



Dishaa

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When people lead...

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Kirankumar Vissa is our new JeevanSaathi

From time to time an AID volunteer becomes motivated to work full-time for social change in India. When this happens, the rest of AID says, "You go do your heart's bidding. Please don't worry about your family – that's what we friends are for." This is the essence of the AID JeevanSaathi program, as aptly summarized by our volunteer Nigamanth Sridhar.

Today we are proud to introduce our latest JeevanSaathi, Kirankumar Vissa. During the last thirteen years, Kiran has touched literally every aspect of AID's functioning in the US - newsletters, projects, disaster response teams, treasury, legal matters, campaigns and visiting AID partners in India. He was treasurer on the Executive Board and a member of the Board of Directors since 1997.



Kirankumar Vissa, with his wife Samyuktha and son, Tanmay.

Kiran has also been a part of many milestones in AID's evolution – from the first AID concert, to forming new chapters, to taking stands on Narmada and on the communal violence in Gujarat to Tsunami relief.

Kiran has a B.Tech from IIT Madras, and an MS from the University of

Maryland. Since then, he worked for a satellite communications company in Maryland. In June, he moved to Hyderabad with his wife Samyuktha, a textile designer and activist herself. They have an 8-month old son, Tanmay.

In India, Kiran will focus on agriculture, natural resources and good governance. Like all JeevanSaathis, he will remain involved in AID and be a resource for projects and campaigns.

Kiran's broad understanding of the issues, his can-do attitude, sense of humor, tireless energy and careful handling of sensitive matters is widely respected in AID.

AID volunteers will greatly miss interacting with Kiran, but then he's really not going away...

...for Kiran is our JeevanSaathi now – a companion for life.

-- Editors



After 22 days of fasting, nine Bhopalis took nutrients on July 3, and ten others began an indefinite fast. They are demanding a national commission to oversee rehabilitation, toxic waste clean-up and legal action against Dow. Photo: Bhopal.net

Hungry for justice in Bhopal

Apart from the fasters in New Delhi, over 800 supporters across the world, including many AID volunteers, fasted for 1, 2 or 3 days at a time in solidarity – all to bring pressure on the Indian government to act rather than issue their usual placatory promises.

There are two ongoing disasters in Bhopal: 150,000 survivors of the 1984 gas tragedy have medical problems, and ground water is contaminated by toxic waste. Two years ago, the PM assured the Bhopalis that their demands would be met. But these promises turned out to be empty.

On June 2, the Prime Minister conveyed his "in principle" agreement to a Special Commission for rehabilitating Bhopal. But like past promises, no details or timelines were provided, no proper health care or clean water was guaranteed.

This time, the survivors expect progress. "The Group of Ministers for Bhopal have assured us that

their recommendations will closely reflect our demands. Bhopal files are being moved at a unprecedented pace. We will focus on the MP Government which is standing in the way of the Commission," said Satinath Sarangi, one of the 22-day fasters. Our prayers and thoughts are with the Bhopalis! [For the latest updates, visit Bhopal.net. --Editors]

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In the Bolero – a world outside the site visit

Our Bolero screeched to a halt as it took a sharp left turn in a small town in the Purulia district of West Bengal. We had startled a short man wearing a shawl and dhoti. He turned and looked at the four of us sitting inside.

"Run me over," he shouted and beat his chest. "Run me over and crush me, I am standing right here. Run over this poor man".

The policeman at the intersection rudely shoved the man aside. We needed this rescue. It was either the defiance or the helplessness in the man's eyes that unnerved me the most, I wasn't sure.

We were in the Bolero to visit the villages in the Ayodhya mountain range served by the Mandra Lions Club in Purulia. After negotiating a rough stretch, we continued uphill on a smooth road – quite luxurious for the few who seemed to use it.

We stopped at a sharp hairpin turn to look into a valley filled with water. It was the lower reservoir of the Purulia Pumped Storage Project (PPSP). Further ahead, the upper reservoir, with stubborn trees poking out of the water, was not only home to a host of flora and fauna, but also a route for migrating elephants. The 900 MW generated here escapes the countryside to illuminate, cool or heat cities far away.

We drove across the road over the dam. Small waves rose and fell against the wall. The dam stood tranquil, unmoved. What if the submerged trees rose to reclaim their share of land and water? I was lost in the what-ifs when all of a sudden, our car began to shake vigorously.

"What happened to the smooth road?" I asked my fellow passengers, who lived and worked in this area. "Well, the dam ends here and so does the road," they replied.

It turned out that most of the eighty-odd villages in the mountains lay beyond the smooth road - meant to make the hills accessible to all. All? Certainly not for these villages!

A whopping Rs. 3,200 crores had been spent on the dam to satisfy the demand from far-off cities. Just like the road, the tribals had no use for the dam. Ironically, it fell on the tribals to bear the losses. We have to give up something to get something – so goes the argument. What remains unsaid is that the people who bear the cost and the people who reap the benefits are never the same.

As we talked to the people in the villages, I was sometimes at the end of my wits. My well-intentioned questions seemed like cruel jokes. Consider this conversation we had in front of a beautifully decorated Santhal home:

"Do you eat vegetables with every meal?" I asked.

"If we could afford it, we would eat more rice not vegetables. Rice fills our stomachs," a man replied.

"What about *daal* (lentils)?" I asked.

"*Daal*?" a younger man laughed at the question.

My world had ended along with the smooth multi-lane road.



The lower reservoir of the Purulia dam
Photo: Somnath Mukherji

Some people sat on long poles made from *sal* (teak) trunks. Women collect them from the forest, carrying 4 or 5 10-foot long trunks on their heads, weighing 40-50 kg in all. They walk about 8 km downhill to sell them for barely Rs 40.

The women face other dangers too – they are regularly harassed by the forest department for 'stealing' minor timber. Perhaps the authorities fear that at this rate, the tribals will denude the hills.

Compare this to the submergence of 500 hectares of old-growth forests by the dam. So neither the amount nor the rate of destruction matters. The legitimacy of destruction depends on its beneficiaries.

In a Bolero, you are shielded by its fortified exterior. At intersections, the policeman will flex his muscles for you. But if you are crossing the road barefoot on a hungry stomach, you had better watch out.

Somnath Mukherji, an electrical engineer in Boston, visited the villages served by the Mandra Lions Club, whose community health (\$4000) and malaria control (\$4000) projects are supported by AID Boston, JHU and College Station.

Regaining citizenship rights: Gothi Koya



Bhadraachalam, AP (June 2008). Fleeing Salva Judum violence in Chattisgarh, thousands of Gothikoya tribal families have taken refuge in the neighboring forests in Andhra Pradesh. Agriculture and Social Development Society (ASDS) has set up children's feeding centers and non-formal schools in 26 villages to help these families survive and secure their rights. Appealing to the National Human Rights Commission, the villagers applied for job cards, ration cards, schools, borewells, and *anganwadi* services. These services have just begun to be sanctioned by the government. Before January 2008, the Gothikoyas lived as refugees in their own country. Today they live as equal citizens. AID Maryland and Boise supported ASDS relief work (\$16,000).

Aravinda Pillalamarri is an AID JeevanSaathi

Fasting in solidarity to free Dr Binayak Sen

Despite international recognition and support, Dr Binayak Sen continues to be imprisoned on false charges. To bring



AID Houston volunteer Rashim Singh takes juice from volunteers Anand and Sekhar after her 10-day fast in solidarity to free Dr Binayak Sen.

awareness and justice, his wife Dr Ilina Sen, Magsasay award winner Sandeep Pandey and others went on a 10-day fast in Raipur ending on June 25. Several AID volunteers in the US, including Rashim Singh (10 days), Rajeshwar Ojha (5 days), Dr Mohan Bhagat (3 days), Somu

Kumar (4 days), Nitin Paradkar (4 days), Selva Ganapathy (3 days), Neena Yennawar (3 days) also fasted in solidarity.

Fasting for justice is quintessentially Indian, with roots going back to Gandhiji and the Indian freedom movement. But it is the first time in the history of AID that many volunteers have fasted for several days, indicating a deep involvement and identification with the cause.

AID Houston volunteers Anand, Sekhar and Nimish talked to Rashim Singh about her fast:

Q: What motivated you to fast for 10 days?

A: I heard Dr. Ilina Sen at the AID conference & read articles about Dr Binayak Sen. Dr Sen, who has worked for 30 years for the poor has been held falsely by the government. I believed it is wrong and I decided to stand for my belief.

Q: What would your message be to anybody reading this?

A: A country is made up of people not the boundaries. If the government is not able to provide a respectable life, then people should stand up for themselves. In the last 3 days of my fast, I thought about the Bhopalis who have been on a hunger strike. I urge the PM to keep a 2-day fast to understand how difficult it is – and meet the suffering *junta*.

Think about the farmers who have committed suicide all over India. I got a glimpse of why one would commit suicide. I started my fast in good health, but it was not easy to go through the last three days. The farmers and their families, who have been living under malnutrition are fasting not by choice but by the circumstances forced on them by the government.

Q: Is there hope under these circumstances for the poor?

A: A lot of people in India are improving their life. But they should think of the factors contributing to their "improved" life. A growing economy at the expense of somebody else's life and oppression is not 'improved' human life. The hope for is for a compassionate citizen who would understand that improved life is when the entire society is uplifted to a respectable state of life.

Protecting wildlife, preserving livelihoods

Phasepardhis, one of the wandering tribes of the Maharashtra region, have traditionally been hunters, until the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 rendered this option illegal. With no alternate livelihood and no help from the government, many have turned to poaching and international trade in animal skins.

Samvedana, an organization for Phasepardhi and Chitrakathi tribals, is working to help them earn a living in new ways. Seeing people in Masa

and Vadhavi move on their own into animal husbandry and nomadic trading, Kaustubh, working with Samvedana, is helping to replicate models of alternate employment in Wadala, Titwa, Shend, Kanadi, and Nawati.



Himmat, a traditional hunter, now earns a living by tending to goats – a success story in conserving environment and livelihoods in Mesa, Maharashtra.

Other initiatives planned by Samvedana include preparing a 'Peoples biodiversity register' of the grassland species in Akola and Washim, creating awareness on sustainable use and conservation of grasslands, and experimenting in-situ conservation efforts for the Lesser Florican, an endangered bird under severe threat from changes due to land use.

Interestingly, to protect the Lesser Florican, Samvedana plans to start an incentive scheme, rewarding successful breeding of the species by farmers and Phasepardhis (former hunters), eventually planning to hand over the scheme to the State Government.

Ipsita De, a consultant in College Park, visited Samvedana in May. AID College Park supported Samvedana's livelihood work (\$17,000).

Bringing smiles, the bio-gas way

June 10, 2008 was a historic day for Ramanwadi, a small, isolated village in the tropical reserve forests of the Sahyadri mountain range in Maharashtra.

Newly installed Gobar-gas units were inaugurated and everyone was overjoyed to see the flames. Using the bio-gas stoves meant an end to troublesome smoke from firewood stoves. And the women and girls do not need to walk 6-8 kms just to collect firewood. I was invited to the first meal cooked on gobar gas, and a unique feature was that 90% of the ingredients were from the fields owned by the family.

To load the digester with dung (Gobar) for the first time, a whole tractor trolley of dung is required. When more dung

(continued on page 4)

Recently Approved Projects

Voluntary Health Association of Tripura (VHAT), Mohanpur block, West Tripura district (\$10,318, Boise): 300 marginalized farmers to learn eco-friendly sustainable agricultural practices.

Community Environment Monitoring, The Other Media, Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu (\$5,143, College Park): Coordinators to monitor and document the health impact of pollution-affected communities as well as sensitize people about occupational diseases and their effects.

Sustainable Agriculture Development, Surul Centre for Services in Rural Area (CSRA), Birbhum, West Bengal (\$4,000, Los Angeles): Farmers and women's self-help groups to learn to transform wastelands into fertile lands.

Engaging and improving RTI implementation, AID India (\$2,590, Los Angeles): AID-Chennai to work with the Tamil Nadu State Information Commission to review rulings to conform with the RTI Act.

Tracking Forest Rights Act in Bhimashankar, Kalpavriksh, Pune, Maharashtra (\$5,143, Bay Area): Forest management and implementation of the Forest Rights Act in the Bhimashankar Preserve to be investigated.

Non Formal Education in Patna slums, Nav Bharat Jagriti Kendra, Patna, Bihar (\$5,099, Portland): Adolescent children in 10 slums to receive education, primary health services and vocational training.

Women's Legal Aid, Aranyika, Vizag, Andhra Pradesh (\$2,381, College Park): Abused women to receive legal services and attend Mandal-level workshops on domestic violence and gender issues.

RTI Janpath, Ahmedabad, Gujrat (\$3,870, Duke): Daily wage and migrant laborers, slum dwellers and people in working class areas to be made aware of the Right to Information Act, via the "RTI on wheels" program.

Local Self-Governance, Kabir, Delhi (\$7,143, College Park): Three researchers to obtain Panchayat and Municipality records and budgets from throughout India using the RTI Act, study the material and incorporate best practices into a model system for rural and urban areas.

Bringing smiles, the bio-gas way (cont'd)

(...cont'd from page 3) had to be obtained from nearby villages, it generated interest and soon more villages wanted the bio-gas units installed. Dilip Patil, the contractor who installed the bio-gas units, was amazed to see all this enthusiasm.



In Ramanwadi village, a demonstration of how a bio-gas stove works. Photo courtesy Venu Madhuri Trust.

So far, at Ramanwadi, we installed 15 go-bar gas digesters with a capacity of 2 cubic meters and 3 units at the neighboring village of Bhari Bhambar, with support of Rs. 1,74,000 from AID-Dallas. All the beneficiaries attended a training session and a laminated instruction chart will also be provided to each family. For the 18 units, the government provided a subsidy of Rs. 63,000 through the renewable energy department and the Zilla Parishad.

Rahul Vijay Deshpande manages VMT (Venu Madhuri Trust) at Ramanwadi village, near Kolhapur in Maharashtra. AID has supported VMT work for the last three years.

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