

India's Finest Hour

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On 2047, August 15, India will complete 100 years as an independent nation. The report card will be out on all newspapers. How well did the largest democracy do with the precious state of independence the ancestors struggled for? Is India closing in on universal quality education? Is abject poverty a thing of the past? Is the citizenry actively participating in shaping public policy? Whether the media reports will be celebrations of a nation's meticulously planned success or woeful criticisms of opportunities missed for short term gains of a few, will depend on what we each do today.

Asha was founded in 1991 with a focus on basic education in India. An action group driven by a spirit of volunteerism, and a decentralized organization model, Asha allowed ordinary people to participate, to learn, and to contribute to the underserved children all over India. With over 500 projects covering 20 states of India, 500 active volunteers and thousands of donors, today Asha after 14 years has reached out to over 150,000 children.

With 180 Million children out of school in India¹, what this means in the larger picture is Asha's effort over 15 years has touched less than 0.1% of the children in need.

Looking across Asha like organizations that have followed similar trajectories, it is clear that independently functioning non-profit organizations are simply not equipped to handle the immense scale of effort necessary to reach out to every child. The government of India alone has the ability to handle the problem of scale in a sustainable manner. What Asha like NGOs can do better however is in going deeper into the issues by segment of children, to try new approaches for intervention, learn quickly, surface the best practices from around India and the world that the government can learn from and

¹ PROBE Report, 1996

adopt into mainstream practice. Children with disabilities, orphans, sex workers, marginalized tribals, rural children, slum children, children of prisoners - each segment needs careful attention. One size does not fit all. So this is where Asha like NGOs have a vital role, as effective catalysts that influence public policy.

On 2047, August 15, India will complete 100 years as an independent nation and enter its finest hour. Will "no village left behind" become a reality? Will there be visible change on the streets? Will India's ordinary citizens like you and me rise to the call of honor and deliver? I believe we can. But every dream has a price. This great Indian dream will require us to think and act in new ways. (i) We must get closer to the government and participate in the democracy.

The government's development programs need to be demystified - citizens should know the plans and budgets for every village and hold the govt accountable for the same (ii) Organizations should find ways to work together rather than in silos. Forums like India Development Coalition of America (IDCA), Rejuvenate India Movement (RIM) that are attempting to foster cooperation to accelerate rural development should be embraced (iii) Younger volunteers especially at the grass roots need to be mentored and where necessary need to be supported financially (iv) Information Technology needs to be leveraged as it plays to India's strength in a services driven global marketplace.

The author has been an Asha volunteer since 1992. The opinions stated here are his own and is not intended as Asha-wide opinion.

D P Prakash was born in Chennai, India on Dec 31, 1967. As grandson of a farmer from a small village, Periyapanicheri, in the outskirts of Chennai, he grew up loving village life. After attending Vidya Mandir High School, in the Chennai city, he graduated with a B Tech in Electronics & Communication Engineering from IIT Madras. In 1997 he finished a Ph.D in Electrical Engineering from University of California, Los Angeles. Currently he is an Advisory Engineer at Microelectronics division of IBM Systems & Technology

Group working on world leading nano technology. While at UCLA he co-founded Asha-LA, one of the early chapters of Asha for Education, an action group to provide education to underprivileged children in India. His envisions Universal Quality Education (UQE) 2047, Project Honor, to facilitate equal opportunity and self-reliance for all 700,000 villages of India.