Sangamam Rajatalab Visit – 27th and 28th Feb 2023

(by Rajaraman Krishnan – volunteer Asha Chennai)

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I am Rajaram, a volunteer of Asha Chennai. Komalavalli, the project steward for the Sangamam Rajatalab project and I visited the project area. Asha India Conference was also taking place near Varanasi at the Asha Centre in Kaithi from Feb 24th to 26th. Two of our teachers from the Sangamam Rajatalab project, Ali and Ajay, presented the project to the Asha volunteers on the 24th. Several of the other Asha chapters and projects wanted to incorporate Asha Kanini and CS curriculum into their work.

We decided to also visit the Rajatalab schools at this time. We stayed near the Harischandra Ghat and everyday the project coordinator, Suresh Rathour, came to pick us up. Suresh had a wedding in his close family on March 5th and was a little busy during the time. However we managed to visit the places we needed to. This was my second trip to these schools after my previous visit in Oct 2021. We chose to visit the newer schools which we had not visited the last time. Of the 9 schools that we are supporting, we managed to visit 5 of them. We visited Jagatpur and Gangapur on the first day. We then had a teacher meeting for a couple of hours. On the second day we visited Harduttpur, Bangalipur and Mehandiganj. Note that all of these schools are in the Arajilines Block of Varanasi District.

General Notes about the Schools

Here are some general points that were found to be the situation in all the schools.

Note that I do not know Hindi. I travelled with Komalavalli who knew good Hindi. And ofcourse our coordinator Suresh Rathour and our teachers at the schools could help me with the translations.

<u>Performance of the Schools</u>

The oral assessments we conducted in April 2022 and Oct 2022 showed that the children in our UP schools were doing far better in Hindi than the Tamilnadu students were doing in Tamil. The performance of the children in Maths was similar. The performance of the Tamilnadu children was much better in English. After seeing the results, I wanted to check if the children really knew Hindi much better. Largely that was confirmed during this visit. In Gangapur we saw the oral assessment being conducted. We saw the 1st std children's Hindi level at Bangalipur which was otherwise just an OK school. The children were indeed much better in Hindi that what I have found in terms of Tamil knowledge in children in Tamilnadu. If anything I found that the children were also better in Maths.

There were also some factors that explained this a little bit. The places we were visiting we part of Prime-Minister Modi's constituency. Because of this, the schools consistently had good infrastructure (adequate rooms, proper compound wall, good black or even green boards in the rooms etc.) and adequate number of teachers (far in excess of the required 30 students to one teacher ration mandated by the RTE act). From what the HMs told me, this is not the case in most of the rest of UP.

Further we have selected well performing schools that can allocate a room for us to setup a computer lab. This is further selected the best schools in the block. Two of the schools we visited Jagatpur and Harduttpur mentioned that they are among the top 10 schools in the block (with about 180 schools).

Support from other NGOs

One of the standard questions I asked all HMs is whether they had support from any other NGOs. Most of them had support only from one other NGO, Nanhi Kali. Nanhi Kali works with some girls either before the school starts or after school hours. They work in the school premises. From the description given by the schools, it doesn't seem to be viewed as a support for the school. It doesn't seem to be helping in improving education by much either. It is only serving some 20% of the weaker girls. I do not think they are using the tablets, Mindspark etc. that are mentioned in the website. Anyway, even if they do, self-learning through technology is especially unsuitable for remedial education. Self-learning with technology is much more suitable for a gifted child kind of program. I am not sure what the intention is.

Reception for Asha Program

All the schools uniformly welcomed Asha's support. The children enjoyed learning computer science. While we didn't talk to parents, the HMs and the teachers said the parents also welcomed the program. The teachers and HM were happy that their children were getting to learn computers and also that there is a dedicated teacher who was assigned to the school who was qualified and was teaching a proper curriculum. In most schools we had put up a computer lab. That they school had a computer lab was seen as a matter of pride. With enrolment pressure (because of competition from private schools) , computer science education and having a computer lab in the school was something they can proudly mention at the time of canvassing for admission. Most of the schools have been able to increase their enrolment after the introduction of Asha computer science education. This was not that different from more urbanised areas of Tamilnadu where the school were facing competition from private schools.

Assessment

One aspect of the Asha support which was not welcome is conducting assessment for their children. Asha conducts oral and written assessments for all children in class 1 to 8. Oral assessments are held in Maths, English and mother tongue (Hindi in this case) and written assessments are held in Maths and English. Their standard objection was that we are only teaching Computer Science. Why are they assessing the school in regular subjects which are taught by the govt teachers? In TN the main concern will be that we will share the result with the higher officials and create problem for the HM. In UP, the concern they expressed was something I had not encountered in TN. They felt that the results will be used to show the govt schools in bad light and push for the privatisation of education!!!

I reassured the HMs that Asha firmly believes in govt schools and our intention was only to help improve the education in the govt schools. I explained to them the purpose of our assessments.

1. In conjunction with the sociological data we gather the assessment performance provides us a good understanding of the external factors that affect learning outcomes. For eg. Children whose parents are not educated do not do well in studies. Children who are underweight/stunted do not do well. Schools with poor attendance struggle with all children.
2. These help us device programs like Arogyam, libraries/activity centres in the evening. We have a history of doing more for schools that do badly rather than blame them for poor performance.
3. Written assessments show the gaps in learning. Or the bridges that most schools/children struggle to cross. In Maths Place value, word problems, different presentation of familiar sums (eg. 3 + __ = 5 instead 5 – 3 = ___). In English, sentence structure, sentence formation etc.
4. These help us shape our education programs like introducing KaradiPath for teaching English, selecting/distributing Maths kits (Ganitmala, base-10 blocks, abacus etc.), selecting/distributing English kits (ELF kits from Eureka books) etc.

These seemed to have reassured the teachers. And most of them were OK with our assessments being conducted at their schools.

Other Aspects of School Functioning

Rajatalab is located about 20 to 25 Kms from the main Varanasi town. At one time (for eg. When I visited it first in 2004 or 2005) it was considered a rural area. Now a major highway runs through most of our supported schools. These are clearly semi-urban or peri-urban areas. These reminded me of the schools I was visiting in Guduvanchery area near Chennai and not our rural schools in Thiruvallur, Thoothukudi etc. Only schools which felt a little rural was the schools in Bangalipur.

Most of the schools had Siksha Mithras in addition to the regular teachers. I believe they are provided for primary classes in lieu of filling vacancies with regular teachers. The Siksha Mitras were also qualified teachers (with DTEd, Bed etc. and also often cleared TET). They are paid a salary of Rs 10000 per month which is far less than the starting salary of a regular primary teacher which will be more than Rs 25000. Further Siksha Mitras do not get promotions etc. They are also not considered govt employees for pension etc. Further they are considered contract employees and do not have any job security. Tamilnadu is also in the process of bringing in such lower paid teachers to fill vacancies.

Another interesting thing UP was doing to reduce the costs was that primary schools with have an Head Master or Mistress only if the strength is greater than 150. Otherwise they will only have an acting or incharge HM. i.e. The salary increase for HM will not apply to incharge HMs. So some of the schools we visited had only acting HMs. This is not the situation in Tamilnadu.

I thought "Ennum Ezhuthum" which translates to "Numbers and Letters" was a uniquely Tamilnadu program for improving education post-Corona. It introduced more activity based education focussed on basic literacy and numeracy for classes 1 to 3. I learnt that this in there all over India. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy for classes 1 to 3, the Jagatpur HM mentioned is there all over India and it was practiced in all the schools in UP as well. Most of the schools have a Maths kit "Elementary School Maths Learning Kit" provided by government. This has the standard Maan cards, base 10 blocks, various shapes etc.

PS Jagatpur

Class 1	35	Head Mistress: Ms. Karuna Pandey
Clsss 2	27	No of Teacher: 7 (incl 2 Siksha Mitras)
Class 3	18	% of children in Private School: 60%. Only 40% in govt school.
Class 4	20	Had 1 comp before Asha. Doesn't work. Have 1 SmartClass
Class 5	32	with big screen TV.
TOTAL	132 children	

The school HM seemed like a very motivated teacher. She was very happy with our support. They did not have an extra room. But they were hoping to get one soon and give that for Asha to setup a computer lab. Right now our teacher Araman was managing with just his laptop. When we asked her what other help she wants from Asha, she gave a very good suggestion. She wanted us to have something like a textbook showing the curriculum for each class so that they are aware of what the children are / ought to be learning and also it will convey to the parents that our computer science curriculum is something serious.

Besides Nanhi Kali, the school had reeived some materials for disabled children from ADRA and kits for teaching English from Sampark Foundation. When we asked he what else the school needs, she mentioned RO water purifier, SmartClass etc.

We visited class 5 where Araman was teaching. He was teaching conversion between fractions and decimals. He wasn't using the computer today. We talked to the children afterwards. They were playing various games in GCompris, tuxmath etc. They were familiar with Asha Kanini. They all liked learning computer science.

Then I conducted some activities for them to see their knowledge of the four operations. In a bigger class the problem is always that there will be a few bright kids who will be able to answer my questions. So it is more difficult to arrive at the average level of the children. This class was the same. There were a few kids who gave all the answers and about half the class didn't open their mouth. Here again the HM seemed keen to learn from what we were doing.

Then the HM gave us a shawl and we took a couple of group photos with all the teachers.

CS Gangapur

Class 1	45	Head Master: Mr. Arvind Singh
Clsss 2	48	Asst HM: Pradeep Kumar Singh
Class 3	49	No of Teacher: 17 (incl 2 Siksha Mitras & 2 Instructors)
Class 4	53	Instructors for Art/Painting and Physical Education
Class 5	60	% of children in Private School: 50%.
Class 6	56	
Class 7	53	
Class 8	47	
TOTAL	411 children	

We directly went to the 5th std class where our teachers Ali and Araman were conducting oral assessment. The oral assessment was conducted in a bit of a haphazard manner. The children were not called one at a time. They hadn't managed the space for conducting it properly before the assessment started. I shared the feedback with our teachers. With the rest of the class I read out the numbers 4076 and 2103 and asked them to add it. Most of the children had trouble with place value. They were writing numbers like 476, 2000103 etc. I drew a rough map of India and asked then where Chennai and Tamilnadu were and where they were located. They had some trouble locating the places – even UP and Varanasi. They knew Himalayas, Bay of Bengal etc.

Then we went to the 8th std. We asked them a little bit about what they are learning in Computer Science. They were also doing some mouse/keyboard activity, playing games in TuxMath etc. Note that we have started working with this school only in Jan 2023. The 8th std children knew even less about Indian geography than the 5th std children! They also couldn't locate Chennai or Varanasi. They didn't even know the name Himalayas!

We then went to talk to the HM and asst HM. We explained the rationale for our assessment and also asked for the help of the HM Mr. Arvind Singh to explain it to other HMs. He is a leader of the teacher union in the Arajiline block. He agreed to help us. Space is a major problem at the school. The toilet at the school is also in bad condition. The school does not have a computer room.

Here too the HM gave us a gift and we took a group photo.

PS Hardutttpur

Class 1	38	Head Mistress: Ms. Poonam Chaurasia
Clsss 2	40	No of Teacher: 9 (incl 2 Siksha Mitras)
Class 3	44	
Class 4	58	
Class 5	37	
TOTAL	217 children	

Here too the school HM seemed like a very motivated teacher. She was very happy with our support. The enrolment at her school has improved. She also credited Asha's support for the same. They did not have an extra room. The schools were placed in a side of the HM's room and the computer class was being held there.

We visited the 1st std. I tried a few activities related to counting. Most of the children were able to count the number of fingers I was holding up (up to 10) and they were able to hold up fingers for the numbers I said. They were also able to hold up fingers in alternate ways. Then I had them counting the number of steps they took from one wall to the other. After some prompting, they were able to do it in lesser or greater number of steps by varying their step size. A few of the children struggled to synchronise their counting with their steps. The govt teachers, the HM especially, were keenly watching my activities.

We then went to the 4th std. I tried some standard self-introduction sentences. The children could answer basic questions like "What is your name?" "What class are you studying?" "How old are you?" etc. When I asked them to ask me the questions, they couldn't do that. The HM also has a standard format leave letter that she has the children write in English every time they have to take a leave! This itself is a good writing practice for the children. I played a simple variant of Simon says game. Children enjoyed themselves. The teacher in the class once again seemed keen to see what we were doing and learn from it.

We then went back to the HM's room to see our teacher Abhay teach the 5th std children. They were all playing some GCompris games. I asked Abhay if they can do things with text document. He said they could and we asked them to open a document and type the names of the students. Many of them struggled to type their names in English. Then I asked them to change the sizes of each of the names. Only one group could do that. Further we also noted that they were using MS Office. We asked Abhay to use OpenOffice.

PS Bangalipur

Class 1	27	Acting Head Master: Mr. Jayprakash Singh Kashyap
Clsss 2	19	No of Teacher: 6 (incl 2 Siksha Mitras)
Class 3	21	% of children in Private School: Only a hand full.
Class 4	25	
Class 5	24	
TOTAL	112 children	

This was 2 or 3 Kms away from the highway and for the first time felt a bit like rural area. The school campus enclosed a big ground belonging to the Panchayat as well. They had also grown a lawn here and the place looked very nice. The currently did not have a room for the computer lab but were planning to allocate one as the new building was

coming up. The village's Panchayat leader also came to welcome us. He is a college mate of Suresh Rathour. We have very good support from the school as well as the village here. Most of the schools gave us very good snacks when we visited. Minimum of one fruit, one sweet, one savoury and one tea. At Bangalipur we were offered delicious malai-lassi in a mud cup which was just awesome!

The HM submitted a request for several things for the school. In particular they require repair work for the toilets.

After some snacks and talking to the HM and teachers we first went to the first standard. Our teacher Ayush made the children play some GCompris games to familiarise them with mouse movement etc. We were also interacting with the children. The children thoroughly impressed us with their Hindi reading skills. They could all read the 7 or 8 line Hindi stories hung on the wall there.

We then went to another class to interact with the 3rd and 5th std children there. I did a Geometry activity with the children. I asked the children to break a stick and make various shapes with it. The important part was to also ask them to make something that is not a square with 4 equal sticks and something that is not a rectangle with 2 pairs of equal sticks. Here again the govt teachers were observing my activities keenly. The children also enjoyed the activity but here again there were a few kids who gave all the answers but quite a few who didn't participate.

We once again received some shawl/gift from the HM and the Panchayat leader and took a group photo outside the school.

PS Mehandiganj

This was a large primary school with over 400 children. We went there with the express purpose of convincing the HM, Mr. Radhamohan Singh, about out assessment. This HM was the person who was most resistant to the idea of having assessment at the school. There was also some difference of opinion related to using the Asha laptops for school official use. I explained the assessments to him and also explained our policies to him regarding the computers. That these remain property of Asha and are only being provided to the school for use by the children. He wasn't completely happy but accepted my reasons.

We then went to see the fifth standard kids at the computer lab. They had stayed back after the final bell to see us. There are 6 desktops and 5 laptops at the school and additionally our teacher's laptop. Therefore the children could really use the systems well. They were working on MS Office. Once again told the teacher there, Abhay, to stick to OpenOffice. Here the children had progressed a little further with the text document. They showed us what they have learnt. They all had some gifts that they had made with their own hand for me and Komalavalli. It was a very nice gesture and we appreciated it very much. We took photos with all the children before heading out.

Meeting with the Teachers, Our Observations and Feedback

On the evening of the 27th, we met with the teachers for a couple of hours. We gave them feedback about what we have seen in the first two schools. We also provided the feedback from the second day to Ali and Suresh. Our broad observations were the following,

1. We were glad to note the level of support for our programme at all the government schools. It doesn't seem like even assessments will be a problem going forward.

2. Given all the interest from other areas in UP and other Hindi speaking areas, we explained to the teachers here that we saw them as a nodal centre for these other Hindi speaking areas.

3. The biggest negative that we observed was that the teachers were not at all anywhere close to the curriculum in what they were doing in the schools. None of them were deeply into OpenOffice let alone programming etc. They needed to understand our curriculum better and try to pull forward the children to that curriculum. Sujatha who has joined the project as a co-steward was also there in the meeting remotely. She knows Hindi and played a part in designing the lesson plans for the curriculum in TN and would be well qualified to train the teachers in this regard.

4. There were some flaws in how they had organised the assessment. They need to be organised better. However we did not think this influenced the results in any way. The results seem to be an accurate representation of the situation at the schools.

On the whole we had a wonderful trip visiting these schools. We then returned back to Chennai on the 1st of March.