

Site visit report

Project: VARUN

Date of visit: 3rd March to 5th March 2008

BACKGROUND:

I reached Varanasi on 3rd morning and immediately left for Naugarh with Anjani Bhai. VARUN has 5 non-formal education centres running in the villages of Naugarh block. There are 110 villages in this block and in about 55 of these villages, VARUN has helped to organize women into self-help groups. Currently, there are 2000 women participating in the self-help groups. Dr. S. P. Singh, who lives in Naugarh, coordinates all the activities of VARUN, while Lal Saheb manages the activities of the non-formal education centres.

Naugarh is a forest area bordering Bihar with large swathes directly under control of the forest department. As you walk through the area, you will see stone boundaries put up by the forest department that demarcates the area under their control. The major problem is that of Naxalism, which has its origins in the unequal land division. As you travel, you can see police personnel everywhere. Because of this problem, roads have been laid to some of the villages.

For the past couple of years, rain has failed in this area and therefore, it has reeled under severe drought.

Some of the people have their own lands and are able to do agriculture but the rest are employed as labourers in the city. The women work in the field of the richer farmers. Agriculture is itself very unevenly distributed. The lower plains have plenty of water and therefore, are conducive for cultivation. The mountainous areas lack water and therefore, are barren.

SHAHPUR:

This is about 28 km from Naugarh and recently road has been laid to this village by the government. Beyond Shahpur are the villages of Bihar.

Total number of children studying at the Shahpur centre: 60-70. About 10 of these children come from Bihar. In fact these villages want VARUN to open non-formal education centres in their village too but as the resources with VARUN are limited, they have refused. Instead the children have been asked to come to Shahpur centre.

There are two teachers: Punnu Singh and Madan Gupta. Punnu Singh is now doing his graduation from a University in Buxar, Bihar.

The centre runs from 9.30 to 2.30 in the afternoon. Children are given a break to go home for lunch.

There is a library in the centre and children are given books to read. There was an attendance register as well as a library register. In addition, the teachers too have to sign a notebook noting their time of arrival and departure. All the registers were complete. Children were able to read for the book that I picked. They were able to do simple math problems. However, one thing that I have noticed again and again is that though the children are able to read their comprehension remains abysmally low. So if you ask the child to explain what they have just read in their own words, they cannot do so.

The village does not have a government primary school. The nearest middle school is in Gahila about 5 km away. About 14 children from Shahpur centre are now enrolled in this school. A total of 42 children have gone to study further.

There are two major problems that VARUN would like to address for this village:

1. Middle school
2. Self-employment for women.

Middle school: As the route to the middle school in Gahila lies via the forest, many children especially girls do not go to middle school after completing their primary education. The girls are married at the age of 16-18, so they spend most of their time at home. VARUN proposes to start a middle school in the village itself. There will be three classes- 6th, 7th, and 8th. Three teachers will need to be hired. About 100 children (including those from Bihar villages) will be enrolled in this school. It is important to note that at present there is no body in this village who can teach the middle school children. Therefore, teachers will be hired from outside the village.

Self-employment for women: Economic hardship is the major problem. Previously, VARUN had started a bee-keeping activity but unfortunately, the coordinator left without informing VARUN. Now they would like to restart the activities so that the women can earn some money. The focus is on the women as most of the men are employed as labourers either in Naugarh or further off. Some of the suggested activities are: Organic farming, Bee keeping, artificial jewellery making, Sewing etc. With jewellery making, the idea is that the materials would be purchased in bulk, the women would make it in the village, and then someone (a coordinator) will take them to the market and sell them. The sewing activity appears to be more of helping the women stitch their own clothes and if possible, sew it for other people living in the nearby villages. For all these activities a coordinator is needed who would get the material to the women from the market and then take the finished product to the market to sell them.

PATHROR:

The centre at Pathror has been running for past 2 years. Total number of children enrolled are 48 but ~54 children attend the centre. Surender Kumar (? Sorry, I appear to have scribbled the name!) is the teacher at this centre; however, he has giving his Intermediate exams and therefore, when I went to visit the centre, had taken leave to give his exams. Lalsaheb was taking classes in his absence.

All the children are below the age o 10-12. A hut is being built by the villagers so that classes could be held in the hut. As the number of children has increased to 54, two teachers will be needed from next session.

All registers were complete. Many of the children from this centre have been admitted to middle school in Naugarh. The children were able to read, but again comprehension was lacking. The children have been provided uniforms.

HORILA:

A new centre is being proposed here. Already about 20 children are attending the centre. There is a large banyan tree in the village where the villagers have built a platform and a small temple. The classes are currently being held here. There was a problem with the teacher who had been appointed by VARUN. Apparently he went on a holiday and the enrolment fell to 20 from 34. The teacher is back and is on probation. The enrolment is creeping back up. All the children attending the centre are from the same village. The registers were complete. The children are in the age group of 5-13.

Some of the children from this village are enrolled in government school in the next village, which is about 40 min walk over the hills. The school provides mid-day meal but no teaching. As the mid-day meal is provided only on select days, the children go to school on the days meal is

provided. The rest of the time they sit at home. VARUN has provided slates for the children and the villagers have promised to provide a hut for the centre.

LEDENHA:

The centre was started in 2000. 34 children are enrolled and a hut has been built by the contribution of the villagers. Mr. Ramkesh Singh has been teaching at this centre. However, now the government is building a primary school and VARUN has proposed to close down this centre from July. Mr. Ramkesh Singh will ensure that the children are enrolled in the school and that the transition is smooth.

Mr. Ramkesh Singh has encouraged and devised physical education exercises. The students are divided into five classes. The class 5 students were able to retell the stories in their words and the class 1 students were learning alphabets. One of the students from this centre is now enrolled in Intermediate College and many of the students are now in high school. The registers were complete and well maintained. Also the children have been given library books to read.

As the nearest middle school is in Naugarh, only 1 girl is enrolled in it. Dr. S.P.Singh/VARUN is supporting her education.

AMRITPUR:

Government primary school is already operational in this village and therefore, this centre is also going to be closed down. As the centre is close to Naugarh, Dr. S.P. Singh has proposed that he and other people will ensure that the transition of the children into the government school is smooth. There are currently 68 children at the centre and all of them have been enrolled into school. There are 2 teachers here: Ramavadh and Vimal Kumar. It has been proposed that the library will be shifted to Horila (See comments below).

DOBAHI:

The centre was started in 2005. Mr. Bhuvan Kumar is the teacher at this centre and the age of the children ranges from 6-10 years. Mr. Bhuvan Kumar has started building a hut for the centre of his own initiative. Children are allowed to take books home to read. There are 26 children enrolled in the school and ~80% of the children were present when we did the site visit.

Children are able to read books; the younger ones are able to write their names. There is no school in this village and for middle school; the children have to go to Naugarh. About 10-11 children have passed class V exam and about 3-4 boys are now in middle school. 2 boys are doing intermediate.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPRESSIONS:

1. Except for few villages, most of the villages are inaccessible. In fact, to reach Dobahi we had to wade across a river, as there was no bridge across it. The visit was possible only because the water level was low. Similarly, Horila is inaccessible as there is no road to the village. Therefore, most of the girls stop going to school after finishing their primary education.
2. It is really imperative that we try to provide some sort of education for the girls beyond the primary school. It is with this aim that a middle school is being proposed in Shahpur. In fact, it would be good if a similar concept could be implemented in Ledenha. As the centre is going to be closed down, the hut is available to run a middle school.

3. It is also essential that the girls be provided vocational training. Most of the boys and the men go out of the village to work as labourers. The girls and the women are stuck in the village. If they can augment their income, their economic hardship would be reduced to a large extent. Dr. Singh was telling how many times the villagers eat roti with salt because that is all they have. The villages up in the hills are the worst affected as they do not have water and therefore, agriculture is not possible.
4. I found Dr. S.P.Singh and Anjani Bhai very pragmatic as to what could be done and what could not be done. For example, though they are being asked to open additional centres, they are not willing to because monitoring is difficult. Yet, the reality is that these centres are needed in the absence of schools.
5. Lalsaheb is currently the coordinator of the centres. As I have said previously, most of the villages are inaccessible. Lalsaheb has a bicycle but Dr. Singh is trying to get some funds together so that he can buy a motorbike. It is just impossible to cover these villages by walk.
6. I also had the opportunity to interact with their women group. There are 2000 women enrolled in the self-help groups.
7. One of the major problems I have found is the lack of comprehension. This is an universal problem not specific to VARUN. The children are able to read their books but if you ask what it means, they simply cannot explain. But I think this is a problem with the way the teachers teach. VARUN has been ensuring that the teachers attend teachers training programs regularly held both at Naugarh and Kaithi. Follow-ups are done regularly. Thus, all the registers are complete, the books are given out to children for reading, and the children follow the prescribed books. However, I feel it can be improved further now.
8. It was proposed that the library at Amritpur would be donated to Horila. However, later in our discussions with Anjani bhai and Vallabh bhai, it was decided that the library at Amritpur would be donated to the government school as it would provide an excuse to monitor the school and also the children would have books to read. A new library would be provided at Horila.