

Action Village India Newsletter
May 2014

We are sending this out now to bring friends and supporters up to date with events at AVI. First a heartfelt apology that you have heard so little from the organisation over the last months. As you will see there are reasons for this.

As mentioned at the end of our last newsletter we were expecting some changes with regard to staffing and the office. In fact these have been more far reaching than expected and it is only now that things are beginning to fall into place. We've delayed sending out info till the situation seemed more settled which I'm glad to say it now is. Of course, too, Emma, Sabrina and Monica have had their energies directed to raising funds for our partners, sorting out changed staff roles and moving to the new office. However we wouldn't exist as an organisation without you, our supporters. We will do all we can to make sure you are kept informed and not to have such a long information gap in the future.

Info on the changes at AVI's UK base are at the end of this newsletter but AVI has always been led by the needs of our partners. So first here are a few comments on recent activities in India.

Action Village India – a bit of history

AVI developed from a group of people with an interest in India who had spent time there. A registered charity since 1988, last year we celebrated our 25th anniversary of working with partners in rural India. These partners were well known to members of the AVI committee before we started raising money for their work. We aim to provide support on a long term basis. This is different from the way many NGOs in the UK work - funding projects run by a range of different organisations. Over the years, we have seen our partners develop and take on new roles such as campaigning for land reform and helping disabled people access resources. A better life for the rural poor remains at the centre of all our partners do.

International recognition for Ekta

We've described the amazing success of Ekta Parishad in October 2012 when the Indian government formally agreed to a list of demands on land reform. A national framework for land reform is now in place, and plans are going ahead including measures for the provision of a small plot of land for every homeless family in the country. Implementation of the reforms is devolved down to state level. A lot of work is still to be done, and considerable pressure on state governments will be needed. However, now the system is in place a change of national government following the election should make no difference.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), speaking on behalf of Quakers in the United States, has nominated Ekta Parishad for the Nobel Peace Prize. This is a tremendous honour. As AFSC said "Significantly, both SEWA (the other organisation nominated) and Ekta Parishad are engaged in both aid and social justice work; in other words they are working to meet people's needs and at the same time, they are working to challenge the systems that make them needy." Or as one of the comments on the Facebook page of Rajagopal, Ekta's founder, put it, "Wow!!!!!!!!!" More about this on: www.afsc.org/story/afsc-nominates-two-groups-2014-nobel-peace-prize

Disability – the spread of new ideas

Life in many parts of rural India is difficult enough. It's doubly so if you have a disability. The programme carried out by NBJK in Bihar and Jharkhand has proved a powerful agent for change. NBJK received a major grant from the UK's Department for International Development which has helped the disabled get their disabilities recognised and then access the resources available. People with disabilities were encouraged to form groups to tackle the common issues they faced such as discrimination. Finding jobs that disabled people could do has also been important. As the disabled got access to resources or paid work and were seen as contributing members of the community, attitudes towards disability began to change. The disability programme was commended by evaluators who praised the positive approach of disabled people and the way they used group support to achieve their rights.

The benefits have reached other parts of India. An AVI partners' forum held at NBJK enabled other partners to hear about the programme and talk to the people involved. Now CRUSADE in Tamil Nadu is bringing in a similar scheme and other partners are looking afresh at the problems the disabled face. The regular get-togethers for AVI partners were Ivan Nutbrown's idea. Staff from each of the partners meet, share ideas and visit projects at the host organisation. There's been so much interest that partners may arrange longer visits between the forums for a project in which they are particularly interested. So good ideas and schemes spread from one partner to another.

Changing women's lives

I still remember vividly the occasion 3000 women came by bus and foot, some carrying babies or accompanied by small children, to celebrate Women's Day in a university hall near Bodh Gaya in Bihar. They had come to share their experiences and problems, and spoke and sang with passion. They wanted change.

It is women like these that AVI's partners are working with. This involves a variety of different initiatives. Savings groups so women can start small businesses and don't get into the hands of money lenders, grants to help girls complete their secondary education, training for women farmers, and health workers to meet the specific needs of women and children. The partners also encourage women to take on leadership roles and to develop their skills so they can do this with confidence. This is true both as members of the partner organisations and on the local councils, which form the Panchayati Raj system, where women will be found speaking up very forcefully.

Undoubtedly women in the India of 2014 face many pressures. Not only the terrible violence we have heard about on the news but also the persistent pressure of low pay and low status.

At the AVI Walk for Women at Virginia Water on 6 July we will be raising funds for a range of projects for women. It's ten years since the first Walk and we want to make this a special event. If you've been before and know what an enjoyable day it is please bring a few friends. It's a lovely place and you do get a free lunch – well fairly free but of course we'd be grateful if you would also contribute to our fundraising.

India in 2014

As I write this 800 million plus Indians are voting for a new government and it looks as if 'business friendly' Narendra Modi, currently the Chief Minister of Gujarat, will be the new Prime Minister and his party the Bharatiya Janata Party will be the dominant party. How will this affect the lives of the rural poor?

Even in the highest years of growth in India prosperity did not appear to 'trickle down' to the poor. New factories, mines and urban development have put pressure on the availability of land. At present poor people can be moved, often with little or no compensation, and have no alternative but to join the millions who scrape a living on the outskirts of the towns and big cities. That's why Ekta Parishad and its supporters across India have been fighting so hard for land rights. As mechanisation of agriculture increases there are fewer jobs for the unskilled. Food prices are rising all the time.

So the fact the one third of the world's poorest people live in India and a UNICEF report found that nearly half (48%) of children under five in India are malnourished is terrible, but should come as no great surprise.

If we really do live in a globalised world our fellow citizens in that world should be our concern. That's why at AVI we support the work our partners are doing to ensure change happens in people's lives not just on stock exchanges in Delhi and London.

No one has been more important to AVI and its partners than Ivan. This brings us back to what's been happening in the UK.

Ivan Nutbrown

Ivan has been the charity's co-ordinator from the time when we were first able to employ staff. Actually he has also been the moving spirit and the person who did everything. Action Village India owes an incalculable amount to him. After his amazing achievements he was planning to reduce his hours (& have a break/have a bit more time for other things). The idea was that he would work a two day week concentrating on activities relating to our partners in India but no longer be responsible for the co-ordination of UK activities or major fundraising.

Sadly this change coincided with Ivan becoming unwell and needing surgery followed by a course of chemotherapy. Good wishes and hopes for his speedy recovery have been pouring in from all over the UK and from the Himalayas to Tamil Nadu in India.

Now in May 2014 it's great to be able to say that he is doing well, and going out for a walk every day. It will not surprise anyone to know that he has continued to keep in touch with AVI's partners since last autumn. Of course he won't be asked to do anything which would jeopardise his health but the plan is that once his treatment is completed and he is back to strength he will resume working two days a week for AVI.

Many of you will, I expect, already know this but for those who don't I'm sorry to have to bring the news. If you would like to contact Ivan his email is xxx. He will be back in the office from time to time during the summer but he had always planned to work mainly from home.

How will AVI manage?

We have been extremely fortunate because our excellent Chair, Emma McKenzie, has volunteered to give up her job for six months and act as co-ordinator for the organisation. To say we owe Emma a lot is to put it mildly. As Chair Emma has worked closely with Ivan over the last few years, knows our partners well, and recently did a Diploma in Overseas development/development economics at LSE. She is also a qualified accountant.

It was felt that having the role of co-ordinator was not compatible with also being Chair of the organisation. So Emma stepped down as Chair and Sabrina Aaronovitch, a committee member, took over as Chair. Again we all owe a lot to Sabrina.

Monica Vidal continues to work part time as fundraiser and has taken on Ivan's role applying for the major grants. Bryan Osbon continues his current part time role as events coordinator. He is also the coordinator of Sensetrade which raises money for AVI at WOMAD.

Because Emma is working on a voluntary basis and there have been various other changes we are able to employ someone part time to approach corporations and community groups for funds. So Lyndsey Hood has just started work. Also we have a volunteer intern Kamile Jucyte who is spending three months with us as part of a degree in human rights at Galway University. We'd like to welcome Lyndsey and Kamile.

Meanwhile our administrator, Jaheda Begum is on maternity leave and she and her husband Tarek now have a lovely daughter Mariyam. We send our congratulations and good wishes. Jaheda will be returning to work at the end of the summer.

The new AVI office

Toynbee Hall, our previous home, is being refurbished and rents will be going up. So Action Village India has moved to a building **belonging** in the Hackney Cypriot Association in Balls Pond Road, just off Kingsland Road. We have a nice light room on the first floor and can use other rooms as meeting rooms which will be very convenient and economical. Members of the Hackney Cypriot Association have been very welcoming and we can use their kitchen. The new office has good transport links – it's close to Dalston Kingsland and Dalston Junction stations and numerous bus routes.

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WOMAD 24 – 27 July

Lots of changes then but one thing that hasn't changed is the need for lots of good people to chop up onions, serve plates of delicious South Indian food, sell silk scarves and tell people about life in rural India. Please could anyone who might be able to help at WOMAD get in touch with Bryan Osbon **E** bryan.osbon@talktalk.net or **T** 07756 819 404
Bryan would be delighted to hear from you and of course the sooner tickets for the festival are ordered the better.