

Visit to "Ugta Suraj", a school for children from the slums in the east of New Delhi, in Noida/Agahpur, sponsored by the association SADRAG.

On our arrival in Agahpur we were welcomed by Dr Mala Bhandari (photo on the right) the head of SADRAG.



It was the 26th of October, an Indian holiday, on which normally the schools are closed, but Mala had been able to convince the teachers of the school to come, nevertheless.

On this day, Hindu women fast for their husbands and go to the temple. In the evening they receive a present from their husbands. This is why the teachers at SADRAG would not normally have worked. Let us hope that we expressed sufficient appreciation for their coming in spite of that.

Mala explained the concept of SADRAG to us as follows:

The six centres are called "Learning Centres". In them, children who do not attend school are prepared for entering a regular school. In most cases, this is achieved within a year.

The children belong to families from the slums of Noida, one of the large industrial areas currently being established; Noida is located in the east of Delhi.



Most families working there are from Bihar, East Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Mala, a graduated sociologist, does not like her facilities to come

across as welfare institutions. She convinced the Panchayat (local council) that by rights, every child in India was to attend school and it was the responsibility of the Panchayat to see to this. Looked at that way, SADRAG helps the Panchayat to achieve this goal, and the Panchayat provides the community centre for SADRAG. The close cooperation with the Panchayat has many advantages, e.g.: Mala has succeeded in asserting that even children without a birth certificate are admitted to the "Government School" next to the community centre.

The lack of a birth certificate is highly problematic, since some families state that they are from West Bengal, when **really** they have come from Bangladesh to work in Delhi, thus living in India illegally. People of West Bengal and Bangladesh share the same language and culture and were only separated due to the independence of India. The same year saw the Indian government introducing the obligation for its citizens to carry IDs.



The children come to the learning centre voluntarily. It is open between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm. In Agahpur teachers have no cane, as is customary in other Indian schools. The religious background of the children is irrelevant. They come from Hindu and Moslem families. Everyone is welcome, and at SADRAG they are even allowed to bring along their small siblings whom they are looking after while the parents are working.

These are the little siblings, asleep, while their elders are attending the programme of SADRAG.

The wretched situation of working families has several reasons. For one thing, they have to spend a large amount of their normal Indian earnings on bad dwellings. And then, since both parents have to work in order to make ends meet, and since as migrants they do not live in an extended family, they have to let their children take care of themselves. Mala explained that families can earn an averaging equivalent of 120-140 CHF per month but have to pay as much as 60 CHF for their small dwelling. It would be useless for the families to live far away from their jobs because then they would have to pay 20-30 CHF per person for bus fare. This is why the rents are so high near the jobs.

While we were visiting, the children were sitting in two groups, each with one teacher, in the community centre, made available for the school time. The room is huge and so the teachers can also play games with the children there.

The children were shy and quiet at the beginning. We had brought along a map of India and a world map for the children so we could tell and show them where we come from. Mala translated for me. Surely the children know now that we come from a small country with snow-covered mountains like the Himalayas.

The little girl obviously did not know what to expect from us at the beginning.



on and so forth. This made the children wake up and put smiles on their faces.

Gita is the project coordinator and a skilled teacher. After our game her movement games really got the children active and going.

It would certainly be desirable for the children to receive a school uniform like all the other school children. One could also wish for an arranged, regular meal, which is not a matter of course in all families. Unfortunately, there are not enough funds for this. Mala has skilled teachers and puts her focus on long presences and good teaching materials.

We tried to play a game with the children that we had learned from another group of children in Kerala. One can learn about their abilities to react and to concentrate from it. But that turned out to be a little too complicated on the spur of the moment. Mala knew a similar but simpler game, which was then put into practice. One child would start saying ONE and then, very quickly, the next would say TWO and the next ONE again and the next TWO and so



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