

Asha Samajik Vidyalaya Rajatalab & Lok Samiti site visit report

Location: Nagepur village, Rajatalab Tehsil, Varanasi District, Uttar Pradesh

Date: 23rd & 24th December 2021

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Context:

December 2021 was the period of rising COVID cases in India attributed to the omicron variant and there was a serious shadow of doubt on whether the school which had just been allowed to open in October would be shut down again.

The primary income generating activity in this region is agriculture with the area situated in the fertile Ganga River watershed. There's a good network of canals that brings water to communities situated away from the river. Another highly visible is the presence of many brick-kilns that dot the landscape. A large migrant labor workforce is employed in the brick-kilns and the laborers are primarily from outside the state.

Introduction:

Asha Samajik Vidyalaya located just outside of Varanasi city is a co-ed school with classes up to 8th grade. Nandlal Master has been instrumental in setting up and functioning of the school since it was started almost two decades ago.



Picture 1 – Staff of the school and women activists of self-help groups

Nandlal Master is also the founder and coordinator of Lok Samiti an organization that focuses on grassroots activism on various topics like women's empowerment, self-help groups, social and community issues in villages in the Varanasi district. The school also doubles up as a useful base for coordinating these activities.

COVID Relief Clinic:

During COVID when the school was shut down, it was also used as a base for coordinating COVID Relief work. A COVID Relief health clinic was still functional during my visit and the weekly clinic was scheduled to by mid-Jan 2022. The clinic had a good response and provided a vital lifeline to villagers in the surrounding villages who eagerly look forward to the clinic opening every Tuesday.



Picture 2 & 3 – COVID Relief clinic at ASV Rajatalab

School:

During the visit, I had an informal chat with school staff about how challenging it was to keep students connected to learning and accessible to learning materials during the shutdown. There was some level of instruction provided by various remote means like –

- Zoom video calls
- WhatsApp messaging
- Allowing students to take some learning materials home from the library

While the cellular network in the area and in surrounding villages is great, not every student has (or had) access to a dedicated electronic device to allow them to engage in scheduled remote learning over video. A good number of students families have one mobile per household that gets shared which limits the amount of screen time they can get. Also, families try to limit the amount of data used due to the associated costs. The library in the school provided textbooks and learning materials but this library is also open for membership for other children in the surrounding village who are not students in ASV thereby adding to the strain on the limited resources available.

It was good to see the school buzzing with activity and students engaged in active learning. I was able to tour around few different grades and interact with children of different ages.



Picture 4 & 5 – classrooms & computer lab at ASV

The school organizes English language classes over Zoom as the English instructors are not local to the area. It seems that the school has faced challenges in recruiting good English language teachers. Nevertheless, the remote model seems to be working well so far.



Picture 6 – English class in progress over Zoom

Library:

As mentioned earlier, the library in the school is frequented by students from other schools as well. The library stocks school curriculum books and books needed for preparing various competitive exams for higher grade students (e.g., IIT, UPSC, UP Police Exam Prep etc.)

There is no full-time staff at the library and that limits the operating hours. The library opens for a couple of hours every weekend to allow students to check out books. It is a small single room and can start to feel tight if more than 2-3 people are in the room. It can get quite crowded during any normal weekend operating hours.



Picture 7 – Library

Women's Self-Help Groups:

Lok Samiti is active in about 70 villages in Varanasi district by means of women's self-help groups that are organized and guided by a group of very motivated ladies. These women commute to

different village to bring together women from their respective neighborhoods to encourage spread of information, sharing of ideas, micro lending and issue-based activism and awareness campaigns. These groups enable women's empowerment, resolution of disputes, advocacy of rights while also serving an important social function of bringing women together that have common interests.

This group is also involved in production of detergent powder in one of the spare rooms at the ASV school. The washing detergent is retails at numbers significantly lower than what a consumer might pay for an equivalent purchased in the market. Selling the washing powder is a great way to create and maintain contacts in various communities Asha and Lok Samiti are involved in.

I was able to interact with a few women of one such self-help group meeting that was in progress in a nearby village that was about a 10 min bike ride from the ASV Rajatalab school.



Picture 8 – Meeting of the self-help group in progress

Sewing Centers:

The sewing centers are run with the aim of imparting some degree of vocational skill to adolescent girls or young women who have dropped out of formal education system due to societal, parental, or financial constraints. It allows women to learn a skill that will be valuable to them if they find themselves in a financially tough situation or it helps them take care of their families better by being able to provide for their own clothing instead of relying on more expensive options.

About 16 sewing centers are functional in various villages in the western part of Varanasi district. Each sewing center is modest and usually consists of a single room with 4-5 sewing machines (manually operated). In most cases the room for these sewing centers is offered by a local village benefactor or the gram panchayat office is used thereby saving rental costs. Anywhere from 20-30 girls or young women are trained at each center which barely allows for a few hours of actual sewing machine usage time for everyone. There's usually only one instructor at each center but some of the more advanced students are encouraged to take the lead to impart skills to the

newer students. Each sewing center maintains a handmade notebook or a manual that contains some lessons and samples of various pieces of clothing that the girls need to learn.



Picture 9 & 10 – Visiting sewing centers

I visited about 3 sewing centers in Benipur, Kardhana & Mirza Murad villages and noted that each of them only focused on teaching sewing of exclusively women's clothing only. Also, apart from noticing the obvious overcrowding at each center I couldn't help wondering how they would cope in the sweltering summer heat in those small rooms. Few sewing related books at each center would also go a long way in speeding up their learning process.

My visit also coincided with the inauguration of a new sewing center in Khewali village.



Picture 11 & !2 – inauguration of a new sewing center in Khewali Village



सिलाई कढ़ाई कर लड़कियां बनेगी आत्मनिर्भर

सेवापुरी। ग्रामीण अंचल की किशोरियों और युवतियों को 'आत्मनिर्भर' बनाने के लिए सामाजिक संस्था आशा ट्रस्ट व लोक समिति के सहयोग से जनकवि धूमिल जी के पैतृक गाँव आराजी लाइन विकासखंड के खेवली में शुक्रवार को सिलाई कढ़ाई प्रशिक्षण केंद्र खोला गया। सिलाई प्रशिक्षण केन्द्र का उदघाटन रत्नशंकर पाण्डेय, व अक्षय भोले, ने संयुक्तरूप से फीता काटकर किया। इस दौरान मनीष पटेल ने सभी अतिथियों के साथ पौधरोपड़ करके पर्यावरण संरक्षण का संदेश दिया। समिति के



संयोजक नन्दलाल मास्टर ने कहा कि कोरोना महामारी ने गरीबों की कमर तोड़ दी है। लाक डाउन का सबसे बड़ा असर रोज कमाने खाने वाले दिहाड़ी मजदूर के परिवारों पर पड़ा है आर्थिक तंगहाली से परेशान महिलाओं को रोजगार से जोड़ा जा रहा है। महिला अगर स्वावलंबी बनीं

तो वे अपने परिवार की आर्थिक उन्नति का आधार बनेगी साथ ही उनके भीतर स्वाभिमान भी पैदा होगा। इसके साथ महिलाओं का स्वयं सहायता समूह बनाकर उन्हें स्वावलंबी बनाने का प्रयास किया जा रहा है। मुख्य अतिथि पाण्डेय ने कहा कि सिलाई एक ऐसा हुनर है, जिससे लड़कियां और महिला घरेलू कामकाज के दौरान बचने वाले थोड़े से समय का सदुपयोग कर अपने और अपने परिवार का भविष्य बेहतर बना सकती हैं। कार्यक्रम का संचालन अनीता पटेल और स्वागत सोनी ने किया।

Picture 13 & 14 – Press coverage of the sewing center inauguration

Conclusion:

The team at Asha Rajatalab and Lok Samiti does a commendable job in running the school and various other initiatives while ensuring there's a separation between the education and non-education activities under respective organization's banner. Providing access to resources is the primary challenge of the school as evidenced by the number of students per shared resource be it a computer or books a sewing machine.