

## **AUGUST 2009 NEWSLETTER**



**(L) The hillside opposite Chris Niwas scarred by landslides. During a short break from the storm when the sky cleared for a brief moment, we counted 21 new landslides. (R) One of the killer landslides that landed in the village below killed a whole family and completely damaged 12 homes.**



**Our children planting trees to counter the landslide problem we have been facing due to the uncontrolled and illegal deforestation. Hopefully the trees our children planted and will plant in the future will control the landslides and the loss of lives of the children like themselves.**

Dear Friends,

The saying 'trouble always comes in pair' is not always valid. For the poor, troubles come not in pairs but in a pack of dozens. And sometimes they even seem to come with 'special offers'. With every pack of 12 troubles, you get 3 troubles free! The monsoon season continues to create havoc by causing landslides, washing away roads and burying homes and people. Landslides damaged a total of 1700 homes in and around Kurseong this month. It has been particularly bad in the last ten days. Just two days back, landslides took lives of six people in two villages near Kurseong – three of them young children. The two truck-able roads coming into Kurseong have been washed away in several places. They estimate it will take at least a month to restore the roads. The cost of essential food items have shot up and everyday it is getting beyond the reach of the poor. Before the roads shut down, we were buying potatoes for 6 to 8 Rupees a kilo, now we are paying 28 Rupees. We were paying 12 Rupees for a Kilo of rice, now we pay 21 Rupees for the same rice. We expect the prices to go up even higher as the shop keepers have had to bring in the supply through another route which takes thirteen hours instead of the normal route which takes about three hours.

All our children were very worried about the safety of their own families especially the four children who come from the village on Balason riverbed. From Chris Niwas we can actually see the river and it has increased in volume and size. It has also changed course and is eating into the mountainside. There is absolutely no way for us to go down and to check on the families. Whenever the rains stop, these children immediately run up to our terrace and look down towards their village wondering and



**Sujan (L), Subani (C) & Punam (R) show their parents they can now read and write as well as other children**

worrying how their parents and their brothers and sisters are doing. Last Sunday, we were all relieved when the parents of three of the children showed up at Chris Niwas. The joy and relief the children felt when they saw their parents were quite palpable. The parents had walked six hours up the slipping mountains to see their children. These poor parents were as worried about us as we were about them. The children showed their parents everything they were learning at school. The children were also very excited showing their parents the results of their mid-term exams. Both Subani and Punam did so well in the exams, the teachers decided to promote them to Grade 1 half way through the school year. The children were relieved to hear that everyone was safe in their home but their houses are completely damaged. They are now living in temporary sheds on the terraces above the riverbed.

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Every six years or so, the government comes up with a pay commission when the salary of the people working for the government is reviewed. The pay hike came into force recently. I was talking to some of my friends who are lucky enough to be employed by the government. A couple of them were getting 4500 Rupees (\$92) a month. Now with the new pay scale they are getting 13,500 Rupees (\$276), which works out to 300 Rupees (\$6.67) per day. Besides they also get other benefits like two month's paid holiday, medical expenses, house rent, provident fund and pension when they retire. The problem is the hike in salary is accompanied by a sharp rise in the price of essential items. The hike in salary benefits a few but the hike in price affects everyone, especially the poor. At Chris Niwas, we have five women and one blind man working in our Weaving Centre. We can only afford to pay them 60 Rupees (\$1.23) a day. Our weavers barely earn in a week what the government employees earn in a day. I wonder how these people and thousands of other poor people manage to survive on so little with the price of essential food items increasing almost every day.



**Shanti (L), Seeta (C) and Purima, who worked in SASAC since their early teens, are now weaving beautiful Jhola Bags at Chris Niwas**

Here is a problem that I welcome suggestions on from you. We would like to give our weavers a pay hike. But the problem is we are not selling enough Jhola Bags to be able to do that. Weaving a jhola bag is a slow process, which brings up the cost of production. Each jhola bag costs 310 Rupees to produce. We have tried to sell the jholas locally but have had to drastically under-price them, which we cannot afford to do. The only way we could cut down the cost of production is by laying off our blind tailor and the five women -- all of whom are physically weak and have some health issues and

their whole family depend on them -- and employing people who are physically fit who will hopefully produce more bags in the same time. But that would be against our objective. Our objective is not to make profit – it would be nice if we could make some profit, though. But we will be happy even if we can only break even. Liz Wickham in California is buying ten jhola bags every month, which is enough to pay the weavers their weekly wages for a month. But our weaving team needs more to survive. If you have any business concept by which we can sell more Jhola bags, I would really welcome it. My priority right now is to send the Weaving centre into orbit sustaining itself. In the mean time, you can buy one of the Jhola Bags made by our people from Liz and help us keep our weaving centre afloat. Her email address is [ejwickham@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ejwickham@sbcglobal.net) .



Ghanshyam, our tailor who is blind and some of the Jhola Bags he stitched together after the women finish the weaving.

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Thank you, my friends, for every kind of support you are giving Sashi and me to carry on the work of SASAC in our own way. Do feel free to let us know if you think we are going off-track. Your suggestions will be very valuable to us in our effort to help more poor children and parents. You are always in our thoughts and prayers and I know we are too in yours.

Love,

Sudhir, Sashi and all our fourteen children!

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