

# Newsletter Assam Foundation of North America

December 2010



Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA), has been supporting (and planning to support) a number of educational institutions and orphanages for the underprivileged children. These include Parijat Academy and Snehalaya at Guwahati, Asha Darshan in Tamulpur, Prajnalaya at Jorhat and Rural Volunteer Force at Dhemaji, Assam.

AFNA in collaboration with these institutions has recently started a program 'Support a Child'. With this program, an individual can sponsor the educational cost of a child, who without the sponsorship may not be able to complete his/her education. Our initial plan is to sponsor Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000 per child per year. We'll send you the child name with photos with details information. You can write letter to them, you can talk with them in the school telephone, and you can send them greetings card and books through the school library. The objective of this initiative is to build a bond between we the expatriates and our people back home. May this good relationship between you and your sponsor child will go for ever and it will be a great blessing for the children.

A number of AFNA volunteers and well wishers including Debojit Bora, Hiren Sharma, Satyajit Nath , Meghalim Sharma , Amitav Chakravarthy visited some of these institutions. There have been interactions with members of Asha Darshan-Tamulpur, Parijat Academy, Snehalaya, Society for Social Transformation and Environmental Protection (sSTEP), SHED, a rehab centers for Mentally Retarded & Autistic children in, Beltola, Guwahati and Destination, an Autistic school in Guwahati. We are in the process of identifying some of the deserving students. This includes an unfortunate child who lost his father during the Guwahati bomb blast.

We appeal you to support our program.

**AFNA is a non-profit organization registered under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code with Tax I.D # 61-0994468**

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## **Support-a-child project update**

Ms Donna Chowdhury, a AFNA member/donor from San Diego CA, has distributed the scholarship amount to four Atma Nirbhar students Marjina, Madol, Kaushik and Dhanjit.

**Update from Prajnalaya, Titabor:** AFNA has identified 11 children from Prajnalaya under support a child program. S-A-C scholarship package has been released to Prajnalaya on the month of May 2010 to support the entire 11 child for the year 2010. Mr. Kaushik Das has handed over the cheque to Prabodh Basak, the mentor of Prajnalaya along with the teacher's remuneration fund released by AFNA.

**Update from Tapovan, Pathsala:** AFNA volunteer/ donor Mr. Arindam Kataki from San Diego CA, has handed over the first installment of S-A-C scholarship amount to Tapovan in the month of April 2010. AFNA has identified 11 special children from Tapovan under the scholarship program. Kumud Kalita, the head of the institution has received the amount on behalf of Tapovan at Guwahati. The first installment of the scholarship amount is issued for 5 special kids named Biswajit, Richamani, Anamika, Kamal and Arnab.



### **AFNA volunteer teleconference with Pradip Sarmah , founder Rickshaw Bank**



In the month of November 2010 Dr. Pradip Sarmah visited Boston at the Invitation of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. On first of November we organized a teleconference whereby Satyajit Nath , Pallav Saikia, Ankur Bora, Krishanu Kaushik, Amitav Chakravarthy, Saibal Das, Debojit Bora and Hitesh Kalita participated. AFNA has been supporting the Project rickshaw since the year 2007.

### **Letter to Anidita and Saurav Kumar from Gitasree**

Gitasree Gogoi Apte from Calgary Canada has not only extended financial support to our students in Assam, she has gone ahead and forged a relationship with them by making them a part of her life. She has written a very touching letter to the two students she has sponsored via AFNA. We would like our other donors to take is as a cue and extend your help from finance to all other spheres: please interact with them via letters, emails (whenever possible), phone calls to guide and encourage them.

Do visit/meet them when you make a trip to Assam. Please contact AFNA to facilitate all your interactions with these kids. Here is the letter Gitasree has written to Anidita and Saurav Kumar of Sipajhar donating the scholarship in memory of her father late Podmeshar Gogoi.

সর্বপ্রথমে মই- মতনত অনিচ্ছিতা আৰু যৌতৎস  
 নতুন বছৰ আৰু জোগাল- বিক্ৰম উলঙ্গ কৰা হৈছে।  
 ১০ জানুৱাৰীত দিনতো মোৰ বাবে ইতিমধ্যে বৰ-  
 উল্লেখযোগ্য দিন- মই পঢ়াই- মে, মইলৈ দিনতে আমাৰ  
 প্ৰথম সন্তানটিও জন্ম হৈছিল। আৰু তাইৰ ১৫ বছৰ  
 পূৰ্ণ হৈছে। আৰুও দিনটোতে অনিচ্ছিতা আৰু যৌতৎস  
 বৰুৱা- আৰুৰূপে পাতি বৰ জোড়ামু অনুভৱ কৰিছো।  
 মোৰ- আৰুৰূপে আমাৰ মে মই বৰুৱা- বাবে তোমাৰ  
 নিশ্চয় মোৰ আৰু তোমালোকে কৰিবলৈ- বহু আৰুৰূপে  
 মাৰ পাতিবা। আৰু তোমালোকে লগতে ময়ো উৎসাহিত  
 থাকিব পাৰা হ'লে হয়তো বৰ আনন্দ পালে হয়। কিন্তু  
 দুঃখই বাবেই আৰু মইমা সমূহে নহ'ল। কিন্তু মনতো  
 দুঃখই দেখিয়াও বান্ধি আশ্বিত লোৱাৰে। মনোৰ মদায়  
 তোমালোকে লগতে থাকিম। অহাৰালৈ- অমললৈ- আহিলে-  
 তোমালোকক লম- পাৰ্হৈ- স্থিতি আহিম।

মই- বৰুৱা মই- মোৰ দেখো ৩ অষ্টোমু-  
 মইমৰ নামত দিবলৈ ওলাইছো। ৩ অষ্টোমু মই-  
 মোৰহাটৰ বাল্য-ভৱন- স্কুলত ১৫ বছৰৰো অধিক সময়  
 শিক্ষকতা কৰি আছিল। তাৰ আমেয়ে মোলাস্কাটৰ মাৰীয়েশ্বো  
 হাইস্কুলত পৰ্বান শিক্ষক হিচাপে আছিল। তেখেতে- মাজত  
 বাল্য-ভৱন- স্কুলত- মতা ইন্ডাফা দি- কালতি- কৰিবলৈ-  
 লম। মোৰহাটত- আইনতীতি- হিচাপে নিজকে প্ৰতিষ্ঠা কৰাও  
 পাচত ৫৯ বছৰ বয়সত- ১৯৯২ চনত ১৯ চেপ্তেম্বৰত-  
 মনোৰেমেলাই- দি- নামত- মাৰীয়েশ্বো- সমত- অফাৰ- হৈ- নিফ-  
 বাৰুভৱনত- মোৰহাটত- অফাৰ- হয়। তেখেত- মই- ও  
 মোৰ- মা- মীমুতা লিনি- মই- প্ৰতিমা চৰদাৰী- চাকৰীও  
 অফাৰ প্ৰাপ্তি- বিম্বনা হিচাপে- নিজ- বাৰুভৱনত- আছে।  
 তেখেত- ম'বাৰলত- মন- হৈছে ১১৫৪-১১২৫৩৭  
 ৩ অষ্টোমু মই- মদায়- মদায়- কাৰুত- নিফ-  
 যত- বান্ধিছিল। বহু- মই, মই- মদায়- অফাৰ

### Kaushik Das: story of a Social Entrepreneur

It takes a special person to leave behind a 22 year long successful career as an industry expert and branch into the role of a Good Samaritan attempting to develop a germ of an idea into a noble venture. It happened in May 1996 when Kaushik Das of Guwahati got with a small group of like-minded friends and well-wishers, and started Atma Nirbhar – Ek Challenge.

Atma Nirbhar is an economic rehabilitation and empowerment project for the disabled giving them an opportunity to work with dignity and to become self-reliant. The project generates income, wherein tea and spices are packaged and marketed under the brand name 'Nav Jeevan' (New Life). This urge to help did not happen overnight. Mr. Das an active Rotarian

since 1985, expressed his thoughts in "Outlook India" the following way, "During my days in the tea industry, I had everything going for me but the mental satisfaction was missing. Although I did work with the Rotary Club, I always wanted to do something practical which would directly benefit the less fortunate ones. Fortunately by 1996, I was financially secure enough to take the plunge."

The guiding principles for Atma Nirbhar are simplicity, respect and dignity of labor. The goal is to give the disabled an opportunity to be economically self-reliant, and be integrated with normal society. As "Outlook India" commented, Kaushik Das's unique venture for the less fortunate blends with Gandhian simplicity, a tea taster's specialized and professional management skills.

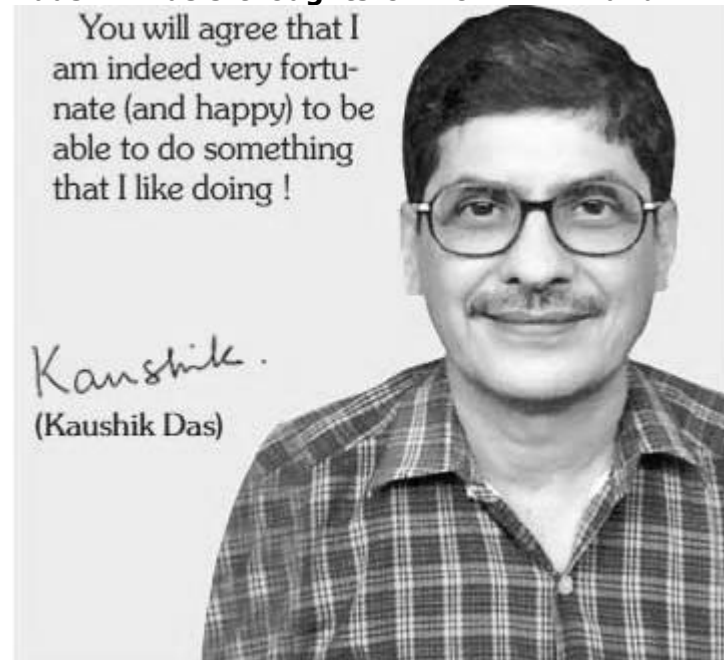
The National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People awarded Mr. Das with the "Shell Helen Keller Award" in the year 2000 for his tireless and inspiring work for the disabled. Mr. Das is also instrumental in starting "the umbrella advocacy group" called Pragati - Confederation for the Disabled in Assam, which brings together N.G.O.s and individuals as its members.

Since Atma Nirbhar was designed to provide intensive support to its beneficiaries, Mr. Das was not satisfied merely with a small number of beneficiaries. Being the social entrepreneur that he is, he started the Punya project in 1998 to further help residents of social welfare institutions in a more compassionate and humane level. In his own words, "Most people living in residential social welfare institutions feel very lonely and depressed because they feel cut-off / isolated from active society environment, confined within the four walls of their institutions. It is a sad reality that after a while even their own relatives stop visiting them. Herein, Kaushik Das and volunteers from his organization would visit these institutions spending quality time with its residents, carrying delicious snacks and sharing with them. These visits would always be anticipated with much enthusiasm, as it was done at a very personal level, honoring the privacy and sentiments of these thriving individuals. By consciously avoiding any fanfare and sheltering them from intrusive flimsy media glare, the volunteers give their full focus and attention on the needs and necessities of these residents. The wants were mostly educational writing materials, school bags, school uniforms, clothes, footwear, recreational materials etc and the volunteers tried to mobilize and channelize such items from the 'giving' public.

"Punya" first changed its name to "Reaching Out", and in 2008, became "Spreading Sunshine". The primary objective of 'Spreading Sunshine' is to build 'bridges' between the civil society, and pockets of societal neglect and marginalized people. It is to improve the quality of life of the disadvantaged and marginalized people living in residential social welfare institutions, by providing them with 'outside assistance', mobilized from the giving public. Through this program many residential social welfare institutions have received school bags, notebooks, clothes, footwear, furniture, fans etc. In the states of Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, over 13 residential institutions and more than 850 residents have

benefitted from this project. This project has also received support from Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA) among others.

### **Kaushik Das's thoughts on how AFNA and NRAs can play a more Important Role**



First and foremost, any help and support that AFNA and the Non Resident Assamese (NRAs) provide is a blessing. We are grateful for this support because children from this land are giving back as young and successful adults to their roots and their people. That is always a moment of pride and hope for us.

Since the early 1980's, a large number of Assamese and NE students went for their college and higher education to the other states of India. Many of them have found jobs outside of Assam, settled there and have done well for themselves. We also need to mobilize this group of persons so that they continue their association with Assam.

The people who have decided to stay put in Assam and are trying to develop Assam / NE need ideas, help and support because there is a lot of work that needs to be done. Moreover, the working conditions are very difficult here, combined with an apathetic attitude of the government and very limited awareness / support from the general public. During the past two – three decades there has been virtually no development here- we have a lot of catching up to do. There are a handful of people working in rural areas- they need special thought and support. The 'voluntary sector', in particular, needs support so that more dedicated people come forward to join it. It would be wonderful if a few NRAs who have done well for themselves abroad could be motivated to provide 'fellowships' to young social entrepreneurs (on the lines of 'Ashoka fellows') in Assam / NE. Though finding good

candidates (dedicated and service minded) will be a very difficult task, we have to make a beginning and try to promote and energize this sector.

As I write this, I am reminded of a conversation I had with an elder from Kasturba Ashram, Sarania and Guwahati. She had returned from the violence affected areas of Udalguri and Darrang. She mentioned about the pathetic condition of the people living in 'relief camps' in those areas. Up to 2,000 people had been accommodated in a school- they have shelter, security and get free food but they have lost everything- their homes, their belongings and their granaries. Unless the people are able to move out of the relief camps, the education of the students will suffer. Our small organization collected clothes for the affected people which at least carry more weight than offering mere words of sympathy. It is in such situations, that organizations like AFNA can mobilize funds on an emergency basis to buy relief material.

## **SOLES for TOTS**

### **A footwear project for the children of Assam, one step at a time**

Alpana and Ram Sarangapani, Houston, Texas, USA

#### **A child's dream**

During one of our annual visits to Assam, our young son, felt very distraught when he noticed rickshaw pullers and poor children without any footwear. He was saddened and surprised that there were people who could not afford some of the very basic things in life. From then on, he found it very difficult to ride rickshaws, and expressed his wish that if he had all the wealth in the world, he would make sure that the less fortunate amongst us, would, at the very least, have the basic necessities of life. That was when he was a young child of 11 and those were utopian wishes of a young child immersed in idealism. But today, as we look back, we try to see the world through our son's eyes, and we would like to take the first step in fulfilling this tiny, cherished dream of our son. We believe, our son taught us to look at the world with a different perspective, to be more compassionate and to try and make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate than us.

#### **Fulfilling a dream**

Providing shoes and footwear for the poor is not a new idea. There are a number of international organizations that already have successful projects in the US, Latin America, and in Africa. Footwear is one of the basic necessities of modern life. However, shoes or sandals are a very low priority for many of Assam's poor. Today, we realize and understand that lack of footwear can often lead to diseases and illnesses in developing countries. Further, young children may be exposed to injuries that could lead to serious complications like tetanus. Proper footwear often helps in preventing diseases that become pronounced in later years.

#### **Soles for TOTS at Parijat Academy**

Eight years old Jogeswar Teron is a student of class II at Parijat Academy. Sunday, 4th January 2010 was a memorable day for him. Thanks to the "Soles for Tots" he got a present - the first pair of shoes in his life. The project was formally launched at Parijat Academy in presence. 750 pairs of shoes and socks were handed over to Parijat for distribution. Amongst the recipients were around 150 children from four villages of Garbhanga area who walked for almost four hours and reached Parijat to receive a pair of shoes.

### **Soles for TOTS at Pragyalaya**

This year, we are planning to launch this project at Pragyalaya, Titabor. We are hoping that this small project will provide a pair of new shoes to the students of Pragyalaya and nearby villages. Towards this end, we earnestly seek the generosity and involvement of the Assamese residents in and outside Assam. The success depends on a few factors. The sincere involvement of, and contributions from civic associations, businesses, and individuals are often the key ingredients to success of such operations. We fervently appeal to the softer, benevolent side of the Assamese heart. These are our children, and we bear huge societal responsibilities. No amount is too small, and every bit helps us to purchase additional pairs. Assam Foundation of North America is supporting this project. Please mark your contribution to

