

## Knowledge Confidence and Healthier Lives

### *Building Tomorrow's Leaders*



Health Animator, Urvasi, demonstrates how to prepare a nutritious children's drink from millet in the village of Tharpakolly.

ASHWINI works with tribal communities around Gudalur Valley in the lower Nilgiris. Set up by two young doctors in 1990, the organisation addresses the health needs in the area. Skillshare supports ASHWINI through a European Commission funded programme called 'Knowledge, Confidence and Healthier Lives.' The aim of the programme is to enhance health awareness among tribal communities and improve health indicator statistics through skilled health animators. Community participation ensures ownership and sustainability.

Three doctors recruited by Skillshare have trained about 200 village guides and health animators. These highly motivated people are spread over 230 villages in the Gudalur and Pandular districts of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, guiding their people towards healthier lives.

Dr Bharat Gadhvi is teaching about blood and its composition. Ten students sit cross-legged on a reed mat and listen to him attentively. Most of them have dropped out of school and you imagine that the class on human physiology is a bit advanced for them. But as it progresses you see them diligently taking notes and nodding knowledgeably. They have been observing and assisting at the hospital lab and know what platelets, plasma and corpuscles are.

Dr Bharat, who is British of Indian-Gujarati origin, is teaching in Malayalam to his young protégés, all first-generation learners from the Nilgiri tribes. Dr Bharat and his wife, Deepa, also a British doctor of Indian origin, came to India in 2001 wanting to put their knowledge to use in a community that had little access to health care. Skillshare found just the place for them - Gudalur. As Deepa could speak Malayalam, the doctors could communicate with the tribals. Initially, Deepa interpreted for Bharat as he took the class. In June this year, Dr Bharat decided it was time he tried to conduct the class without help from his wife.

The group of young boys and girls are being trained to be health animators. Skillshare will bear the entire cost of their training, board and lodging over the next four years. During this time, they will have theory lessons and gain practical experience dealing with patients, assisting doctors and nurses at the Gudalur Adivasi Hospital. Each will also spend time working in the villages with senior health animators. Bharat and Deepa are encouraging them to take the Class 10 exam, and those who have done so are being encouraged to prepare for the Class 12 examination. After their training, they can choose work as nurses or animators in the villages.

As the students are seen as facilitators of change and tomorrow's leaders, Bharat and Deepa are keen to help them build their communications skills and confidence levels. The earlier batch of 14 health animators trained by Skillshare International has been active in the area. Each one oversees 10 to 20 villages. Through village health workers they monitor antenatal patients, children's growth and follow up on their immunisation. They also conduct a monthly training session for the village health guides operating in their area and take an interest in the development of their people through participation in tribal *sangams* and self-help groups.