

Site Visit Report of Nari Gunjan

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Visiting Nari Gunjan was special for me having associated with the children and the project for more than a year. I was specially excited to meet Sudha ji, who is a social activist and very well known in the community for fighting for rights of musahars specially women and children. Nari Gunjan runs two hostels for girls- one near Patna in Danapur and another one in Gaya. I had planned to visit the hostel in Danapur as it was closest to the major airport of Patna.

I came across the spirit of Nari Gunjan in empowering women in the area as soon as I landed in Patna. I was told by Sudha Ji that an auto-rickshaw would pick me up at the airport and drop me at the hostel because of it being in an area far from the main city. I wasn't however expecting a female driver for my ride. It was pleasantly surprising me to see a female auto-driver come up to me and escort me to her rickshaw, because rickshaw driving is an overwhelmingly male dominated occupation. We started talking about Nari Gunjan and Sudha 'di' and she told me how Sudha ji had helped her since her childhood, help her get on her feet as a bread-earner in house even when opposed by the community, her own family and the auto-rickshaw union.

As soon as I reached the hostel, I was greeted with a welcome song by a group of girls some of whom were singing and some of the others who were playing drums. Their confidence and vigor in welcoming me was very impressive. I recognised some of them as children I had talked to before on video calls from Aavishkaar. They told me about their hostel and their daily routine which included morning prayers, exercises, school, food and other activities.

I waited for some time in the office where I was able to talk to the treasurer of Nari Gunjan and a volunteer who had come for an internship as part of her curriculum at Tata Institute of Social Sciences. They told me more about Nari Gunjan's day to day activities at the two hostels and in their community work in the area with Women and Children.

While I waited, the whole hostel got together in a room upstairs for an exclusive interaction with me. It was told to me that these visits give the girls a chance to interact with people from a world outside their own and helps them develop confidence to face and ask questions. I was a little surprised at the arrangements that were made for such an interaction and a little intimidated by the prospect of facing around 150 children of ages 7-17. There was some respite in seeing familiar faces in the children.

I interacted with them alone for almost half an hour where we discussed the activities they do at the hostel, parts of Bihar they were from, the classes they studied in, their favorite extra-curricular activities, etc. In turn I was impressed by their confidence in asking me questions about my life in US and my research. Some of them showed interest in pursuing science as a career after this interaction if given a chance.

In some time, Sudha ji arrived and the energy of the room raised quite a bit even after her busy day through the community. We talked for a couple of minutes and then set our chairs aside for a show by the girls. They had prepared a show of about 20-25 minutes in which they showed the physical skills acquired at the center, including Karate, and ade some difficult human formations such as a bicycle, a lotus, etc. Their performance was one of the best I'd ever seen and I've included some pictures from the performance below. Soon after the performance, Sudha ji moderated a short discussion between me and the girls which was focussed on encouraging them to continue their studies and not reel under the pressure of getting married by their parents. It was heartening to see them sing 'O Ri Chiraiya' which is about a girl child in sync before they left.

I finally discussed the immediate challenges faced by Nari Gunjan, where Sudha ji mentioned their recent major cut in donations due to sudden death of a benefactor. She thanked Asha for Education for supporting Nari Gunjan for financial help with Aavishkaar camps. While I was leaving, the girls were praying before finally going to bed.



During interaction with girls at the hostel

Link to video of their karate demonstration:
<https://www.facebook.com/ashapurdue/videos/1543190749084050/>