

Visit to SADRAG 12 December 2013

Project Ugta Suraj, Learning Centre in Nagla and Barola/Noida, east of Delhi

(Present: Mala, SADRAG; Klaus and Doris, noon.ch)

Dr Mala Bhandari

We met Dr Mala Bhandari, who is the founder and head of the SADRAG NGO (Non Government Organization), on a main road in Noida in order to visit our project Ugta Suraj. Mala introduced her companion Bandana to us who supports Mala at SADRAG. Despite Mala's toothache and my fierce cold, our visit took place in a friendly and familiar atmosphere, so I suppose my less than rosy impression of the Ugta Suraj project on that day should be blamed on our state of health.



Project Ugta Suraj

Within the SADRAG project Ugta Suraj, noon.ch is promoting an LC (learning centre) in Barola as well as a new group in Nagla.) Our former LC Agahpur was closed due to lack of interest in this community, after another NGO had opened an LC there, which also offers food. On top of that, an increasing number of children are attending a regular school in Agahpur now.

At first, we visited the **LC in Barola**. The children are taught in the parish hall of the panchayats, for which Mala does not have to pay any rent. According to our list, only 28 children should have been present at the Barola LC but there were far more: the class register showed numbers between 35 and 54 children. Each LC has two teachers, one for the group of younger children and one for the older ones. According to Mala's statistics, the children are enrolled at a government school after one year at Ugta Suraj. By monitoring them for another year, the teachers make sure that the transition to the regular school has worked out. The 'drop-out' rate remained under 10% at the Ugta Suraj Non-Government Organization at the end of the school year 2013.

The most common reasons for dropping out of school:

- Inability to cope with the demands at school
- Lack of interest in learning
- Beatings at school
- Work at home or out with the parents
- Looking after younger siblings
- Change of address
- Destruction of slum districts
- Seasonal migration
- Frequent illness due to lack of hygiene

Barola, December 13; Group of little pupils with coordinator and Klaus, noon.ch

The room the children were sitting in was bare, the windows were covered with torn raffia mats, and there were only two pictures hanging on the wall. The blackboard was in such bad condition that you could hardly read the words on it. Mala was annoyed about the children sitting in this small room when they should have been in the big room of the



village hall. However, there were no doors in the latter, the temperature in the early morning was only 10° C, the children had no warm clothes and the wind was swirling dust and sand around. The teachers seemed to have acted on their own initiative, and had taken the children into the smaller, relatively sheltered room.

It was mid-December when we asked the children if they knew the symbols of Christmas. But of course! They knew Santa Claus, candles and especially that you get gifts for Christmas! We had brought along crayons, erasers, pencil sharpeners and paper for all the children. (We had come across good and affordable Faber-Castell crayons in Delhi.) When we asked if they wanted to use the new crayons to draw some Christmas cards for us, and then send them to Switzerland, they replied with a cheerful YES!

The young coordinator of the LCs, who was also present, explained that she visited the four LCs every day and tested whether the children had been learning according to the syllabus. And then we learned from Mala that there is one learning group for children between 5 and 8 and another for children between 9 and 14 years. The children are allowed to bring along their little brothers and sisters (see the second girl from the left).

Barola, 12 December 13; Group of the older students with Klaus, noon.ch

Because of Mala's heated discussion with the teachers, I asked her when she had last been there. Mala said that she had not been for some time. The young teachers seemed to be intimidated by Mala, so they did not dare to argue. Young teachers normally take on jobs like these when after leaving college they do not immediately get work paid by the government. And they usually only stay for one year. Obviously, Mala cannot compete with the safe positions at state schools, for which everyone is striving. So, for financial as well as reasons of availability, it makes sense for Mala to work with career beginners.



We went to the schoolyard to take pictures of the children. One group was playing a numbers game with the teacher, in which each child was given a number. When the number was called, the child was to go into the circle and pick up the ball lying there. The boy in the picture below wanted to introduce his own rules, which mainly meant keeping the ball to himself.





New Learning Centre in Nagla

Next, we visited the **LC in Nagla**, which was recently established by SADRAG. Last year Mala's field workers had found out that there was no facility in this district of Noida that helped the migrant children to be integrated into a state school. Mala usually succeeds in integrating the children into one of the neighbouring schools within a year, even

though they often do not have the necessary documents (such as birth certificates). At first, the group of children was taught in the local temple. But although during our visit the community centre of the panchayats was still under construction, lessons were already given on the roof terrace of the building. Meanwhile, the downstairs rooms are completed and the children will be protected from the sun in summer.

Nagla 12 December 13, The colourful little tables came from a donation of an Indian group.

When we arrived, the children had painted a tree with thick wax crayons. We had brought along crayons, sharpeners and erasers for these children, too. The teachers felt that they should not hand out the sharpeners, because the children would break the pens with them. Some very lively children amused the whole group with their verses, and all the children joined in.



We suggested that the teachers do some very simple sums with the children. But the latter obviously could not do anything with them. Then Mala tried to explain adding single-digit numbers by drawing circles that could be counted. That did not work either. We feel that some of these children will need a lot of support before they will be able to go to a regular school.

Mala is trying to explain the addition by painted circles



We consider it a huge challenge for the young, inexperienced teachers to – in only one year's time - supply the migrants' children, who often come from remote villages, with enough schooling for them to succeed at the regular schools. The young teachers are hardly up to this task. Although Mala runs SADRAG NGO in a very professional way, she will not be able to eliminate all these problems in the future.

Visitor's report by Doris Eckstein, noon.ch, December 2013