstatement if I say I met more than 80% of my

friends through AID and most of them at the football games. AID is like a family and you never get the feeling that you are new to the group, we have potlucks, picnics which are loads of fun. And it’s not all about fun; we work sincerely never losing the main aim of supporting grassroots developments in India, finding and funding projects which support a wide variety of social development projects, towards an improved life for the underprivileged in India.

## **Visit and Talk by AID Saathi Michael Mazgaonkar**

Prepared by Sameer Marathe ( [ssm139@psu.edu](mailto:ssm139@psu.edu) )

AID Saathi's are people who have considerable amount of experience at the grass-roots level in different project areas. AID supports the Saathi's through fellowships. Saathi's provide us with guidance and expertise in choosing and implementing projects and are a constant source of inspiration to AIDers. Michael Mazgaonkar and his wife Swati Desai were the first AID Saathis. Michael visited AID Penn State chapter in December 2005.

Michael and Swati have been living with Vasava tribals in Gujarat, in the remote village, Juna Mozda (~95 km from Ankleshwar) for last 15 years. NGOs and individuals from outside the village, trying to bring about changes to the village according to their own vision, are often eyed with mistrust by the villagers. Michael (an engineer by training) and Swati chose not to become such agents of change, trying to install their own view of development, but became one amongst the villagers instead. Living among the Vasavas they learned their language, culture, customs and most importantly they gained their trust. Instead of directly initiating activities in the village, as many NGOs would do, they initiated discussions among the villagers about the problems and what would be the best solutions for the village. Often they found the villagers had a pretty good idea about the solutions. Wherever the villagers lacked the know how, Michael and Swati contributed through their expertise and guidance.

In his talk, Michael presented an overview of their life and work in Juna Mozda. Over the years Michael and Swati have encouraged the villagers to start soil conservation and watershed development programs in the area. Michael talked about how the villagers, who have been living and farming in that area for generations, knew exactly where the bunds and other structures were needed. They simply needed some guidance in building those structures. He explained

how an equitable program to get such projects done through local efforts emerged from the discussions with the villagers. He talked about the women's cooperative they helped start. They encouraged the women to process the pigeon peas (Toor) grown by the villagers into Toor daal, which would fetch higher returns in the market. Through their discussions a consensus had emerged that solving the problem of light and electricity in the village was important. Michael and the villagers first experimented with LED torches, which work on 2 AA batteries. Michael's partners in this effort were school going boys from the village. Michael showed us one of these torches during the talk. The battery case is made of bamboo or cloth and only the circuitry, the LEDs and the batteries need to be bought from outside the village. These torches were helping the villagers navigate the nights. The latest development in their efforts to solve the energy problem is the construction of a 1200 watt windmill that will provide power to ~ 40 homes in Juna Mozda. The wind mill itself was constructed with the help of professors from Dhulia University. The villagers assisted in the installation. Michael showed us pictures of the wind-mill during construction and in its final form.

Another aspect of Michael and Swati's work is their campaign against environmental pollution in the Gujarat golden corridor. There are a number of chemical industries in this area and most of them deal with hazardous and toxic materials. Enforcement of environmental regulations is lax and the companies regularly dump hazardous waste in the Damanganga river. This has led to increased level of toxicity and heavy metals in the water in the area, pollution of the groundwater (used for drinking) in many places and increased incidents of cancer. To bring this problem into focus Michael and Swati formed the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (PSS), an informal group that actively campaigns for a variety of environmental causes. The government has largely neglected this problem and one of main tasks conducted by PSS is documenting the violations by the industries and collecting data on the pollution of groundwater in these areas. PSS has organized the people in this area to confront the pollution control board and demand action against the industries involved in illegal dumping of the waste. Michael showed us some pictures which depicted the horrors of pollution of water sources in this area. In one picture, a migrant worker was seen bathing in the red colored water of a canal, which Michael said was not unusual to find in this area.

The talk culminated with informal discussions with AID volunteers and other attendees. Personally talks like these are not only informative but extremely inspiring too. Knowing that passionate and determined people like Michael and Swati and their fellow villagers from the Mozda Collective are working hard to solve the different problem in rural India, I feel a little more inspired to get over my own laziness and cynicism and attend the CSH, or work on a project or volunteer for an event and do my part in supporting these people. Michael's work brings to my mind the quotation by anthropologist Margaret Meade:

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

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## 2005 Food Fest

Shankar Shastry ([sns150@psu.edu](mailto:sns150@psu.edu))

*Very Very Tasty Tasty*

And that's what Food Fest is all about - authentic home cooked Indian food.

Indians are a very passionate, colorful, motley race. We love our clothes, movies, actors, cricketers, and above all food. Ask an Indian what they miss about home and the first thing they would say is the chai/kapi and depending on where they come from, it will be their mother's mouth watering idli/dosa, chaat, parathas, dhoklas, pongal/vada, stuff from the road side walas, and all those sweets – roshagollas, kaju katlis, kheers, jalebis. No offense to Indian restaurants here but well, nothing compares to home. Then we have the food fest once a year, when our lovely members from Indian community as we would call 'aunties' cook us delicious meals all out of love for the social cause its aimed at. All that the AID volunteers provide them with is containers and we get hot yummy food back. As an AID volunteer, I am extremely grateful to all those who cook for this event and I am short of words to thank them.

Coming to the AID volunteers, well, it is an annual social event where the excitement during the organization builds up so much that we don't even realize when it comes to an end. Be it booking halls, advertising, making creative fliers and decorations, planning the menu, who cooks what, helping in cooking, driving volunteers around, buying supplies, dropping it off at right places, picking it up, we always have somebody to take up the job. In this

context, I must bring up the name Arun Rajamani, who is currently working (Pointy) in LA, who almost single handedly coordinated this whole effort for Food Fest 2005. I am sure we will get through the Food Fest this year but not without bringing up his name a zillion times, esp., how he conned me into doing more work than I thought I was to do. But who cares, it was FUN!

An article about Food Fest won't be complete without mentioning its cause. Cost wise this event is a minimum spending and HUGE returns, all of which has been going towards funding the various projects mentioned in this news letter through the year. Last year alone our net profit was nearly 5000 dollars from this event. This shows how a small amount paid annually for a sumptuous meal can go a long way. Thank you all.

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## Prerana- A ray of hope for the Blind

Shivakumar Jolad ([shivkumar@psu.edu](mailto:shivkumar@psu.edu))

### Background:

Prerana Resource Center has been working for women with disabilities specialized in rehabilitating visually impaired women in particular and other types of disabled persons in general in Bangalore city and surrounding areas. The organization has grown with its founder Secretary Mrs. M.R. Prashantha. Her dedication and commitment to the cause of Blind women has left indelible mark in enriching their lives. It is currently serving 60 inmates with more than half of them blind and remaining physically handicapped or & Deaf/dumb.

### AID SC role:

Dr. Latha Bhushan gave a presentation on Prerana during mid September 2005. Project review started around mid of fall 2005 and was taken up by me and Sameer Marathe. Site visit was done by Shankar Shastry (secretary AID SC). Funding request was mainly involved non-recurring Mobile van, recurring food expenses and staff payment. One of the main problems faced by Prerana Blind women is the mobility within the city to go to work places in Bangalore. This was seen as an urgent necessity, so we decided to take up this part for funding. The AIDers unanimously approved funding for 'Maruthi Omni Van' to Prerana on Jan 26<sup>th</sup> (India's republic day!).

### Main Areas of Work:

- Counseling, Training and job placement for Disabled Persons both women & men
- Hostel services for women with different disabilities

- Upliftment of the local, poor and bring social and cultural awareness in them.
- Facilitating Marriage alliances



Happily Knitting!



Prerana women in Basket making-Bringing Colors to shopping bag!

### Prerana Program Interventions:

Prerana has organized series of programs during the past seven years. Around 2000 plus disabled persons with different disabilities in Karnataka have accessed the different type of services provided by Prerana. Some of the important services / interventions are categorized and given below.

**1. Counseling Services:** The counseling service is one of the important packages offered to all types of disabled people. The services are being given regularly as and when the people visit the centre or referred by other NGOs and other agencies sometimes over phones.

**2. Training for self—management:** Mobility training for visually impaired persons is one of the important and on-going activities of the centre, so far 160 visually impaired women benefited from this. In addition to this, training on how to cope up with the working environment, relationship with fellow employees' etc. are also been provided.

**3. Home Management:** Home Management is another training being imparted in order to make them self-reliant at home.

**4. Job Placement:** Job Placement is one of the major and important activities of Prerana. The organization has made a big breakthrough by placing 365 persons with different disabilities. Government of India recognized the contribution of Mrs. M. R. Prashantha, key person and founder of Prerana who made this big breakthrough and given the National Award for her best performance in Placement services.

**5. Training for Self-Employment:** Depending on the individual strengths & limitations of Disabled Persons, self Employment training have also been organized to make them earn their livelihood. They undergo training in paper cover making, Garland Making, Telephone Mat Manufacturing, Plastic Molding and Cap Making, and many of them are self employed.

**6. Matrimonial Services:** Prerana created a space for eligible DPs who wish to get married were encouraged to meet each other and take decisions for themselves, of course with the consent of their parents. So far 12 such marriages have take place with Prerana interventions. The couples have settled outside of Prerana and are leading an independent life.

**7. Awareness Camps:** Series of Awareness camps with the help of Department Disabled Welfare and other agencies such as M. S. Ramaiah Medical College Hospital, Rotary Club of Bangalore Midtown, Lioness Clubs, Inner Wheel Clubs etc. These camps have been organized on different issues highlighted above.

#### **My experience:**

I Interacted with Mrs. Prashantha through phone calls and emails. I was amazed by her single minded devotion towards the welfare of these blind women. She single handedly established Prerana and is running it with remarkable success. Everyday she travels 40 miles up and down, from her home to the center spending the whole day with them. She spends two days completely with these women every week. Her family has been supportive of her endeavors and bears her absence cheerfully. She says she doesn't distinguish between her children and these blind women. It is for this love and care that 'Prerana' women treat her as mother. It's a message to us that everyone has the potential to bring change in the lives of people around us and make our world better a place to live.

*\* Also see the following article about a site visit made by Shankar Shastry to Prerana*

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### **Site visit to Prerana- Bangalore**

Shankar Shastry ([sns150@psu.edu](mailto:sns150@psu.edu))

*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom...*

Prerana, a non profitable organization established in 1990 and working for empowerment of visually and physically challenged women in and around Bangalore, India is the beacon of hope and life for the current sixty odd residents. Prerana was the brainchild of Mrs. Prashantha, who wanted to do bring about a change for the better in the lives of visually impaired orphan girls. It was established with the objective of providing counseling, job training and securing employment for people with different disabilities, focusing mainly on visually impaired persons. For the past nine years prerana has also been providing hostel services for physically challenged women. Some of the activities undertaken by Prerana include organizing awareness camps, counseling services and providing mobility training. Women trained in basket weaving, making paper bags, garlands and telephone mats, to name a few, have been gainfully employed. Currently the organization is in need of a car to facilitate quicker and safer transport for the girls when they travel to work or for job training. The project was referred to AID Penn State by Dr. Lata Bhushan.

I visited the establishment on January, 7th 2006. I was welcomed by Mrs. Prashantha, in her office and in the manner of Indian hospitality was offered coffee immediately along with the exchange of pleasantries. I introduced AID as an organization to her and explained our goals and objectives and the activities AID Penn State was engaged in. She in turn narrated her vision of having an organization for the betterment of poor girls with disabilities and the evolution of Prerana from a small organization housing 15 girls to its present strength of sixty women. She is an ardent follower of Swami Vivekananda and his words, "Awake Arise! Let us not stop until the goal is won." is her mantra and the inspiration for her to found Prerana and hence the name.

I met all the women who were at home that evening and had a tour of their 'home'. There are about 12 rooms with bunk beds set up to house sixty four women. Five to six girls share a room and the rooms are very well maintained and the house was very clean. The women take turns sharing the domestic chores. One of the girls who had 90% visual

impairment demonstrated her mobility training when she navigated her way to a room and climbed the bunk bed to get up on the top bed. One of the women in the group has a Masters degree in music and she tutors the other girls and they have a music group that sings 'bhajans' at social gatherings. Traveling to perform in different locations of Bangalore is a problem especially when using the public transport and is one of the reasons they would like to have their own vehicle.

Prerana is located close to the industrial estate of Bangalore and Mrs. Prashantha has approached several factories to provide training for her girls in a particular field. She has found especial promise in packaging and garment industries. The girls get called up at anytime of the day for training sessions depending on availability of resources. Mobilizing all the girls and taking the bus to travel to the site is a taxing job. This has on occasion ended in the girls reaching the factory to find the session canceled on account of their being late for the appointment. Having their own vehicle would help them greatly to avoid such incidents.

One of the girls there, paralyzed from the waist down was assembling tools for an automobile industry. The factory had provided them with the different components for a trial run. Also they had material from packaging and garment industries, which they store in the storage area, built on the fourth level. Transporting the material from the factories to Prerana and returning them is to be managed by the organization. Also most of the girls living there were out on their jobs and they travel to their workplaces by the public transport. Also, Mrs. Prashantha has established a very good network with the restaurants in their locality, wherein they call her whenever they have an excess of food and she collects sufficient food, to feed her 'children'. She has to depend on 'rickshaws', the local cabs to transport the food. All of the above mentioned tasks would be easier managed with their owning a vehicle.

All the women that were present in the house during my visit, gathered together to give a soulful rendition of 'Uthistatha jagrata...' a song urging humankind to awake and arise to answer the call for help from fellow humans. Mrs. Prashantha was very happy that somebody had taken an interest in her organization and emphasized that she would be very happy to receive assistance from AID towards her cause. I promised her that I would present the case to the group and the decision would be put up for a vote and concluded my visit on that note.

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## Site Visit to Sahyog Trust-Pune

Pratik Mankidy ( [pjm285@psu.edu](mailto:pjm285@psu.edu) )

### *Mental Rehabilitation of Prisoners*

I was in Pune, my hometown, this last October and part of November for a few weeks. Along with my excitement of going back home after almost 4 years I was also very eager to do my very first AID site visit for our State College chapter. I had heard from other volunteers who had done site visits for other projects about the immense satisfaction they got when they made their first visit. My involvement with AID in the past two years had been with fund raising activities, such as the food fest and foot ball games volunteering and some project discussions. But this was the first time I was actually making a site visit. I must say that how volunteers describe their first site visit is very very true. A sense of realization dawned upon me that what we do here as an AID chapter does has a very significant impact on the issues we are trying to resolve in India.

My site visit also was in a lot of ways different from other site visits. I was meeting with people from Sahyog Trust in Pune. Sahyog Trust was started by Asim and Rama Sarode both human rights lawyers in Pune. The project I was going to talk to them about was a very different one from the usual projects that we discuss. Asim and Rama were conducting moral value education lessons for prisoners inside prisons. Their view was that the convicts are and will continue being part of the society we live in and nothing was being done to change their views on life. There are programs in the prison that focus on training these convicts to pick up a new vocation but nothing was being done for their mental rehabilitation. Therefore the Sarodes decided to use the concept of Gandhian Thoughts Exams to impart moral education to these convicts. The Gandhian Thoughts exams were in fact started by Asim's father Balasaheb Sarode who also helps them with this program. The course involves using Mahatma Gandhi's life as an example to explain the ideas of ahimsa or non violence to the convicts. They use three books based on such examples along with an autobiography by Gandhi for this purpose. Asim told me that classes are held in the Yerwada Central Prison in Pune (the only place so far where this is being done) every week for three months before the convicts have to appear for the exam which is a three hour, written, question and answer type examination. There are three levels for this course and it is totally voluntary. Asim mentioned that he has had no problems in the last two years that he ran this

program to get convicts to opt to take this course. Including, he mentioned he was able to persuade the jail guards to study and take this exam as well, as he thought it was necessary for them also to learn what the people they were watching over were learning.

The day I was going to meet Asim he called me and asked if I wanted to visit the Yerwada Central Jail with him that day as he had to conduct one of the exams there that day. I was quite taken aback by the offer as the Central Jail understandably does not allow civilians to enter their complex easily and this was to be my first visit of any sort to a project. But I am glad I accepted the offer. I met Asim that morning in front of the huge gates of the Central Prison. He knew the Warden well enough to pass me along as one of his Trust's volunteers. After several expected security searches we finally entered the Jail complex. I was surprised to see how clean and organized it was on the inside. All you see from the outside are the huge walls in the middle of the town but inside is an arrangement of gardens and pathways through the gardens surrounding different workshops and facilities. The complex looked well organized and busy like a little town market. The exam was to be held in the complex library for about 10 inmates. When we arrived there I was again pleasantly surprised to see the classroom type setup that was arranged by the librarian in preparation for that days exam. The inmates all seemed anxious to take the exam and it was heartening to see them trying to soak up all the information they could in the last few minutes before they were told to put away their books. That resembled every examination hall I was ever in before an exam. Asim asked a certain inmate to say a few words to the class before they started taking the exam about how he felt about the Gandhian values. This inmate spoke passionately and eloquently about the morals and values he had learned. He impressed me very much that I later asked Asim about this particular inmate. Asim said he used to be in a theatre and drama school but had committed a crime and was now sentenced for life imprisonment. That piece of information was very touching as it made me realize that these convicts were in fact willing to change their view of their life even if they might never leave prison and this course and exam was helping them do that. This same inmate later wrote an article in a local newspaper about his experience of taking the Gandhian thoughts Exam. I ended my visit to Yerwada Central Prison by later chatting with Asim about his views on improving other aspects inside the prison like healthcare and his proposal of expanding this program to other jails in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Asim also mentioned of receiving positive reports

from some of the inmates who had taken the exam. Some were even released into open grounds in the prison on account of their good behavior.

I returned to State College and in December 2005 our chapter voted in favor of partly funding Asim's efforts in imparting this moral value education to prisoners.

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## **Reproductive Rights and Wrongs**

Uma Asher ([uxa100@psu.edu](mailto:uxa100@psu.edu))

Women's concerns in poor countries like India are quite different from those in the US. Of course, as in the US, they stem from a belief in equality, dignity, human rights, and morality. But most importantly, in India, they stem from the stark imperative of survival.

It's impossible to talk about reproductive rights in India without discussing overpopulation. Before going on to reproductive choice, let's consider some basic aspects of India's population, in global and national perspective.

From the global perspective, one in every six people on earth is Indian. India and China account for a third of the world's population. What happens there should and does matter to us in the US - Americans feel the consequences of many things in India, such as low wages, affordable education, technological development, and increasing energy consumption. Also, thousands of Indians come to the US every year, as university students, temporary workers, and immigrants.

Considering at the population from India's perspective, firstly, it is a very crowded country, roughly one-third the size of the US, but with four and a half times as many people. India's population crossed the billion mark a couple of years ago.

Secondly, it's a misconception that overpopulation leads to poverty. In fact, it's the other way around. Poverty compels families to have more children. Most Indian parents are poor, and work as informal labor, with no social security, no pension, and no accident compensation. Children supplement the family income. They provide financial support when parents grow old. They substitute for disability benefits and life insurance. If you're poor, it's vitally important to have children. Children – in the plural – because even uneducated parents know that a child who is poor, illiterate, undernourished, and unprotected from a harsh climate, is more likely to die. The result: more than one-third of India's

population is less than fourteen years old. Twenty per cent are less than five years old. Compare that with the US, where only three per cent of the population is below the age of five.

What will happen to all these Indian toddlers in another 15 years? Will there be enough clean water, homes, and jobs for them? There is already a shortage of those things, even though most Indians live frugally. So India must reduce population growth.

How to do this? There are political, logistical, and social constraints. Politically, as a functioning democracy, India cannot enforce a one-child norm. It can only promote it through education and health services. Logistically, it is difficult to reach out to communities that lack literacy, electricity, and basic health services. And - most important - socially, it is difficult to ensure that women exercise choices in their best interest, as they are more illiterate, poorer, more malnourished, and socially inferior to men.

So this brings us to the issue of reproductive choice. In India, all the choices for birth control are available. A safe, legal abortion costs about five dollars, even in an expensive city like Mumbai. Contraceptive pills and other products are legally and cheaply available over the counter. In cities and towns, expectant parents can get ultrasound tests to ensure their baby is progressing normally. In a situation of women's social inferiority, all this reproductive technology can turn deadly.

The technologies may be expensive for some families, but they are still cheaper than the eventual "burden" of paying for a daughter's dowry and wedding. Thus there is a strong preference for sons. This situation has led to a veritable femicide. Amniocentesis and ultrasound scans are used to determine the sex of unborn babies, although it is illegal. If the baby is going to be a girl, an abortion follows.

As a result, millions of girls are never born. Ordinarily, any human population should have slightly more women than men, because female fetuses and newborns are, by nature, a bit more hardy than male ones. But the 2001 census in India showed there were only 933 women for every 1,000 men. This is partly because of selective abortion and poorer post-natal care of baby girls.

A recently published study<sup>1</sup> of 1.1 million households in India showed that half a million girl fetuses are selectively aborted each year – that's a total of 10 million girls since the technology became available about 20 years ago. In the 12 years since sex selection became illegal, only one doctor has been arrested, and this happened only last month. Clearly, the law is only part of the solution.

Indians must have as many reproductive choices as possible, because of overpopulation. But the mere existence of technologies does not amount to choice. The most crucial element of the solution to the selective abortion issue must come from society. Women should be able to participate as equals in reproductive decisions, and baby girls must be treated as equal to baby boys. After all, India needs its women as much as its men. Indian women of all classes must become more educated and aware of their rights: life, education, health services, work, equal pay, saving money. The Indian government and many organizations work to promote these rights. But the problem of selective abortion is rooted in social prejudice, and the solution must be social, too.

What can I do about all this? I can say to my friends that I think dowry is a bad idea. I can voice my ideas about the preference for sons in my community, and promote the idea that girls and boys are equal in dignity, intelligence, and potential. I can sponsor the education of a poor girl. India is a great country, and I'm proud to belong to it, but I can't let national pride stand in the way of its continued success.

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<sup>1</sup> Access it free online at the Public Library of Science, [www.plos.org](http://www.plos.org) - click on journals, and choose *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 3(2), February 2006. Originally published in *The Lancet*, Vol. 367, Issue 9506, 21 January 2006, pp. 211-218.

**Financial Accounts for AID-Penn State  
for the year 2005**

Piyush Thakre ([pkt109@psu.edu](mailto:pkt109@psu.edu))

Description	Income	Expense
<b>Fund raisers</b>		
Food Fest 2005	5070.00	
Football Game Stall	4343.86	
Mehendi Stall	142.00	
Subway Coupons	150.00	
Electronic Fund Transfer (EFT)	13174.00	
Donation (Credit Cards + Checks)	2071.00	
<b>Publications &amp; Other disburseals</b>		
Postage Expense		119.39
Office supplies		38.06
Newsletters Printing		46.43
Speaker Refreshments		13.97
Speaker (Chandra Anil) Travel		115.00
2005 Calendars		405.00
Narmada book Tutorial		50.00
<b>Project disburseals</b>		
Wadala School Proposal (Mumbai)		4800.00
SENSE (Tamil Nadu)		1550.00
Srikakulam IRDP		3100.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24950.86</b>	<b>10237.85</b>

**Delta Sigma Iota (DSI), Penn State**

Arindam Biswas ( [axb924@psu.edu](mailto:axb924@psu.edu) )

Delta Sigma Iota was founded at The Pennsylvania State University in August 2000 in order to promote unity, spread truth, value education, and integrate South Asian culture into our daily lives. Since its establishment, DSI has managed to integrate South Asian culture into our daily lives by engaging ourselves in community service projects that reach out to the South Asian population. Some of our service projects include National Gandhi Day of Service, Tsunami & Earthquake relief dinners, our national philanthropy South Asian Marrow Association of Recruiters, and one of our favorite events, the annual AID food festival.

Over the last three years Delta Sigma Iota has volunteered regularly in the food festival. Our contributions include the assistance to the decoration committee, serving food, clean-up crew, etc. Every year, the food festival has created memories for us, the South Asian community, and the beneficiaries of the grass roots projects being funded in India as a result of the food festival. Some of the members of our organization had to say the following things about their experiences in the food festival.

“A gathering of South Asian heritage in one place to help benefit the Grass Roots Projects is truly inspiring. As a brother of Delta Sigma Iota, I have never seen as much dedication and commitment to an event as I have for the annual AID food festival. I am glad that I was a part of such an event while being a student at Penn State University.”

-Jignesh Patel

"As a brother of DSI, I look forward to the AID Food Festival every year. Its amazing to see an entire community come together to enjoy great food and experience new culture for a good cause."

-Purav C. Patel

“Ever since my first experience with the AID food festival freshmen year, I have looked forward to the event every spring.-Especially, the fantastic food and the hundreds of people that it brings together for a great cause.”

-Arindam Biswas

Delta Sigma Iota prides itself and enjoys participating in the annual AID food festival. We look forward to participating in future food festivals and the memories that come about each year from it. If you are interested about finding out more information about Delta Sigma Iota visit us at [www.deltasigmaiota.org](http://www.deltasigmaiota.org) or contact us at [Info@DeltaSigmaIota.org](mailto:Info@DeltaSigmaIota.org).

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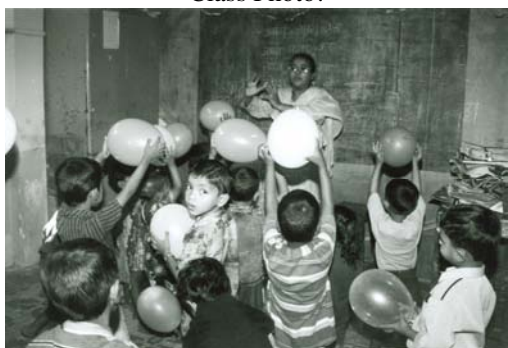
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## Parivartan - Wadala School Project

Pictures taken by Uma Asher



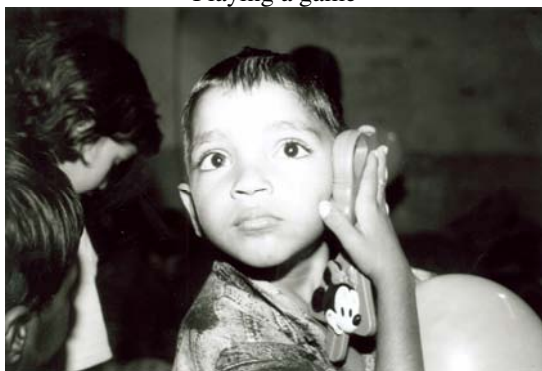
Class Photo!



Holding up Balloons



Playing a game



All tuned in!