

Hijli INSPIRATION Site Visit Report (November 2012)

Conducted by: Lalit Goel, Asha RTP volunteer

The trip happened in November 2012. I called Chandrayee and talked to her about the project a little bit. She gave me Sandipan's contact information to setup a time for the field visit. When I visited, Sandipan took me to the community where the project is being executed.

During the visit, one of the things that Sandipan impressed upon me were the particular aspects of the community which made the project challenging as well as one that can have a large impact. The community constituted primarily of low income Muslim population from states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The community had places where local alcohol was produced and where adult males of the community would gather for alcohol and gambling. This was a major problem because the adult males would not contribute to the betterment of their families and choose to spend all their earning on alcohol and gambling. This also meant that the burden of providing for the kids fell right in the lap of the adult females of the family. Not only that, it was easy for families to believe that their kids could be bread-winners too and that school was a waste of time.

This was not helped by the fact that the community had jute mills right there. The jute mills saw small children as labor cheaper than adult males. For the families of kids, it meant some more money.

There was one other issue with the particular community - girl trafficking. It turns out that there have been incidences when girls were trafficked out of the community.

These forces really worked to pull the kids out of school and what in my mind made the project challenging. The project Inspiration supports these kids to keep them at school and progress to receive at least primary education. Asha is supporting four teachers - three of them teaching in Hindi and one in Urdu. Each teacher is responsible for 25 kids. The purpose is to support the children with their homework and tutor them for exams.

Providing tuition to children outside of regular school may seem unnecessary. It is important here to remember a few things. The government school that the kids attend, charge a fee of Rs. 10 per month. Since the fee is so low, it is not hard to imagine that the quality of education is not good. The exams though are probably centralized. As a result, if the kids do not get after school tuition, they may not pass the exams. Failure would be another reason for families to put the kids to work.

Apart from this, the tuition keeps the kids away from getting involved in hazardous work at the jute mill or bad influence from alcohol and gambling.

I, especially, remember one of the teachers. Sandipan said that she was very experienced in social work. Due to her experience, she had actually worked with other organizations to rescue one girl who had been trafficked and brought her back to the community.

The teachers had also worked very tactfully with the community elders to establish the tuition centers. One of them was a local club. The other was really built from scratch with help from the community. The teachers showed the community the value of having a center where the community could organize events like marriage or prevention from rain, etc.

The teachers work 2-3 hours per day for 5-6 days per week for a salary of Rs. 900 per month. It seems their salary was Rs. 800 not very long before Nov 2012. To put this in perspective, their salary is approx. \$18 per month for working 40-72 hours. This is what really struck me. It is not uncommon to spend \$18 at one meal in the US, but these teachers do such a challenging job for one month for that money.

On my way back, Sandipan had just one request - the salary of teachers be increased.

I found it good that the money raised for the project is being used meaningfully and hope the project can continue to be supported by Asha. I think you may already have sent the funds last weekend, but hopefully this report is still useful. Let me know if you need something else from me.