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Thought of the day..

*We get to make a living,
we give to make a life.*

Winston Churchill

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The British Asian Way

Launched at the Leicester New Walk Museum on the 13th of November 2008, **Sudarshan** ('leading by example') attracted over 100 Asian businesses from across the East Midlands and London, who were interested in being responsible businesses when working in India and the UK. They spanned different industries from textiles, to packaging, printing, food and data centre industries.



L-R: Kishor Tailor (LSEP), Bala Thakrar (AFP) and Councillor Culdipp Bhatti (Leicester)

Attended by local dignitaries such as Councillor Culdipp Bhatti, the event was opened by the renowned Mr. Kishor Tailor, CEO of Leicestershire Economic Partnership (LSEP). He emphasised why it was important for businesses to not simply think about making a profit, as **'now is the time to set yourselves apart, to become the leaders and pave the way forward'**.

Continuing the theme by highlighting past corporate disasters such as Bhopal, as well as the atrocities of the 'behind the scenes' garment industry, AFP Director Bala Thakrar reiterated the need to have responsible businesses. As Bala aptly said **'Will you be the business that people talk about and hold as an example? Think about it'**.



Mohitt Joshi

Inspiration was given by the final speaker for the event Mohitt Joshi, who at the young age of 26, employs over 200 people at his data processing office in rural underdeveloped Punjab. His company has a turnover of over a million pounds a year, and is part of a global movement of a more ethically aware business culture. To cap it all, Mohitt recently won the prestigious 'Supplier of the Year' Award. His message was simple, you can make a profit, but you can do this while being socially responsible.

A responsible business is a simple combination of community support, concern for the environment, consumer satisfaction and taking little more time to ensure staff are healthy, happy and above all, loyal.

Disability is not inability

Striving to be inclusive, our Paropkaar programme has recently sent our first visually impaired volunteer Paresh Jotangia to India. Paresh works as a Technology Officer at the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB). He has just returned from working with our partner organisation Mitra Jyothi that supports people with visual disability. This is his story.



Braille Library at Mitra Jyothi

What motivated you to apply to AFP?

AFP is an organisation I admire and appreciate the work they do for Asia as a continent and especially in India. The support they give to the local community projects are started by the communities themselves for self help, especially in the field of education, health, employment, women's rights or disability. I was introduced to AFP and the work they do by a friend and she thought I could support their work in some way.

What were your fears and thoughts before you went out? What were your main concerns?

Before volunteering with AFP, I had never done volunteering overseas. I had done some volunteer work very locally where I live, in a Community Centre where I trained elderly people on how to use computers.

My main fears and concerns were whether I will meet the host organisation's expectations and whether I will maintain the standards set by other volunteers of AFP in the past. I was also concerned about communication at local level as the main language of Bangalore where I was posted is Kannada.



In addition to this, as a visually impaired person, I was also concerned about how I will manage the infra structure and daily living while in India. This concern was soon resolved by AFP who kindly agreed for me to take a guide who will guide me and look after my accessibility needs in India.

What was your role at Mitra Jyothi?

My initial role at Mitra Jyothi was of a trainer in Access Technology as well as to introduce measures for preparing visually impaired students to enter IT related professions. The key tasks were to work with trainers to set up the curriculum and develop training modules, deliver the trainings to students on employment related skills, as well as meeting with HR staff of Corporate Companies employing Mitra Jyothi students to carry out an assessment of provisions.

I also found myself carrying out the role of a consultant as well as an ambassador for the host organisation. I carried out a holistic assessment of the services of the organisation and made some joint agreed recommendations. I introduced some new ideas and access technology that would benefit the students and the staff of the organisation as well as sister organisations.

Disability is not inability (cont)

Give us an example of what touched you/ made you feel like your work was important?

In the short time I spent at Mitra Jyothi, I felt so at ease, and the hospitality extended to me and my guide was so warm and welcoming. When I carried out low vision assessments for the partially sighted students to identify how they could read and access printed materials or look at distant objects, the smiles and the excitement on their faces was beyond any words. It seemed they felt that I was a doctor who had found a cure for them by introducing them to a magnifier or a binocular that helped them see small



print in a book or they could read a sign on the wall. Just by introducing them to a simple magnifier glass or an electronic magnifier they could make the most of their partial sight and this created the hope in them to do more studying or look for employment where they could work side by side with their sighted colleagues.

What do you feel you have achieved?

I personally feel that all I have done is started the ball rolling in a football field and goals still have to be scored.

There will be a lot of pursuing, negotiating and battling to reach the goal post. I have merely scratched the surface by sharing my knowledge, my resources and my experience in the field of visual impairment with Mitra Jyothi.

What advise would you give to other prospective volunteers? What about other volunteers who have visual impairments or other disabilities?

I feel that AFP has given me an opportunity which I would have never experienced before. As a visually impaired volunteer representing AFP in India, I felt that I had so much to offer and share with people at the host organisation. Yes, I had my fears and concerns about my own disability but I felt that if one has the determination and the support of an organisation like AFP one can achieve this. I felt this experience has taught me a lot in life especially that nothing is impossible, and to appreciate my life and what I have got. I would definitely urge all people especially those who are disabled and want to do volunteering but never had the chance/ backup, or want to go out there and do something that would make a difference, then go for it! There is nothing to fear and a lot to gain.

Inspired by what you just read? Would you like to volunteer with AFP? Our next cycle of volunteers will go out in June/July, if you would like to be part of the AFP family, email info@affp.org.uk for more information and an application form.

Feedback from the field



Judith Heljeberg

AFP recently had an external evaluation visit which was carried out by Judith Heljeberg of Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). She visited our partner projects and wrote up the findings. Here is an excerpt from the report:

AFP volunteers are having a positive impact on the communities within which they are placed and hence playing an integral role in contributing towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Their approach to working is holistic, encompassing direct transfer of hard skills, development of soft skills as well as awareness raising and advocacy.

The volunteers have also fitted in well in the projects, easily creating a rapport with staff members and beneficiaries, which is demonstrated by the frequent requests from partners that they should stay longer. AFP also ensures that volunteers have the relevant skills for each placement, which enhances the effectiveness of their volunteering programme.

AFP had set itself goals through which it assesses how well it is doing. Judith looked at all of the goals in relation to our volunteers, such as the one below.

GOAL: To improve the access to education and employment opportunities for people with disabilities and the Dalit community in India.

Mitra Jothi's main focus is to create economic independence for the visually impaired. The uniqueness of AFP volunteer placement in this organisation was that Paresh, one of the volunteers is visually impaired. Therefore, from the offset he was an excellent role model for the beneficiaries and he motivated them by encouraging positive thinking as well as sharing with them his experiences as an educated and employed visually impaired person. Paresh also looked into employment opportunities by visiting employment agencies and businesses, both to assess which jobs visually impaired people would fit in as well as to lobby them on the importance of equal opportunities for visually impaired people. He trained staff members on how to lobby the local councils and businesses.

In addition, staff members received guidance on how to undertake home needs assessments so as to improve the daily living of the students. Paresh set up a resource centre using equipment useful for accessibility, e.g. for magnification of texts to make reading easier. He donated all the equipment.

"During my trip to India, I was fortunate enough to interact not only with AFP volunteers and partners, but also beneficiary communities. I got first hand experience of the power of the Diaspora and what it can achieve given an enabling environment. AFP is a small organisation, established in 2005 run by two members of staff. Due to time constraints, I was only able to visit TEN of AFPs projects. TEN!! Bala, I am humbled and excited by what AFP has achieved and would like to see it replicated in other countries" - Judith Heljeberg

Hot issues of the Month: Fast Fashion

The Guilty Garment:

A behind the scenes look at the multi million pound clothes industry

The garment industry has, in recent years, become vital to the economic development of Bangladesh, providing millions of dollars in foreign exchange earnings (accounting for 80% of total exports) and providing 2 million, mainly women, workers with a vital source of income. On one hand the industry has enabled an increasing number of women with opportunity to earn an income and gain independence, but there is also a dark side. Bangladeshi garment workers, producing for big high street clothes companies, are earning poverty wages, working long hours and face serious risks to their health.

Shahida Sarkar and Abida (Shuma) Begum were invited to talk at Development House on Thursday the 11th of December 2008, held collaboratively by Asian Foundation for Philanthropy (AFP), BRAC UK, Labour Behind the Label and No Sweat. Attended by a cross section of students, professionals as well as buyers for the top clothing chains, this was an opportunity to hear first hand about what goes on 'behind the scenes'.

As factory worker Shuma said *"The conditions of the factory I work in are very poor, but we are always under pressure to produce more and more garments in a faster time, and with the same level of quality. We hardly get to go to the toilet, as this is considered counter productive. Often water is not available or allowed, and if it is, it is of very poor quality. This leads to other illnesses such as typhoid, diarrhoea, dysentery, basically almost all the people in my factory are unwell"*.



Shuma Begum

So what can consumers do? Both Shahida and Shuma don't want the factories to close down, instead consumers need to put pressure on companies to have better working conditions for their workers. Consumers should not boycott the products, but question corporate buyers on their methods of operation. The ultimate responsibility rests with these buyers. Consumers can also change buyer behaviour by writing to local politicians on the issue, petitioning UK buyers, as well as getting governments to give incentives to buyers so that they meet quality standards.



Shahida Sarkar -Union Leader

The poignant closing point by Shuma hit home for the audience. Shuma is now unemployed as a result of taking time off to raise awareness of these issues in Germany and the UK. And because she is a skilled worker, she will take longer to find work as her pay demands will be higher.

For a full report of the event, please email sheetal.shah@affp.org.uk.

Hot issues of the Month: Fast Fashion

Cividep-India is a civil society organisation based in Bangalore which helps workers unionise, studies the effects of corporate activities on communities and the environment and campaigns with many other organisations and individuals for workers' rights and corporate accountability. AFP interviewed Suhasini Singh on issues of Fast Fashion and what British consumers should be aware of.



Suhasini Singh

Why is there a need for your organization?

Workers face stressful working conditions, workplace harassment, abysmally low wages and unpaid overtime. There was a need for an organisation which could take up garment workers issues and fight for their rights with the factory management and relevant government departments. Six senior members of Cividep have once worked as garment workers in a factory.

What is your role within the organisation?

I work in the capacity of Research and Communications Coordinator. My research work revolves around the work and domestic life of garment workers (especially women) of Bangalore. The research findings are then communicated to other partners, organizations and individuals interested in this issue, and used to advocate for worker rights. Some grave findings are also sent to media.

What is the connection between what we buy in UK and what is made in India?

Garment workers in India or in any other developing country stitch for foreign brands; mostly American and European just because the labour costs in these (developing) countries are a lot cheaper. These garments are then exported to the buyer to their parent country from where they are tagged, priced (which is sky high) and sent to the stores around the globe.

These garment workers more often than not work in extreme conditions. Work place harassment, high production targets, unpaid overtime, unprofessional treatment on the shop floor and low wages are a few. It becomes a moral duty of any consumer to see that the actual makers of the product are living well from the work they are involved in.

Why do big buyers not see how terrible the working conditions are?

These buyers know very well the working conditions in which their garments are made but they just don't want to admit it. The voluntary codes and compliance mechanisms of the big brands are all aimed at covering up the violations of human rights and labour rights that go on in their supplier companies'. Their compliance officers just do fire fighting, that is, when there is a blatant violation, they 'manage' the situation by talking to local unions and NGOs and then take some short-term remedial measures. Very little of the efforts of the big brands are directed towards long-term structural change in the supply chain to ensure better working conditions.

What in your eyes is the correct way of implementing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)?

CSR does not mean charity or adopting a village/community to make it a model. It is all about giving back to the society starting from their employees. Every company should see that their employees/workers have good working conditions in a harassment free environment. Their rights are respected are allowed to associate freely. And last but not the least they should be paid an amount from which they can take care of themselves and their family, meet their day-to-day needs and lead a healthy life.

Together we can achieve

Sustaining AFP's work

In keeping with its pledge to donate a proportion of turnover to charity, Axis Security, one of London and the City's fastest growing security service providers, has given a donation to AFP. Vijay Thakrar of Ernst and Young suggested AFP as the charity to receive a donation from Axis, being a long time supporter of AFP and strongly believing in our ethos of inspiring social change.

Thanking Axis for its donation, Bala Thakrar, Director of AFP said: "Axis's contribution will directly go to support our mental health work with 70 villages in Karnataka on the Siddalghatta project. Mental health is a huge concern for the populations in India, and this donation will enable them to receive the right medicine and assimilate them into society. The donation will also support awareness-raising activities, which are crucial in breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health in India."



L-R: Jonathan Levine (Director-Axis), Sheetal Shah (AFP) and Vijay Thakrar (Ernst and Young)

Jonathan Levine, Managing Director of Axis Security added:

"We made a number of worthwhile charitable donations over the course of 2008 and are pleased to give our partners a say in where donations are placed. We were delighted with Vijay's choice and for bringing AFP's worthy work to our attention. We can only hope that the donation goes some way to help them continue their invaluable work to improve the social and economic development in India."

A little goes a long way. Contribute to AFP's activities.
Email bala.thakrar@affp.org.uk to find out more.

OTHER NEWS:

AFP Director at Commonwealth Forum on Cultural Diversity, 19-20 November 2008, Malaysia

Bala Thakrar was invited to speak on behalf of the Diaspora at the 5th Diversity Matters conference held by the Commonwealth Foundation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Speaking about 'Realising People's Potential: Inclusion, Opportunity and Social Capital' Bala emphasised the importance of Diaspora and the crucial role they have played in the shaping of different economies.

AFP Director at Atlantic Youth Forum 2008, 4-8 August 2008, Wilton Park

Bala Thakrar was invited to speak at the prestigious Wilton Park Atlantic Youth Forum on 'Self Reliance and Global Responsibility: Should Countries sort out their own problems?'. The talk was well received, as the Wilton Park programme director Julia Purcell said 'You gave an excellent overview...particularly the insights into the potentials for diaspora communities'.