Studying Society: Tools for Youth

The Avehi Abacus Project focuses on the context of children’s surroundings and knowledge pertinent to daily life and current society. It all began with Shanta Gandhi, an avid educationist and activist. A group of children interacting with her, spontaneously asking questions about their surroundings, and finding answers through games, songs and discussion, led naturally to discussions regarding human evolution - how life emerged, why we are what we are, how our lives have changed from the past, and so on.

Out of such experiences, the Avehi Abacus Project has developed three integrated packages of educational materials for students and teachers that are meant to supplement primary and secondary school learning.

The first kit Sangati meaning “Togetherness, Relevance, Harmony” is a thought-provoking interactive teaching-learning module based on knowledge about body, mind, our needs, our earth, the web of life and how everything is interconnected.

Responding to the growing violence against the girls and women, and to bring increasing awareness about gender parity, the second kit “Saath Saath” was developed to promote respect and open mindedness for individuals irrespective of their biological sex.

The third kit, Manthan (Churning) is for teacher training and focuses on education in the wider context of society, and the role of teachers within the social system.

Today this project reaches more than 2 lakh children and 10,000 teachers in over 900 schools in the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai mostly serving migrant slum communities of the lower economic strata.

Sobini Paldey, a scientist, volunteers for AID in Cincinnati.

Jai Kisan! Punjab Farmer joins National Task Force

Great news from Bhatinda: Umendra Dutt, executive director of Kheti Virasat Mission, an organization promoting sustainable agriculture in Punjab, is now part of a 7 member task force of farmers and scientists that the Ministry of Agriculture has appointed to promote organic farming across India. According to the Ministry, over 7 lakh farmers practice organic farming.

The task force hopes to showcase successful farmers in each region who are practicing ecological and sustainable farming, tending to Mother Earth while reaping the benefits of practicing chemical-free farming in terms of personal and public health, food and income security. The task force intends to highlight ways to improve training and access to resources that people need for sustainable farming, seed-saving, and marketing. The members will also consult with the public and with various farming communities and consumer stakeholders in order to understand the issues.

Punjab came to world-wide attention for being most affected by India’s Green Revolution, to the extent that a "cancer train" ran every night from Bathinda to Bikaner carrying passengers for medical treatment. KVM has been instrumental in bringing to the forefront the voices of the women in the household, who are keen to reverse this trend.

With their know-how and can-do spirit, KVM is taking confident steps towards ecological farming. AID congratulates KVM on this recognition and milestone, and hopes the task force will be able to help the small farmers who are the backbone of our country.

AID supports the Center for Sustainable Agriculture which along with KVM works with women in 60 villages in Faridkot District to grow food organically as part of the Women’s Action Against Pesticides project in Punjab.

Sripriya Komarlingam Natarajan dabbles with smart home technologies and volunteers for AID in Seattle.

Sohini Paldey, a scientist, volunteers for AID in Cincinnati.

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Can We Imagine Development for All?  
Interview with Aseem Shrivastava, ecological economist

**Dishaa:** Aseem, in our Summer Book Club, AID volunteers are reading *Churning the Earth*, that you and Ashish Kothari wrote about global India and the way forward for ecology and democracy. How can we be part of the solution?

**Aseem Shrivastava:** We rarely pause to wonder at the true source of the problems for which we seek answers. Our general attitude is to “fix” them. Thus we see “education solutions” being advertised no less confidently than “energy solutions.”

What we need to ask is: Could our way of life itself be a problem-creating one?

**D:** Our way of life may be problematic, but in the big picture of poverty and injustice, can changing our lifestyle really make any difference?

**A:** Not only our lives, we have to change the way we imagine the world. A world in a hurry has lost the patience for such things!

While we are being relentlessly told by the full-on advertising around us that we are heading for “superpower status,” “a better world,” “a smarter planet,” and the like, we are also made more anxious about our health, our children’s safety, the security of our borders, and so on. It turns us into spendthrift consumers, who oil the wheels of a skidding economy. Denied in the process are the countless possibilities that human life has for meaningful relationships, happy communities and creative freedom.

**D:** How can we balance the goals of development with the protection of the environment?

**A:** The problem with this balance-sheet approach is that it overlooks ecology and views the “environment” in a mechanical, fragmented, fashion. The bauxite in the mountain is one thing and the water it incidentally stores, which sustains the tree-cover and the farmers’ fields in the valley below another. The uprooting of cultures and communities is not given much importance in a developmental-environmental vision, as the present land acquisition bill shows. Yes, people are “displaced,” in some Archimedean sense, but they will be “compensated.”

**D:** What is the alternative?

**A:** We need to view things in an integrated manner, as part of living organisms and interdependent habitats. We need a holistic, ecological vision that maintains the dignity of human beings, the earth and its creatures, by refusing to objectify them in some rudely utilitarian fashion.

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**How can AID Promote Alternatives?**

The pillars of the alternative framework outlined in *Churning the Earth* are:

- Ecological sustainability
- Social well-being and justice,
- Direct and delegated democracy
- Economic democracy
- Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy

**How can AID promote alternative worldviews and practices for a socially and environmentally just and sustainable world?** Ashish Kothari, co-author of *Churning the Earth* suggests what volunteers can do:

- **Understand** the dynamics, lessons and values of the alternative framework
- **Spread** information about initiatives aligned with these values
- **Facilitate** human and financial resources for these initiatives (if they require)
- **Advocate** in the United States for reducing consumption and demanding greater global accountability from the government.

All of these create more conducive conditions for alternatives to flourish.

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**Flooding in Assam:** Planning with Foresight

Abdul Kalam Azad of the Center for Equity Studies (CES) and Luit Goswami from the Rural Volunteers Circle (RVC) have years of flood relief and rehabilitation experience. Familiar with the myriad aspects of Assam floods, and earnest in their desire to make a difference, they recently shared their expertise in developing measures that would prevent floods from turning disastrous.

They told us how the floods affect every aspect of life - shelter, livelihood, education, and health, in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. They told us about successful interventions in Bangladesh. Interweaving the intricate threads of the temporary river islands called the *char* areas, shore areas, and tributaries, they painted for us a picture of the Brahmaputra river, Luit’s namesake.
Ravishankar Arunachalam, who volunteered for AID in Austin before moving to Chennai to work with AID-India, gave us a picture of AID-India and the successes we’ve seen in the Eureka Superkidz program in Tamil Nadu. C. Srinivasan, whose work in resource management is widely recognized in India, discussed shifting our perceptions of waste and resources by turning “garbage to gold.”

Aaron Sherraden studies languages and literatures of India at the University of Texas and volunteers for AID in Austin.

Idealism, Energy and Patience
Towards Health for All

Since 2002, AID has supported Jan Swasthya Sahyog, a team of doctors and health workers in rural Chhattisgarh. Dallas volunteer Srinadh recently made his fourth visit to the JSS Clinic in Ganiyari, Chhattisgarh.

It had been 8 years since the last time I visited Jan Swasthya Sahyog – seemed like an eternity especially given the changes I saw!

A big change was seeing Electronic Medical Records (EMR) in action – it has taken close to 2 years and a dedicated team of 30 software engineers from Thoughtworks (working collaboratively with JSS) to come up with “Bamhni,” the open source software with integrated functions for patient records, OPD, lab, pharmacy, and billing.

Other additions to the infrastructure over the past few years include:

- A fully operational training center where a nursing program is the latest addition.
- Increased capacity in the in-patient wards – more beds and more staff.
- More facilities for students, visiting doctors, interns, staff to stay on campus.
- The Phulwari (creche) program that AID has helped support now serves 1000 children. I was able to visit 2 Phulwaris in the Shivtarai cluster.

We also learned about the inroads JSS has been able to make on advocacy with the government.

One very refreshing development at JSS is that several young doctors have joined and they have brought
new energy, vitality and freshness to JSS.

It has been 12 years for the AID and JSS collaboration. So many have undertaken the journey to Ganiyari – often a deeply transformative experience.

Amidst the changes, the soul of the place has remained much the same – unfailing empathy and compassion for the patients who seek care at JSS. The other thing unchanged is the scene outside the OPD - the wait times are now typically a week!

I wondered if we could ever have the patience wait for a full week before having a sick child attended to.

And so, as one departs JSS, one is reminded each time that for all our small endeavors and desire for the rural poor of Chhattisgarh to have better access to healthcare, we should also not forget to try and be just a little more like the people who wait outside the OPD.

* Srinadh Madhavapeddi designs chips by day and volunteers for AID in Dallas.

* Debolina Banerjee is an architect and urban planner who volunteers for AID in Seattle.

* Dishaa is originally printed on recycled paper. When printing copies, please use recycled paper.

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### Recently Approved Projects

**Yugajyoti:** Livelihood Promotion, Koraput District, Odisha ($12,563, Boston)

Marginal and landless families improve land and water management to increase agricultural yield and also develop other means of livelihood like poultry farms and non-timber forest produce.

**Yusuf Mehrally Center:** Mundra Coastline Protection, Kutch, Gujarat ($6,503, Bay Area)

Fish workers defend coastal and marine life from violations of social and environmental laws by new construction, industrial activity and coal processing.

**Micro Center for Community Development and Research:** Tribal School in Paschim Medinipur District, West Bengal ($3,357, Pittsburgh and Morgantown)

Sabar, Munda and Bhumij tribal communities study in Berabhenge (Across Borders) Primary School.

**Chaitanya Shravanti: Aranyika:** Community organizing, Vizag District, Andhra Pradesh ($7,852, DC metro)

Youth organize to identify and solve local issues, and provide peer counseling and legal support for women, particularly survivors of domestic violence.

**Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan:** Community empowerment and mobilization, Sitapur District, Uttar Pradesh ($8,017, Boston)

Rural women from 90 villages organize to obtain access to irrigation waters, generate employment and ensure fair wages and pension.

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I would like to attend an AID Community Service Hour

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