

Site Visit and Studies of Varun Projects in Varanasi

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1 The Area

The Chandoli District lays East of Varanasi and borders to Bihar. The Naugarh Block is one of totally 11 Blocks (1 Block usually has 1 police station, 1 hospital, 1 B.D.O) in the Chandoli District with about 65'000 people in 111 villages. 55 villages are in hilly mountains where people live at lowest cost and without roads (and vehicles), electricity (no light and telephone), medical care, schools, education, vocational training or any other social infrastructure. This people live an almost tribal life like 1000 of years ago. Not one of the

school kids I interviewed in Shahpur knew what a computer is or has ever seen one! Only 2 of 50 kids have ever been to Naugarh, the block-center which is about 1.5 hours by jeep (if you know the way...). Most villagers belong to low casts or are tribal.

Ever since Independence from Varanasi (3-4 years ago), the district of Chandoli has seen very little progress. Historically it has sometimes been a part of Uttar Pradesh or Bihar.

Perhaps of this confusion or reasons of corruption and instability (see Naxal), this region has since long time been neglected and the people are getting cut off from the main development of the state.

Naxal Movement:

Due to this unsatisfying situation, Naxal movement is very active in the area what worsens the change of amelioration: Construction of roads and any other facilities are hindered or delayed by banditry and terrorism. Heavy armed police patrol in large groups and lately, 25 policeman where killed in a truck-attack. The villagers are forced to pay money to Naxal right after harvest time, which was at time of my visit. Therefore, we entered the area only with attendance of well known and knowing local villagers which would vouch for us in any malsituation. We were nine people totally. Police would have probably not let me enter the area if they would have seen me. Luckily, nothing unforeseen and unwanted happened so far.

Agriculture:

Most people are hunter-gatherer. The villages live from agriculture mainly (few men work outside; as rickshaw puller in Varanasi, in construction or any kind of temporary work) and due to rainy/dry seasons, erosion, lack of infrastructure (machine, dam, seeds) or knowledge they face times of aridity and hunger.

The main products planted or gathered are:

papaya, mango, guava, bamboo, lemon, chili, garlic, carrot, beans, potato, tomato, rice, weed, forest product (mahua, etc.) and naturally grown herbals.

Education:

Due to its remoteness and instability the 111 widespread small villages which are lacking connecting roads and financial means, there are only very few government facilities for education. Most of the villagers are illiterate. The families want to give their children a future apart from this tribal live but until now, the chances to exit this spiral of poverty and non-education are low.

Asha for education NGO runs two schools in Lehara and Shahpur for education from class 1-5. For further education, the children have to go long ways (10 km by bicycle when owning one) or live with relatives in other villages if possible. Only few families have this chance or can afford the school fee's, books, uniforms etc.

Medicine and Health Care:

Due to lack of roads, large distance to hospitals and doctors, lacking medicine and knowledge of the villagers, even small diseases (like diarrhea) can cause severe problems. People may die on the way to the hospital. Vaccinations are not given to the people, we checked some kids and no-one was vaccinated. Pregnancy and Birth giving is a complex and dangerous process here and many villagers showing symptoms on lack of Iodine.

2 Site Visit in three Villages (24. and 25 April 2005)

Naugarh, the block-center of 111 remote and widespread villages, is reached in 3 hours from Varanasi on a sealed (paved) road which winds up the hills. It gets very rural, we have seen a Bear next to the road. Staying two days in Naugarh, we visited the two villages where Asha is funding schools (Lehara and Shahpur) and additionally one of three villages (Pathrour), which are proposed for further projects by Varun. A short description of the visited villages follows:

Lehara:

This is the village most close to Naugarh (11 km). It is reachable through 5 km rainforest on a very bad path by jeep only. The villagers are very nice and were glad and happy for my visit. Everybody wanted to speak with me, they offered their best food showed us around. Later on, they expressed their problems and hopes and asked about my person and the aim of our coming. We spent easily 3-4 hours here and half of the village accompanied us to our jeep when leaving. They are very poor but deliberate, self-sufficient and thankful persons. No stranger is said to have been here for more than 70 years!

- Population: 36 families or totally 264 people life there.
- Houses: 94 (72 mud wall, 10 brick, 12 hutment)
- Animals 388 (157 cows, 145 goats, 54 buffalos)
- Belongings: 19 bicycles, 2 TV (battery), 5 diesel pump, 2 rice-making machines
- Shops: 0
- General Literacy: 20 % (3 persons passed class 10)

- Juvenile: Totally 90 from 0-15 years (60/30 male/female !)
- School going: 26 children (13/13 male/female) come to school (class 1-5)
- Teacher: Mr. Ramkesh, 45 years, finished class 12, earns 1000 RS per month.
Teaching since January 2002
- School building: mud wall, built by villagers, repaired for 5000 RS (Asha) in Oct 2004
- Closest government school: 7 km

Shahpur:

This is the largest village we visited. It is 27 km far away from Naugarh and the path could not be much worse (if it was, you couldn't reach it even by jeep). Many parts of the path pass riverbeds or cross rivers, so the village is cut off after heavy raining. Government is currently building a road to this village; it may be finished in 2005/2006. The border to Bihar is only 100 meter next to the village!

We were warmly welcome and spent 3 hours there interacting with the children, the women and some male villagers. This village is very neat and clean.

Seen from outside one would not believe that there are many internal fights (litigation) going on. The children and the women are more proud and self-conscious than in Lehara.

- Population: 69 families or totally 356 people life there.
- Houses: 225 (196 mud wall, 0 brick, 27 hutment)
- Animals 388 (138 cows, 125 goats, 90 ox)
- Belongings: 55 bicycles, 15 radio (battery), 4 diesel pump, 2 grass cutting machines
- Shops: 3
- General Literacy: 33 % (2 persons passed class 10)

- Juvenile: Totally 140 from 0-15 years (68/72 male/female)
- School going: 59 children (31/28 male/female) come to school (class 1-5)
- Teacher: Mr. Punnusingh, 27 years, finished class 10, earns 1000 RS per month.
Teaching since January 2000
- School building: brick, built by NCDC NGO in 1996, in good condition
- Closest government school: 15 km

Pathrour:

Pathrour is a village even more remote (another half an hour by jeep from Shahpur) and is in a really bad condition. It is a small village and there are no facilities at all. The villagers seem to be pretty depressed and desperate. A certain resignation was in the air. Help is needed in all villages, but here it's most ocular.

The closest government school is in Sadhopur and Jamsoth: about 3 km distance through forest, with danger of snake-bites, bears and other dangerous animals what is frightening for the children. In rainy season, the school is not reachable at all. And finally, the teacher does not show up regularly in Sadhopur and Jamsoth. Therefore, as far as I know, no children from Pathrour go to school at all.

- Population: 38 families or totally 183 people life there.
- Houses: 39 (38 mud wall, 1 brick)
- Belongings: 16 bicycles, 4 radio (battery)
- Shops: 1
- General Literacy: 21.8 %

- Juvenile: Totally 86 from 0-15 years (45/41 male/female)
- School building: No school yet, building might be prepared shortly by the villagers (ruins of Panchayat-building)

Horila and Dhobahi:

These villages are quite similar to Pathrour: Remote, small, lacking facilities, no school education etc. available.

Varun will do some investigation and make a proposal for further steps.

3 A.D.O and B.E.O (Meeting Government Officials)

In Pathrour, we consulted and interviewed the local government officials from the development and education departments. (When reading this, please bear in mind that things are more easily said and planned than realized. Therefore, schedule and quality of this projects or plans is another thing...)

A.D.O Assistant Development Officer

Due to absence of the B.D.O (Block Dev. Off.) Mr. Shri Shesh Nath Chauhan, we were only able to talk with his assistance: Mr. Shailesh Kumar. This assistance is responsible for statistics and any sort of information and demographic data from the block. He said:

- 17 new primary school are planned. The budget for this project is not yet decided and is awaiting permission from the U.P. State Government. Lehara is one of the villages. The schools might open in 2007/2008 and the government will provide buildings and teachers.
- The world bank funded two projects for drinking water in the block: Jalnidhi (project on hold) and Swojaldhara (project stopped) p.s.: jal=water, nidhi=source, swol=self, hara=flowing
- At my question to provide a 2-3 years outlook of any other projects, the ADO said:
 - Road: Villages may be connected to the main road

- Widow Pension
- Rationing System (to provide sort of identity cards and economic status classification all over India)
- Electricity (light) in the coming years (hope so..)

B.E.O Basic Education Officer

We were lucky to meet the BEO who provided us the most important information. His Coordinator, Mr. Shri S. Ram informed us on further details. It was funny (and sad) because these persons could not agree the meaning of their abbreviations and what their program really contains. So the talk was long and confusing, but here's the consensus we filtered out:

- Criteria for opening new primary schools are: population 300 and distance of 1.5 km to next school
- 17 Upper Primary Schools may be granted, also in Lehara (See: above, ADO)
- 16 Junior High schools are already running
- 63 primary schools are already running
- 23 Early Child School (ECS) are running, also in Lehara and Shahpur! (*)
- At my question to provide a 2-3 years outlook of the projects for our villages, the ADO said:
 - It is planned to run ECS in Pathrour (might start 2007/2008)
 - Upper Primary Schools is planned in Lehara (See: above, ADO)
 - No plan for school, they will think about it later, when the road is finished (**)

Here is the Personal Opinion from Mr. Shri S. Ram (the Coordinator of the ADO) on the whole education situation in the area:

We (Asha) should build a central residential school and provide food, accommodation, education and later some vocational training. This would be better than opening schools in several villages. "Otherwise, the kids are born, live and die in poverty", he said.

If this is not realizable, he thinks, it will be a good idea to open schools in the Varun-proposed villages (Pathrour, Horila and Dhobahi). He said, these are the villages which need it most.

=> My Comment: Residential school would be meaningful but they are in a completely other range of cost and budget.

(*) Nobody from Varun knew about this or has ever seen a teacher from government in Lehara and Shahpur. Probably, these teachers are paid but do never show up. In contrast, the BEO knows about the Asha schools and teachers in these 2 villages. I insisted in having details to ECS, here's the result:

Lehara:

- ECS running since 2003 for 25-30 children. MO-SA from 7-11 A.M. They rent a room and the teacher (Mr. Shesh Nath, lives in Lehara) earns 1000 RS/mth.

Shahpur:

- ECS running since 2004 for 30 children. MO-SA from 7-11 A.M. They borrow a room (mud wall) and the teacher (Mr. Shambhu Lal Kesasi, lives in Jamsuth) earns 1000 RS/mth. (ECS is for children aged 6-8; they learn the alphabet, letters and to recognize some animals etc.)

This school system is an alternative for poor children who can not go to/afford the normal government school. Its divided in E.C.S, E.C.C.E=?, A.I.E =Alternative Interrogative Learning, according to the ages of the kids)

(**) My comment: Even though it is the largest village and very remote...

4 VARUN Organisation

Voluntary Association for Rural Upliftment & Networking (VARUN) is a self-motivated, social and non-profit organization. Varun started its activities in 1999.

Outline:

- Working in 7 villages
- Running schools in 2 villages (Lehara, Shahpur)
- Self help group (women micro finance). - Introduce Organic Farming (Nursery, Seed Bank)
- Library (in 5 villages)
- Financiering exempt from Asha: only small other donations from
 - Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (18'000 RS)
 - Nabard (18'000 RS) for micro finance
 - Individual Donators (family, friends etc.)
- FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 1976) applied in February 2005, might take years and maybe sometimes also bribes of about 20'000 RS, until then, donations go through Asha-Varanasi

Key Persons:

- Dr. S.P. Singh, living in Naugarpur since 1993, secretary and founder of VARUN (agricultural extension)
- Prof. R.C. Mishra, president (dept. of psychology, faculty of social science)
- Anjani Kumar Singh (sociologist and journalist)
- Dr. Sanjay Mishra (sociologist)

Remarks:

- Dr. S.P. Singh lives in the field and has the supervision of the village committee (Gram Panchayat = local self governance: a council of about 5 elected villagers to decide about the development projects and any other village decisions)
- S.P. Singh, Anjani Kumar Singh and Sanjay Mishra are the active and executive members of Varun.

Main Aims and Activities:

- Education: To increase the level of literacy and intellectual development of the villages
- Community Development:
 - To give technical instruction to increase skill level (organic farming, seed banks)
 - Provide technical tools and know how (ex. compost tanks to create fertilizer)
 - Income Generation
- Health Care (supporting the government polio vaccination program with volunteers; promoting of growing healthy fruits, vegetables and medical herbs on empty land around the houses)

Women Self Help Group (Saving)

Dr. Singh initiated women self help groups for saving money. There are currently 50 groups with each 10-20 members running. Each member of a group pays monthly 10 RS and the

money is brought to a banc-account. Other income possibilities for these groups are provided by collecting and selling mahua and other natural products from the forest. The money on these bank-accounts is a guarantee to get further credit from the bank for any investments in the villages. Exemplarily, one group has saved 20'000 RS saved and was able to get a credit of 40'000 RS from bank. The credits are mainly needed for:

- farming, cultivation and fertilizer
- medical treatment
- education
- rituals like marriage and cremation

Target Project: Bee Keeping for Income Generation

Creating and increasing any sort of income for the villagers is a sustainable way of aid beside of basic education. One person can hold 10-20 boxes of Bees and create an annual income of about 30-50'000 RS. A 7-10 days training is needed for newcomers and one box costs about 3500 RS. The rural village area seems to be fitting for such activities. As a evaluation phase, the project should start in one village with about 10 boxes and one or two persons. This would cause a initial and singular investment of about 15'000 RS. Vallabh from Asha-Varanasi is an expert in this subject and will help to introduce the system to the villagers.

5 Interviewing the Villagers

LEHARA:

Asking the villagers in Lehara what they think of being their major problems, I received the following ranking:

1. Education: "Children are future" (Asha school is good, but further education not available)
2. They want a new school building with more light and (comment: see ADO/BEO, Suggestions)
3. Medicine / First Aid not available
4. Water Problem (from 6 pumps only 3 are working, they have to carry water from far)
5. Economy: Need help to create income
6. Road: it's far and complicated to Naugard (comment: see ADO/BEO, Suggestions)
7. No Electricity

OTHER: A women marriage can cost 25'000 RS which is practically unaffordable and creates debt

Asking the school kids in Lehara what they need most, I received the following answers:

- Black Board, Chart (*)
- Toys for learning (*)
- Mat to sit (*) (**)
- Clothes, uniforms
- Tables, Posters (with Birds, Anatomy, Geography, Calculation, etc..)

(*) This is also the main request of the teacher

(**) Need being provided regularly, due to the extreme poverty, these things "disappear" and are used otherwise (Comment of Vallabh when I asked about the Asha-Budgets)

SHAHPUR:

Asking the villagers in Shahpur what they think of being their major problems, I received the following ranking:

1. Education: "Children are future" (Asha school is good, but further education not available)
2. Insecurity of Food
3. Water: Need for PVC-pipes to provide the fields with water and interconnect them
4. Medicine / First Aid not available
5. Lack of road and electricity

Asking the school kids in Shahpur what they need most, I received the following answers:

- Mats to sit on (*)
- Games for learning and playing

(*) Need being provided regularly, due to the extreme poverty, these things "disappear" and are used otherwise (Comment of Vallabh when I asked about the Asha-Budgets)

PATHROUR:

The situation in Pathrour is quite similar, except that there is no school yet and the need for education is expressed by the villagers as ultimate priority. It overshadows the other problems and needs.

6 Personal Impression

I was studying and observing the Varun Project for 11 working days! I worked on it with a very critical point of view (much donations disappear and many projects silt up..). I have spoken to many people from Varun, from Asha, with Villagers, with Government Officials and neutral persons, and in addition, I can compare this project with other Asha and Non-Asha projects in India I was visiting and studying.

I am convinced that this small project is a good base for upgradeable activity and support from abroad. On one hand, the need for help in this area is obvious and on the other hand, Varun has the potential, the knowledge, the contacts and the motivation for active and sustainable help in the area.

Therefore, I propose absolute continuity in funding this project. An extension of funds and activities would be very desirable and meaningful. In case of upgrading, the control and steering of Varun's activities can be extended.

It is remarkable and amazing how much is being realized with little money in this two school projects.

7 Suggestions and Recommendations

As follows, my neutral suggestions and recommendations based on my observation:

- Asha should consider following the suggestion of Varun to open three new schools in Pathrour, Horila and Dhobahi if the villagers can provide the buildings (this shows their willingness, motivation and interest). I made an initial step with the villagers of Pathrour by offering them a teacher if they repair prepare the ruins of Panchayat-building as school building. It will cost little money to pay a teacher and will help so much!!

Also ADO thinks it's a good idea to open schools in the 3 Varun-proposed villages

Comment on the new proposal from Varun (received 20.4.2005):

- I absolutely agree on the text
 - The budget of 156'700 RS looks OK for me. It includes already some reserves and Varun must be able woth this money to do very good work and handle also some unforeseen things and expensed. The coordinator (18'000RS) is already paid with Asha's actual donation of 1365USD
 - I recommend this project to be realized in the proposed form: it is reasonable, needed and realistic.
- To start bee-keeping in 1 village (singular investment: 15'000 RS) is worth a trial! It bears low risk (small investment) and can be very interesting and highly profitable sustainable income possibility.
 - Community Self Development: A one time donation of about 5000 USD would give many sustainable impulses to these villages (income generation):
 - Dams could be built and enable the villagers to grow more regularly and with better results. This creates more income which can be used for further amelioration
 - Biological Farming could be introduced and spread widely
 - With a certain pressure, land from government can be obtained for the village Panchayat, and herbal and aromatic cultivation would be started. The earnings from this will be used for purposes of the whole village.
 - Bee keeping could be extended after it has shown success in test stage
- ➔ I think, this 5000 USD are a very good investment! Of course, intensive steering and control of these activities must be provided by Asha-Varanasi. Varun will have to prove successes of their activities regularly and especially after an initial (setup) period.
- Better Cooperation with Government Organs required:
 - When we visited ADO and BEO (on my demand!), I was surprised that there seems to be no cooperation (or even knowledge) between Varun and these Organs
 - Government is planning 17 schools, permission shall/might/should come shortly. (Varun was not up to date about this plan!)
 - Vaccination Programs available if pressure and support is high enough
 - Subsidy is available if the pressure is high enough
 - Regular contacts and task sharing is essential!
 - Further education (class 6-12 in government school) needs additional donation (as the case arises). Providing any kind of vocational training in future would be desirable, studies and search for possibilities have to be carried out first.
 - The newly Asha-appropriated “Education Program Controller” (18'000 RS/year) is more needed for
 - Cooperation, interacting and dealing with government organs
 - Community Self Development
 - Coordination of Varun activitiesthan for education (as long as there are two schools only!). The variation of age and knowledge of the kids is to high and the distance between the schools to big. So, any education (reading, writing) is good for these kids. The teachers are very good and motivated. So, the “Education Program Controller” should be called “Project Coordinator”
and work more in this direction. A person should be appointed and announced to Asha in
order to have a responsible and addressable partner.

- Construction of new school building should not be paid by Asha:
 - Villagers shall show motivation and initiative
 - Government is planning 17 schools in area in the coming years
 - Repairs on current building shall be supported

→ This is also the idea of Vallabh from Asha-Varanasi
- The teacher's salary is now at 1000 RS and therefore still at a low level. Asha Silicon-Valley pays only 850 RS of it. Varun wants to increase the salaries by 20% per year which is desirable, at least for some more rounds.
- The school and the kids in Shahpur are in better condition than in Lehara. Varun splits up the funds according to number of students, therefore Shahpur gets more money. Probably, Lehara should be considered a bit more.
- Medicine and First-Aid possibilities are needed in all villages. Basic training for one villager to enable provision of medicine in emergency might be worthy. Dealing with the official organs may result in government support. As is, 1200 RS (in Asha-Budget 2005) is not enough, a first-aid box is highly needed and must be refilled regularly.
- Providing new school uniforms, sitting-mats, toys and learning material (as demanded by kids and teachers) should be considered. Partly, the budget is available and Varun has to realize it according to the priority of needs. Further budget should be granted.
- Funds need to be on time, it creates problems otherwise. The school was not in a very good condition when I visited (lack of stationary and sitting-mats) which is partly the fault of Asha.
- Assumed that funds are provided regularly and/or are even extended; the control and steering of VARUN by Asha-Varanasi can and will be extended says Vallabh. Currently, Asha-Varanasi collects all receipts given by Varun (I was happy to see some, but they could/should be more in detail). There are some possibilities for Varun to work more transparent. My suggestions for more transparency:
 - Varun must work out plans and schedules for its activities and prove the realization (Who, When, What, How much, Where, How → Measurable and Comparable facts)
 - Detailed Budget (Expenditure Plans and Tables) of all Varun-activities should be made and provided at the beginning and end of each year (plan and reality)
 - Meetings and any decisions with the villagers should be brought to protocol and externalized to Asha-Varanasi and Silicon Valley.
 - The annual report should be extended and refined. More frequent reports should be provided by Varun
 - Site visits by Neutrals or Founders should be more regular
- Eventually, Varun can create a web-page to provide transparent information about their activities (and successes) for donators and interested party (knowledge to do so is available)

8 Outlook and Procedure

Outlook

- Varun wants to work out details and expenditure plans for a community self development and income generation program. The draft will be proposed to Asha as new project-proposal.
- Varun wants to work out details and expenditure plans for the three new villages to be provided with schools (has just been translated to English and sent by e-mail! See: Suggestions)
- The villagers of Pathrour agreed of repairing and providing a school building. Photos of the successfully renowned and prepared building will be made and provided to Silicon Valley and me. After this, funding for teacher may start immediately. (Dr. Singh has already a teacher who is capable and willing)
- Varun has plans to force and convince the government to overtake the schools and teachers in Lehara and Shahpur financially because they have approved their worth. The released money could be used to start new school projects in other villages. The success of this aim will be seen in a while.
- I am willing to continue studying this project and I will provide further information from my studies in Varanasi.

Procedure

- Noon.ch is a very small and new organization (my family and friends) which can not guarantee continuous funding. Therefore, Noon.ch can not fund ongoing projects which need attendance for several years.
- Asha Silicon Valley shall decide if they can fund new parts of the Varun Projects (see Suggestions and Recommendations). If Asha will not fund the projects, Noon.ch can pay the salary of the new teachers (3 villages) for one year. From there, the future is uncertain.
→ Asha Silicon Valley is the leading part and shall decide what to do. Noon.ch hopes for positive respond and will only act if not otherwise possible.
- Asha Silicon Valley and Noon.ch should plan further activities together. Andi Fischer from Noon.ch is willing to support and consult Asha Silicon Valley in any arising questions and will provide all needed information as far as possible.

