

NJSS Site visit report

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Date: Feb 27th 2015

Nandlal picked me up from Assi ghat in Varanasi. The school is about 25 km from Varanasi town. After going to the school I was introduced to the NJSS staff: Mahender, Anita, Najma, Amit (teacher). Mahender, Anita and Najma work actively with Self Help Groups (SHGs), womens issues, NREGA and other stuff. Amit is a school teacher.

In the meanwhile the school had a recess time. I went into the playground area of the school with my DSLR camera to capture some clicks. The DSLR camera made the kids curious and they readily came to me when I started to have a conversation with them. These were all primary school kids (all <10 yrs in age). The children were very spritely and readily posed with smiles for pictures. I asked them questions on why they were playing outside, how they liked studying in this school. They seemed to be pretty enthusiastic in giving out the answers. They all seem to be happy to be at the school. When I asked them the question on when their final exams were, they responded that the teacher did not write the timetable on the blackboard yet (essentially meaning to say that the teachers have not given out the exam schedule yet).

[Pictures]

While interacting with children I was introduced to Mahender bhai. I told Nandlal that I was interested in learning more about the MNREGA work that is being done by the Asha Trust groups around varanasi. Mahender bhai told me that I needed to leave right away if I wanted to see the workers in action since the workers usually wrap up the day by 1 PM. I was given a ride by Mahender bhai on his two wheeler to a work site about 5-6 km away. Details of the NREGA site visit will be given in a different report.

In the afternoon, took a tour of the school building and met Subhash bhai. Subhash is the senior most teacher and has been with the school for more than 14 years. The school has a computer room in which there are two working computers. The teachers have been using these computers to show the educational DVDs from Azim Premji foundation. Got an impression that the kids like the DVDs and have been finding it useful in understanding their lessons.

The school also has a small library room in which books were stacked in a couple of shelves. The books looked pretty worn out and beaten up. Subhash bhai has informed that the books have been given to the school a few years back and the library could use a new infusion of books.

[Pictures of library, computer lab, school building]

In the afternoon, I went into the near by village along with Subhash bhai to talk to the parents of the NJSS students. Along with way I met several kids both previous NJSS students as well as other village kids who have completed their 10th and 12th standard and are either working

daily wage jobs or are pursuing their higher education. I found it very interesting that all the girls I have met along the way were in high school or +2 and were keen on pursuing their higher studies. While some of this is attributable to a general change in perception about girl child education in the country, I felt a lot of it has to do with the pro-active engagement NJSS has with the parent community.

In the evening, I attended the "Chance India" session that was being conducted by Nandlal. There were about 20 kids ranging from high school upto B.Comm (Bachelors in Commerce, an undergraduate program) who were actively singing songs. I had a brief conversation with the group on what their future aspirations were and I was pleasantly surprised to find a very diverse set of answers. There were some kids who wanted to become police officers. One girl wanted to be a politician (and in fact contested an election in her college for a student leadership position). There were aspiring cricketers, actors, teachers, doctors etc. This is perhaps the broadest set of ambitions I have heard students talk about in a rural project. If you took a blind-folded test you would think you were talking to well to do kids from a high end school in an urban area.

[Pictures of chance India session]

There were clear indications that the mentorship they were receiving in the Chance India program is broadening the horizon of awareness in these boys and girls. The sense of wanting to achieve something in their life was clearly palpable. Nandlal is their primary mentor and the father figure for these kids. He has a tremendous influence on the way the students are able to think differently and aim high in their life.

In a separate conversation with Nandlal, he mentioned about how in the more than decade of his work with the community he is clearly able to see a change in perception in the community about things like education and specifically girl child education. He feels that there is a big change in the attitude of kids in chance India program as well as NJSS school where in the students have started to aspire big in their lives. He is able to motivate them to go after their dreams but given the remoteness of their villages and lack of information, they do not have enough awareness about how to go about pursuing their dreams.

(I could see that in my conversation with the kids as well. They know what they wanted to become but they didn't had an idea of how to go about getting it. They were not clear on what academic path they need to take, they are not aware of job market conditions etc.)

Nandlal said since he too isn't fully aware of how to help the kids further he is looking to forge partnerships with other organizations in getting help for these kids achieve their dreams. I feel Asha is well placed in helping the project further in this space. Would strongly encourage Chicago volunteers to have conversations with the project regarding these aspects.

Issue of salaries to teachers

I also had a conversation with Amit and Subhash about the salaries that were given to them in the school. Both of them felt that the salary of Rs 2,500 or so for a full time job is extremely low. They have started working in the school for a low salary when they were single but given that they have families with kids they felt that there is always a part of them that is worried and concerned about not meeting the basic needs of their families. It is sort of ironic that on one hand they participate in struggles with the government to ensure villagers are paid the state mandated minimum wages (Rs 156/day in UP) for a 6 - 8 hour work day but the teachers who work at least 8 hours a day in the school and also participate in non-academic work are hardly getting paid half the mandated minimum wage by Asha.

It is important for Asha as a whole (and for Chicago chapter within the context of NJSS project) to ensure that the wages we pay to teachers gives them some semblance of sustainability in their lives. It is extremely hard even for dedicated teachers to give their best to the school children when they know that they are not able to provide even the minimum for their own kids. I would strongly urge the Chicago chapter to consider paying a sustainable salary to NJSS teachers (state mandated minimum wage would be a good starting point).

NREGA site visit

Mahender bhai took me out on his bike to the NREGA work location. During the drive he told me that the workers union that they have created is helping with implementation of NREGA in the block (varanasi block). Their presence is in roughly about 30 villages of varanasi block. Currently they are able to generate roughly about 40-50 man days in this block. Rest of varanasi (and in general rest of UP) is faring pretty badly with roughly about 5-15 man days.

At the location: Met Suresh bhai. He was overseeing the work being done by roughly about 25 women. They were digging a pond. Mahesh bhai started to describe the issues in implementation here. For the past 2-3 years NREGA implementation is on the decline. People are getting less than 20 man days of work. The funds are not being properly allocated at the district and block levels. Even the payments are not being made properly for the work that has already been completed. Today (Feb 27th) was the first day of NREGA work for the year 2015 for these villagers.

Only Women were working at the site. Men go to find other manual labor work. Generally women start the work at 9 AM and work till 1 PM. Everyone has job cards, bank accounts. Work not being allocated when requested. No unemployment payments are being made either after 15 days of request.

Spoke to the women about how NREGA is being implemented, how loksamithi volunteers are helping them, what have they learnt about NREGA rules etc. [Refer to audio recording].

[Took some pictures]

Went to BDOs office. He seemed generally cooperative and friendly. Clearly the state administration didn't seem to be enthused about working with NREGA. Seem to be lack of interest at both center and state level regarding NREGA (perhaps since NREGA carries a perception of being a congress legislation with it).

Mahender and Suresh are actively pursuing the NREGA implementation in varanasi block. But they currently lack the resources to fully meet the need. All the details about the NREGA visit will be documented separately in a different report.

In conclusion, I feel the NJSS project is running very well. The new building that was built is serving the purpose really well. The library could use fresh batch of books. The computer lab could use an upgrade. The issue of teachers salaries is very acute and needs to be immediately addressed by the funding chapters. Chicago should also look at potentially helping the Chance India program of NJSS school. There may be some monetary requirements but a bigger need is the provision of non-monetary resources to students.