

Asha Navjyothi Report

The beginning:

After landing in Delhi and having few talks with Nandlal Bhai and deciding on the arrival date I reached the rustic and alluring lands of Varanasi with my father. Suresh bhai came to receive us there.

Landing in Varanasi:

Due to delays caused by the transport system we reached late by a couple of hours at 2pm. We sat in the car and, in the scorching sun and dusty road rushed to the first Vocational training centre.

Vocational Training center 1:

Objective views:

A group of around 12-15, 20-50 years old aged students were present with their teacher and two sewing machines, in a well-lit room made of concrete bricks and a concrete floor. There were cloth mats on the floor to sit on. It was slightly cool inside. All the women were confident, and forthright. They said they liked their teacher, and coming to the center was a good break from the mundane life for them. Their families had no objections either. It gave them a chance to talk to each other and discuss medical problems, family problems, be more aware. Most importantly, learning how to sew empowered them as they could practically apply the skills and sell stuff from Rs.10-Rs.25. So far they had learnt how to make petticoats, saree blouses. They were satisfied and two sewing machines were enough to serve them all. They didn't have any demands or complaints.

Subjective views:

Everyone gave a very warm welcome to us. There were curious, shy and expectant looks on everyone's faces at the same time. We sat on the floor with everyone. Papa asked about health issues (him being a doctor and working with the Govt.) and I got an opportunity to talk about the workings of the center and how they liked it. How did their families perceive it, how do they manage their time, how was coming to the center useful for them and what ways could we help them out – if they had any complaints or would like to ask anything? They were happy in general and were eager to talk.

The Journey continues:

Hungry and thirsty by now. But the clock was ticking and before the second training center closed, we wanted to go there and meet everyone. Again, zooming in the white maruti, passing beautiful green fields full of mustard, wheat and paddy we reached the second vocational training center.

The Second Vocational Training center

Objective Views:

A group of around 10-15, 20-50 year old women with their single teacher awaited us. There were three sewing machines, one was not working – the repairs were going on. It is a regular problem. We were inside a courtyard like structure with the sewing machines along the sheltered and

enclosed boundaries. We were sitting in the middle open ground with mats on it. The student group varied from girls coming to the center riding on their bicycles and going to college for pursuing a B.A. to women who could not even write their names and all genres in between. On being questioned and talked to, they all enjoyed coming to the center. **They expressed an earnest demand from Asha Chicago to supply funds for Painting and Beautician courses.** They said that sewing helps them be more independent and that by interaction with everyone, they are able to learn new things apart from sewing as well. Everyone was aware of banking and medical facilities offered in the village.

Subjective views:

A very expressive and confident group of women awaited our arrival. They asked me about my whereabouts and why I was there. The teacher was a vivacious lady who was very proud of her students. The students in turn liked their teacher. They displayed their sewing creations (a top) – very neatly and deftly crafted. This center was more urban with regards to its location – right along an active road, compared to the previous center which was located in the middle of huts. There was a very strong interest in this group to expand the learnings of the center beyond sewing and get into other ventures like painting and beautician. Papa asked them about medical awareness and we had a short talk on benefits of education, including banking and financing and family troubles. They were all pretty aware on all counts and were not shy from discussing any issue. I met Urmila ji #1 here. She has been part of Navjyothi for a very long time and is a foot soldier, recruiting more people going from one house to another, spreading awareness traveling on foot/bicycle everywhere, firefighting issues and spreading the cheer.

The journey continues:

We went forward on the exciting venture. The poor car seemed like it was having its share of joys and sorrows. It would jump and make us jump even higher till we touched the ceiling as it said hello to the bumpy roads. At other times it would say hello to the winds, which had traversed the green fields and carried their scent everywhere with the pollen. Dusty and rustic, fitting into the setting, the car reached a hut. We were to witness and be part of an SHG (self-help group) meeting now.

SHG meeting

Objective views:

Around 7-10 women, aged 30-60 years old were present at the meeting. One of the women present there was a Govt. healthcare scheme called Asha (a govt.scheme) worker. Urmila ji #2 who spearheads the SHG initiative was present here. SHGs are self help groups formed by a maximum of 20 women. It is a micro-credit system, wherein, women save around Rs.50 every month and deposit it. They maintain a register wherein all entries are made. I saw the register. SHG meetings also serve as nucleation centers for women to discuss their domestic, health, and other problems with each other. There are 30 such SHG groups in the project. Urmila Ji #1, Urmila Ji #2, Nandlal Bhai, Suresh Bhai and Mahesh Bhai have gone from one house to another to spread such awareness and encourage women to form such groups. From the women who were present at the meeting, they said they looked fwd to come to these meetings. I asked them what problems they face – didn't get much of a reply. They said a lot of times they get involved

in sorting out domestic issues but as a group they are able to put pressure on the males and get justice.

IDEA: A regular quarterly/bimonthly SHG newsletter, written and circulated by SHG members, which can be circulated in all SHG nuclei and/or at other areas beyond that will be a very strong recruitment and empowerment tool. It will help spread awareness, spread the virtue of education, create confidence in women and reduce the footwork for the Navjyothi foot soldiers and generate employment. Perhaps we can catalyse such a process by thinking of a photocopier and information transfer. This was discussed with Urmila Jis and Nanadlal Bhai. They were positively interested in this.

Subjective views:

The women trusted each other a lot. Not all of them knew how to write or make an entry in the register. But they all had a thorough understanding of the process of an SHG working. Not all of them were confident. Some who were already exposed like Urmila ji, the govt. healthcare worker and the younger women were more open to talk about their issues.

The journey continues:

Tired and exhausted but enthralled we reached the main Asha school building which is also used when someone comes over to stay. I met Nandlal Bhai here. Having refreshed ourselves with a cup of chai, we went to the terrace. All the senses were satiated, you could see the goats and cows in the fields, a group of kids dressed in rags playing around, hear the birds chirping and feast on the colors of nature – brown mud, green fields, blue sky, smell the fresh air and the food being cooked in the kitchen. We ate on the terrace sitting on chairs and charpais. Soft leavened rotis with sabzi and dal. Life was good. Soon discussions ensued with Nandlal Bhai, the village Pradhan – youngest man to hold the position so far, Suresh Bhai and Mahesh Bhai. There were interesting issues panned from Govt. policies on paper and in practise, the inception of Navjyothi project, the health issues in the area, money given by the Govt. to each district – allotted as Rs.10,000 by the Govt. – only Rs. 5000 was being received by the Pradhan. Papa took a photocopy of this document. We discussed navjyothis schools, the coke project and water rights movement.

It was 6 pm. We had to rush to go and visit the night schools. The journey now continued on two bikes. I rode the bike with Nandlal bhai and papa with the Pradhan. The sun was setting, you could feel a part of the setting with the bke ride – a very exciting event on Indian roads from Bollywood romances to the villages.

Night School 1:

Objective views:

Three sets of students (informally divided like classes) sat on mats on dusty ground admist open fields. A thick fog was beginning to envelop as twilight was advancing, so it was becoming increasingly difficult to see individual faces of the kids. Three were 4/5 teachers of around 25-40 years of age. All of them were males. The battery powering the lamp was dysfunctional; hence there was no light for these kids this evening. All kids were of age groups 7-15. The girls:boys ratio was nearly 1:1. There were no toilet facilities. The kids would go back home in absolute dark conditions on their own. It is deemed safe in the area. The students were very confident and

recited many poems – very patriotic in nature. They were happy to be able to come to school. Didn't have any complaints. They said they study hindi, English and maths.

Subjective views:

A happy lot of students was present at the school. Their dedication was astounding as there was no light at the premises tonight, and it was really dark. One could not even see faces clearly. Despite a clear lack of adequate facilities, they were gathered together in high spirits and attentively paying heed to their teachers. They were very disciplined. On being asked one of the girls claimed she wanted to grow up to be a police officer so she could bash people who do wrong things. A small boy was very fond of reciting and singing. He recited many poems and generated a lot of enthusiasm from the kids. They said they love stories. It was heartwarming. Papa donated a certain amount for the electricity problem to be fixed for now. We headed back to the bikes ready to go to the second NFE (non-formal education) center.

The journey:

Headlights on, fog surmounted, darkness surrounding, open fields around...an amazing wind surfing ride on the bikes started. Nandlal bhai and myself had varied conversations at this point. At other times, we would be just talking to the raging wind. Soon soaked in dust and hair wired on top of head in all directions, we reached the second NFE. Papa had already reached here.

NFE2

Objective views:

A family had gladly given a room on top of their humble abode to serve as the premises for this one. We climbed the twisted flight of stairs and climbing them was a feat of sorts in itself. A small room crammed with around 25-30, 7-17 year old boys greeted us. Their teacher, Mr. Shiv Sunder, was writing on the blackboard. There was a collection of books on one of the shelves built in the wall – this was their library. Two fluorescent bulbs hanging from the roof lighted the room. One of the boys read a story to the entire class from a book here. It was about a rat and dowry. The students learnt maths, hindi and English. They could write their names. They showed us their notebooks. By and large their handwriting was very neat. They recited poems and asked about our whereabouts. One of the students was physically challenged in many ways including his speech. He was asked to recite a poem by Mr. Shiv Sunder. As he stood, his pants almost fell and his speech was affected. All the students were jeering but this young lad went on with absolute confidence and silenced them all with his presence. He was a celebrity of sorts for the teachers, as he had testified in courts for some family feud already. However, he was a student to be jeered upon by the students. He could hold on his own. Papa applauded him specially to encourage him by giving moolah so sweets could be bought for the kids on behalf of this child! There was a strong sense of camaraderie amongst the students, as older ones would help the younger ones. They liked hindi and reading stories. It was their fun time of the day.

Subjective views:

A zesty group of students. The teacher was very dedicated and took pride in his students. Seemed like a story from one of those books we read about as kids, where, a teacher burns the night lamp to spark the fire in his kids. All the students we had met so far appreciated the value of

education. A realization as to how easy it was for some of us was settling in. Digressing a bit, papa lauding that special chap was a study of sorts in itself. While it raised a few brows, it was special for that child whom all had jeered on. It reflected a lot about behavior in many contexts – perhaps one could do a PhD on this itself. Steering back to the school, learning here didn't seem tedious or burdensome for the kids. They seemed glad to be here.

The journey:

Hopping back on the now firing engine, we headed towards the third center. We couldn't see much, we could hear nearby dogs, cows, people and trucks. Out of the blue, we would be confronted by the glare of headlights from the monster trucks. I was definitely back home. I was worried about papa but he being his man, it was all good. Puffing and grunting, the poor bikes, I am sure now tired of us, parked us at the third school.

Third NFE:

Objective views:

The school was a big rectangular room (almost like a hall) with girls and boys between the age groups of 7-16 years of age. They had a blackboard and the strength of the students was around 25-30. The room was well lit with incandescent bulbs. Girls:boys ratio was close to 1:1. The students were curious to know about who we were and what we do. On hearing that papa was a doctor, one of the older students wanted to know how can disabled students study – if there were any government facilities or benefits such a child can look for. He told papa, he would come next day to meet him at the main students building where we were staying. He didn't come. The different thing about the students over here, was that they were very interested in dramatics. Two students, wanted to show a small skit – one sang a song on a drunkard and how it is harmful for the family, while the other enacted it through dance and facial expressions. Everyone was in peels of laughter as this amazing performance unfolded. The child who was enacting the play, loved to perform the part of the drunkard, wherein, he would turn in circles, walk haphazardly and then fall to the ground. After this the students told us about the harmful effects of drinking and how they try and convince their fathers not to drink but they don't listen. One of them had been able to convince his father to stop drinking. One of the girls sang a song for the entire class. They had a library too and studied Hindi, Maths and English. They recited tables as well. They wanted us to stay longer – Nandlal bhai told us a family was waiting for us – we should head out.

Subjective views:

The enthusiasm was contagious. It had been a very eventful day thus far but we weren't feeling as tired as we probably should be. The children were well rounded and very confident. They were curious. Some of them came to night schools as they would be working in the day helping either in the fields/taking care of the younger ones/ making banarsi sarees. The market for banarsi sarees was suffering because of the advent of power looms. The teachers and the students shared a very affectionate bond. Some of the problems were evident as the child asked about disabled children. Nandlal Bhai told us there was a Christian organization nearby for blind children from where they were able to get some help in this regard.

End of today, yet another morning:

It was the day after Eid. We were going to a Muslim family's place where a customary dinner was scheduled. A grandfather-like man welcomed us. He had worked with railways. Nandlal bhai and the work done by other co-ordinators in the village had crossed the barriers of age, caste, religion and he commanded respect from all. After having dinner, wherein, I was alone as I was vegetarian, we headed back to the Asha building. Nandlal bhai told me about certain cross-community family feuds he was asked to intervene in and solve. Such firefighting wasn't new for them. It was all like a collective family. We went to sleep mulching and assimilating all the experiences. We saw a documentary on the Water rights movement against coke in mehandiganj and saw many research thesis on the same. It was almost 8am.

The Day school 1

Objective views:

5 classrooms, within the boundary of the main school, were adjoining the playground, covered with tin roofs and half-open to let sunshine come through to keep the students warm in the winters. There were 5 rooms in the main building made of concrete and stone, but the temperature in here is cooler in winters. There is a whiteboard, a TV system with a video/DVD player and storage space in here. The walls of the outside classrooms had pictures of national leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Mother Teresa and many more, painted by local artists. Every classroom has a blackboard. There was also a library organized in racks with a register for documentation. There were clean toilet facilities for the children. There were 6 teachers -2 female and 4 male. Each class had 25-30 students. The girls:boys ratio was close to 1:1. The students bring in their own books and satchels with notebooks and stationary. They were taking an exam today – hindi, English, art were the main subjects of study. Science education was missing. The students loved clicking pictures with the camera. Even the youngest of the lot were eager to display what they had learnt. The students didn't have any complaints. **The teachers really wanted to have teacher training to enhance their teaching skills in accord with the students. On a meeting with teachers they mentioned they really wanted to extend the education for these kids upto 8th grade, when they can be more independent and make their way through a Govt. school much better. The students were also of the same opinion as expressed independently of the teachers. The students expressed a deep felt need for uniforms as it is a symbol of pride for them to have one.** (More on this is in discussion with Nandlal Bhai in train). **These were two ways where they wanted Asha Chicago to help them out.** All students start their day with a morning assembly session wherein they stand in lines, pray, perform a workout and then disassemble to their respective classrooms. This is conducted by the students themselves and monitored by the teachers. The teachers themselves were very committed to the students and didn't have any complaints. They use charts as well as aids to teach students. However, because of the open nature of the classrooms, they cannot be hung on the walls. While, I was interacting with the students and teachers, papa was hoisting health camp for these kids and giving them vitamin pills. The students were super excited to be checked up! There was construction going on at the second floor of the school building.

Day school 2:

Objective views:

A fifteen minute bike ride from the center. This school has no building or toilet facilities. They were using an abandoned Govt. Building earlier but after the Govt. has taken it for the purpose of

an anganwadi, the students sit outside in the open without any shelters or classrooms. The library for these students is inside a trunk which the teachers complained about. The students cannot readily see the books and hence the library is not as beneficial as it can be. A shelf with a lock would be needed. The students (around 80 total) were divided into 4 classes. They all were testing at the time. They study hindi, English, maths, art, science. There were 5 teachers – 2 females, 3 males). These students come from very poor backgrounds. They go out in the fields as there are no toilet facilities. This is a problem for the female students. The students sit on cloth mats in rows and study. There was no blackboard. They bring their own books and bags.

Two more vocational training centers:

I also got a chance to visit two more vocational training centers or kishori kendras. They were very similar in nature to the ones described earlier. A special incidence which requires mentioning, is that the villagers trust the teachers at kishori kendras for more than just sewing. This was evident as one of the teachers had gone to help a woman with an health issue when we arrived there. They also help resolve with family feuds. These are nuclei of multitudes of learnings.

The final stretch:

Having seen the workings of the project by and large, and having had loads of talks with Urmila ji, Suresh Bhai, the teachers, women at SHG, we visited a family which makes the banarsi sarres. Three huge handlooms were present with a very aged man, and a young man working behind them. The sarees were made of nylon thread with beautiful work on them. We bought a couple for a very cheap price relative to the urban market. Due, to the advent of power looms and other styles, the village had been hard hit as making banarsi sarees was a major source of income for many families. They even have folk songs based on the sound of the handloom. We headed to the city of Varanasi with Nandlal Bhai. There we boarded the train to Lucknow. En route I had a chance to have a detailed dialogue with Nandlal Bhai.

The dialogue with Nandlal Bhai:

The key issues targeted and brainstormed at this 6 hour long dialogue were :

1. **Shelter and Toilet facilities for kids at Harsos – day school 2.** There are logistical issues with building a shelter as the villagers object. So far the students being young have not expressed a problem with going to fields.
2. **Extending the teaching facilities till 8h grade:** The teachers and students are really keen on this as they enjoy learning here more than at the Govt. schools due to the student:teacher ratio over here being at 25:1 v/s 100:1 at Govt. schools; teachers being more attentive; and teaching being more interesting. Nandlal bhai feels that while this may be a short term solution, it defeats the long term goal of integrating the system with the Govt. and making them responsive. Perhaps having an unbiased third party which would conduct a survey of the various aspects of teaching (teachers, students, methodology etc.) by questionnaires and other methods to highlight the differences in quality would generate some response from all quarters.
3. **School uniforms:** The students were very keen on this. This was proposed in Asha chicanos budget earlier but declined as it was not considered important. We could either

find a private school tie up in the region and ask them to donate their used uniforms after they have been cleaned and repackaged. This is not completely in line with the beliefs in the region. The second way would be to get cloth donated, use the current strength of the 7 vocational training centers and get the uniforms made here. These can be either bought by the students for Rs.5/10 or funded by Asha Chicago – whichever deemed fit.

4. **School and SHG newsletter:** An in house newsletter by the students, of the students and for the students. An in house newsletter by the owmen of SHG to enhance education, communication and awareness. This also adds up to something substantial which can be measured and recorded in term sof progress and empowerment.
5. **Employment:** Perhaps taking up some ideas from Sreenevasan – AID saathi vellore project in terms of vermiculture, green marriages, and employment generation.
6. **Teacher training program:** The teachers would like it if someone could ocme over, interact with them and the students, observe them and then provide a teachers training program in accord with the needs of the situation.
7. **Library facilities at Harsos:** A shelf /rack to have a better management and utilization of the library at Harsos.
8. **Book drive:** Students expressed a huge interest in various books. This is not limited to books in hindi. They use the library very actively. Local book drives would be helpful.
9. **Project partners:** Since various asha projects can benefit from each other – tying up or picking ideas from nearby projects adds to the knowledge and resource base.
10. **Communications:** Having regular communications and site visits is very important for smooth functioning and understanding of these projects.
11. **Community development:** Propelling the RTI, NREGA movement and awareness movement fwd with marathons and rallies – something they are already deeply involved in.