



News from Chirag! **January 2009**

Writing has always been a rather onerous task for me. Improved electronic communication has only made matters worse. All those emails don't seem to count at all. We have been planning a newsletter for some months - an electronic newsletter. Keith sportingly put together material for the first newsletter and handed it over to me to edit. The 'editor's block' was back! I decided to keep it simple and just try and put down all the latest news from Chirag - as if I was having a conversation with you - monologue actually.

So much seems to be happening all the time that this seems like a good way to keep all Chirag's supporters and well wishers informed. Please let us know what you think. I hope we can keep this going at least once every quarter.

I hope you and your loved ones have a great year.

*Madhavan
22nd January 2009, Sitla*

Vocational Skills for Adolescent Youth

We commenced collaborating with SaralTA - an institution based out of Hyderabad a few months ago. Saral offers a four-month long course on Information Technology for youth from rural areas and guarantees employment after the course. When they first approached us, we were slow to respond. Should we be encouraging youth to move far away from Kumaun? Shouldn't we be focussing on providing them with options to work in the region? Luckily, our adolescent team is practical and found this very simple to deal with. They felt that for youth with limited education our emphasis should be on helping them move up the labour value chain- within the region. Youth who were better educated and were in any case not willing to work as skilled labour - would migrate in any case, unless they found a 'job'. This could provide them with an option. An examination paper was sent by Saral and exams were conducted in November. 47 youth appeared in the exam and 11 of these youth were interviewed on the 11th and 12th of December. Following the interview, five youth were selected and three commenced the course at Hyderabad. A beginning nevertheless!

Chirag Hospital

If you have read our past 2 or is it 3 annual reports- you'll probably skip this. Not another delay! Well, even I am pleasantly surprised. The hospital was inaugurated three days ago. There was a simple 'Puja' at the hospital and the out-patient facilities at the hospital have commenced. On the 20th and 21st of January, Dr Kumkum (Gynaecologist) and Dr Avinash Kulkarni



(Paediatrician) were our first specialists to visit the Sargakhet hospital and Sitla clinic. We are finalising the list of equipments and suppliers and hope to start receiving this shortly. We currently have a team of four trained medical personnel and four doctors at the moment. Yes, four! Jennifer and Sonia have been volunteering with us since September and with Dr. Ruma Mukherjee and Mahendra Bisht complete the team. Sonia went home for Christmas and is due back today. The Sitla clinic will not be shut down and we will continue to provide services through it. Dr. Ruma Mukherjee who has been a tremendous support, continues to visit our clinics twice each week.

Chirag School

The school has shut down for the winter break a week ago and will reopen a month later. The winter break was planned based on the belief that the winters tend to be the worst towards the end of January and in early February. We hadn't taken climate change into account. The past week has been really warm and winter seems to have departed. In the last fortnight of December there was a fair for children at Reetha and students from the Chirag school were invited. Puja and Mahi from the Chirag school - both students in the 2nd grade - won the competitions for essay writing and drawing/painting respectively. Given the fact that they had never participated in a competition or test before and were competing against children from the 3rd and 4th grades, this was quite an achievement. The notion about the Chirag School just being a place where children play and sing has been dented a little.

Simayal Experimental Farm

The Simayal experimental farm - Orakhan farm if you insist, has received its certificate from the Uttaranchal State Certification Agency. The farm is now in its first year of conversion to being 'certified organic'. The food already tastes better.

Community Forestry

Our NRM team has been rather busy these past few months. Quadrats have been laid in each site where we are undertaking community forestry work and measurements have been completed. They have even mapped the perimeters of most of these plots using a GPS device and there is a distinct possibility that by the end of the month, we will actually have some maps of the sites we are commencing work in - courtesy Google.

Technical Support

We have been supporting Sri Bhuvaneshwari Mahila Ashram and the Himalayan Institute Hospital Trust in Garhwal and INHERE and Himalayan Gram Vikas Samiti in Kumaun in undertaking protection of catchments for drinking water schemes that they are constructing. Our teams have been spending time visiting each of these organisations. Further, we are supporting four organisations in Kumaun in promoting the cultivation of fodder on common and private lands. Raju was in Chamoli recently to



undertake the evaluation of a similar fodder effort in the district supported by the Himmat Society.

New Agricultural Initiative

Our new initiative to increase the scale of our impact on agriculture in the region has just rolled out. The path to large scale impact is through farmers as innovators. We are currently identifying farmers who innovate on their own. We hope to work with them and shall support them to undertake trials on their own fields. The underlying assumption is that the results of trials conducted by farmers on their own fields are likely to disseminate far more easily than our own efforts. Currently, this looks like a far more cost-effective method of disseminating information and encouraging alterations in practices. Workshops with these innovators were held earlier this month and in a few days, we'll receive proposals from each of these innovators. Who knows, in six months we may very well have 70 odd experimental farms!

Interns and Volunteers

In addition to Drs Jennifer Pond and Sonia Chery who are helping our curative health programme, Edward Laughton is involved in several pilot projects the results of which could lead to new products being produced. Gaurav Madan – an IndiCorps volunteer from the US will be with us for at least another 9 months – if not more – and is focussing on mobilising communities around the issue of preventive and promotive health and on creating a plan for development of the leadership of women at the village level. Pulkit and Kathleen from the US have just arrived a week ago and will be here till May and both of them are working on issues related to public health. Sam Schwarz from Germany is taking time off before he embarks on a civil engineering course and is exploring our work with soil and water conservation and community forestry.

Departures

After a long wait- Pratima has finally got her visa to join her partner Anil in London. We are all saddened to see her go and shall miss her.

Travel

Raju was away in Israel for a fortnight's course on poverty and has come back with ideas about enterprises and with his political interest in developments in the middle-east aroused. Dharmendar attended a fortnight's course in Karnal and Shankar and Kuldeep visited Hyderabad for a workshop organised by ANTHRA on animal husbandry. Sundar and Sangeeta attended a workshop in Delhi on teaching English and Sundar subsequently visited Eklavya in Bhopal and Digantar in Jaipur to check on how some of the youth from our "swades ki khoj" cohort were doing. Mahendra Bisht attended a conference on ayurveda at Agra and has come back rejuvenated and with a gleam in his eye. Our colleagues seem to get around quite a bit now!



Chirag Cricket Team

We have a cricket team – actually 25 enthusiastic and able bodied volunteers who have played five matches this season. There have been several changes in the team and yet we haven't won a match. Fitness is emerging as a concern and has accounted for several run-outs and poor fielding. There are also some cynics who believe that participatory processes are contributing to the poor performance. A huddle to discuss a run surely does not sound like a good idea. I am told that the objective is to “play and provide entertainment and not to win”! Quite a good side if you ask me- though short on match practice. Expect to hear more of this team.

Kumaun Grameen Udyog

I don't think we expected that we would need to bask in the reflected glory of KGU this soon. Strangely, when the Kilmora stores sell well in a particular month – our spirits rise. The team is back from the Nature Bazar and the Dastkari Haat Samiti fair. With tales of companies 'laying off' people abounding, we were scared about how KGU would fare. They have sold a few lakhs more than they did last year- which is not bad. Kilmora products have featured in an exhibition in Hyderabad organised by Dastkar Andhra –in December. Meanwhile, in little trickles stock seems to be moving out each week to other stores and buyers in the country notable amongst whom are The Shop, Industree and Pankaj. Pankaj – an entrepreneur with a brave heart – is currently running a pilot in Delhi wherein he is trying to help all the organisations in Kumaun that work on livelihoods to find new markets. We can't wait to see how much all this will add up to. The Kilmora stores are also selling calendars – made by Peoples Science Institute, Dehradun. The theme for their calendar this year is the Ganga. Next time you shop at our store/stall – and if you splurge – remember to ask for a Kilmora book-mark.