

Field Report

Gramya Sansthan - Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh

July 9th - 11th 2023



It was toasty 3pm outside the Varanasi Airport where I was looking for Bindu ji. I had never met her except for a chat conversation about my itinerary and arrival. Incidentally a discovery of clear profile picture on her social media, gave me a face to look for in the mélange upon arrival. Bindu ji was accompanied by Surendra ji who besides many things was our designated driver for the day. Our destination is Laltapur (ललतापुर), a village in Chandauli district, home of Gramya Sansthan, is about 110km from Varanasi [airport]; and with an average drive-time of 2.5 hour offered an opportunity to journey the history - replete with anecdotes, occasionally bordering folklore - from establishment, navigating the political, social and cultural maze, to current circumstances of the institution and the journey of its people.



Laltapur Village in-route to Gramya Sanathan office

Chandauli district, noted as a the “Rice Bowl (धान का कटोरा) of UP,” has been on the list of most backward districts in India [1]. Noted as one of 90 districts affected by Left wing extremism [2], the district had significant influence of MCC that popularized it as a Red Block in the institutional memory of the state, remanence of which can be found in the elaborate barricading of police stations, and now abandoned CRPF stations that still dot the terrain. Bindu ji arrived in the region in 1996 to investigate reported starvation death of [tribal] women; then working as a coordinator with the

Government, she for the first time came in direct contact with the realities and hardships plaguing the communities in the area never to turn back. Bindu ji's work and thereby Gramya's, while broad based ranging from advocacy to women rights, is significantly centered around education - specifically operating non-formal education centers for children in the region, and through education creating intervention opportunities addressing socio-economic challenges of the community.

Surendra ji arrived at Gramya in 1998 as an accountant only to outgrow his role into managing operations for the institution besides cultivating an intimate understanding of the cultural, social and political environment of the region. Neetu ji is equally tenured in the organization and manages all the field work, ranging from Government advocacy, women rights and engagement, and is the primary liaison with various local government departments and nodal offices. Surendra and Neetu along with Bindu ji are the coordinators that oversee Gramya and offers a robust second line of leadership in the organization.

After a pitstop at 4:15pm at Mugalsarai (मुगलसराय), officially renamed as Pt. Deen Dayal Upadhyay Nagar in 2018, referred to PDDU in short) for a delectable bowl of an arguably renowned Lassi (लस्सी), a quick break in the middle of forest on Chandauli-Naugarh (चंदौली-नौगढ़) road, and brief stopover to collect groceries for dinner, we eventually rolled into the Gramya Sansthan's campus. It was a hot, muggy gloaming by now with no lights in sight except for the office building where we are welcomed by Neetu ji and ushered into a room with a cot and a ceiling fan, which was to be my homestay for next two days. Monsoons besides being the lifeline for the

entire subcontinent, also bring a wide variety of winged creatures to life, who have an undeniable infatuation for lightbulbs besides leaving nasty bites, and it was decided to turn off all the room lights, and organize a tea jaunt in the hallway in front a small ancient table fan. The hallway offered a vantage point to survey the campus which has a large playground the size of a football field separating us from the school buildings diagonally opposite from us - the school buildings are three different structures [figure-1, and 2]



Figure-1, Gramya campus, as seen from my homestay on the first floor of the office



Figure-2, Gramya school buildings, the newer two story building on the left and the older classrooms in the middle.

the smallest being the thatched mud house where Gramya started, adjoining which is a newly constructed two storied building followed by the a series of three class rooms. The far end of the campus has a series of toilets and spigots for drinking water.

Day-2: Fields

We had an early start to the day with a quick breakfast prepared by Neetu ji. We had decided to start the day with a visit to the education center in Amdahan/Charanpur, followed by a stopover at Basauli and finally a hike to Kalhadiya village, which is both the youngest, and the most secluded therefore challenging, center in operation. We were to return before 4pm to meet with the Gramya team in Laltapur for an open interactive session.

Children who had been trickling into the school since 7am were now streaming in small batches by the time when we pulled out of the campus on our way to Amdahan (अमदहॉ). Suendra ji was at the wheel with Bindu ji and myself riding pillion, Neetu was to join us at Amdahan. It took us about 30 min to reach the first Gramya education center. Operational since 1996, Amdahan/Chandauli is an primary education center with 90 children and 2 teachers, Dilip Kumar and Rama, at helm ever since [see Figure 3-8] Whilst most children are at grade-1, divided into three groups by learning levels and proficiency. The infrastructure at the center can be best described as rudimentary; a large cluster of 1st graders were divided into groups, stationed under a large banyan tree sitting on plastic sheets practicing hindi writing on their slates, a smaller batch was engaged under a thatched roof on mud & stone pillars in a science lesson conducted by Rama using an overused chalkboard placed against the cracked wall of the adjoining thatched roof mud house that contained a cluster of students. With minimum possible infrastructure, Rama and Dilip constantly shuffle and divide time between different groups that switch between group activities, problem solving to self study. I spent some time interacting with the enthusiastic students in Rama's class who were learning about animate vs

inanimate things and their distinguishing features. Rama is clearly a dedicated and resourceful teacher who has managed to keep his pupil engaged, attentive and eager despite of being overstretched with a clear lack of resources at his disposal.



Figure-3, Rama in the background using the blackboard for a social science class under the thatched roof structure



Figure-4, panoramic view of the Amdahan center



Figure-5, Rama



Figure-6, grade-3 student indoors the Amdahan center



Figure-7, grade-1A students in the open air school under the tree



Figure-8, Grams instructor with grade-1 students at Amdahan center

It was 9:45am by the time we reach Basauli (बसौली) center. There are 40 students with a single teacher, Jayprakash who has been with Gramya for over a decade (since 2002). Basauli center - operating in a cramped room with thatched roof - resembles Amdahan center in every possible manner [see Figure 9]. The temperature was already soaring outside and environment inside the room was muggy and dark. The children despite being categorized by learning levels, 3 students from grade-2, 4 from grade-4 and another 4 students from grade-5, they weren't organized in any particularly manner due to lack of space. A group of young children were engaged with threading the beads - a learning tool for counting - while some fiddled with the hand made flash cards. The center seems in dire need of expansion that will help organize the children in groups from the melange that Jaiprakash seems to be struggling to sort and shuffle. Despite



Figure-9, Jaiprakash outside the Basauli center

the clear lack of resources, the children look alert, eager to learn, and Jaiprakash somehow is able to keep them engage. After a brief conversation with Aanchal, and Neha from grade-2 [see figure-10], interacting with 1st grader(s) [see figure-11], we evicted the already cramped room and walked back to our car and headed towards Kalhadia.



Figure-10, children at Basauli center



Figure-11, grade-1 student at Basauli center

We passed the last mile Government primary school in Pandi village on our way to Kalhadia (कल्हड़िया), which is on the far side of the forest tract interrupted by a seasonal river rendering access difficult if not impossible during monsoons. There is no road, except for a taxing 2.5km hiking trail that leads to this small village of roughly 100 forgotten tribal citizens [see figures on page-15]. Cloud cover offered respite from the scorching heat of the sun, and we reached the perimeter of the picturesque village by 11:40am. A short walk, mostly flat walk brought us to a cluster of mud thatched huts surrounded by the green fields and mountain ranges at the distance painted green by the impending monsoon rains. Taking a right from the brings a large Peepal tree into view with a small thatched structure with a yellow canopy in the foreground - a newly constructed structure by the community to offer some protection from the impending rains. It is the peepal tree that is the site of the first and only school Kalhadia has [figure-12]. With 23 first generation eager students and one teacher, this school is a result of adamant demands of women of the Kalhadia village who insisted with Gramya to start a school for this children.

The students are organized into two batches - a small group of relatively older cohorts were sitting closer to the bole facing the chalkboard leaned against a plastic chair engaged in solving division problems [figure-16], and a band of excitable kids organized in a U facing a small chalkboard leaned against a pile of mud bricks trying to solve simple addition puzzles [figure-13, 14]. Surendra, who is fantastic with children, engaged the latter in a counting game which besides acting as an ice breaker helps gauge the diverse learning levels of children [see figure-15] -

some children were comfortable at multiplying single digit numbers (using finger counts or tally marks) while others clearly struggled at basic math. The children, nonetheless are eager to learn, and quick to adapt when offered counting techniques. The school clearly is in need of another teaching hand which is constrained by lack of financial assistance besides the taxing remoteness of the village making teacher retention a challenge.



Figure-12, approaching the open air school of Kalhadiya, (left to right) a parent observing his ward, Surendra ji, students, gramps volunteer, a village elder (in foreground). Group on grade-1/2 students can be seen on the right against the chalk board.



Figure-13



Figure-14



Figure-15



Figure-16

I left our young friends with Surendra's accounting fingers [pun intended], to meet the smaller group practicing division puzzles with their teacher [figure-17]. This smaller group of older cohorts, some beyond their teens, seems farther along their learning levels. Solving division puzzles on the chalkboard quickly turned into a group exercise, with supportive crowd offering reassuring advice, and sympathetic [words of encouragement]. The sense of pride for their ward attending school is quite palpable along with admiration for the school. A few village elders congregated around the wooden cot under the tree which began to resemble a meeting place, a chaupal (चौपाल), and we are presented with a plate full of freshly made Khoya (dried & evaporated milk solids) sprinkled with granulated sugar (खोया और चीनी) with a pail of fresh water. A brief interlude over the refreshment



Figure-17, maths class with parents in the background observing their ward.



Figure-18, a member of the community pointing at the dry bore well and crisis of potable water in the village

and conversation with the community members, revealed the water crisis plaguing the area [3].

The village has no viable ground water sources; two dry borewells (a piped hole bored into the ground used with a submersible pump to pull water out of the ground) are reminders of the bleak situation. The only source of water is a nearby seasonal, rain water fed, stream besides an occasional water tank provide by the panchayat office that the village women fetch water from; lack of which often makes the entire village go hungry for days on end. Surendra and I took a short walk to the stream



Figure-19, the only freshwater stream in the area littered with plastic waste.

which incongruously was littered with the plastic waste - sachets of soap, and detergents - product of urbanization that have managed to pollute the only water source of a forgotten village [see figure-19]. I requested organizing a cleanup of the only source of potable water with the community. We made an impromptu decision to install a waste basket at the hike trailhead leading to the river stream, and to engage students against littering, and plastic pollution. The cloud cover dissipated as we hiked back

from the Kalthadia exposing us to the scorching sun, as we burned away the calories I got a bring teaser into the harsh living conditions of the

community. We drove back to Laltapur in relative silence, recovering from heat as well as the taste of abject apathy.



Road to Kalhadiya, the yellow colored canopy is a plastic sheet covering the thatched roof of a room the villagers constructed in preparation for the impending monsoon rains. The large peepal tree in the background is the current site of the school.



In-route to Kalhadiya

It was nearly 4pm by the time we reached the Laltapur and the place was teeming with activity in preparation for our meeting. After a quick lunch break we congregated in the meeting room where I joined Bindu ji, Surendra, and Neetu at the head of the assembled staff of 17 teachers, resource workers and volunteers. We went around the room with a round of introductions followed by an open dialogue. Unsurprisingly, the foremost concern from the staff, particularly the teachers is delay in salaries - meager as they are, the salary drawn from Gramya is the only source of income for many - lack of which has caused acute hardship. Most teachers haven't received any salaries for over a quarter due to delay of funds from Asha for Education. I apologized for the delay, with a reassurance to accelerate crediting the pending dues, as well as reinforcing that a delay in funding is merely an aberration.

“ Teachers like Rama, Jaiprakash, Ganesh, Tribhuvan and many others work with meager resources in a challenging environment - engaged beyond teaching - in broad based liaising with the community and it is paramount that they be timely paid their well deserved wage. It is disheartening that a tenured teacher is forced to turn to moneylenders or seek personal loans because of non-payment of salary. It is my sincere hope that this report will be of some assistance in expediting the well deserved financial support for Gramya.

Our dialogue lasted about an hour and after Neetu ji had managed to thoroughly embarrassed me to pose for pictures, we disbursed for a well deserved tea break. The evening was eventful with a group meal of Litti-Chokha - it took enterprising hands of Surendra ji, Neetu ju, along with Rama, Tribuvan, Ramavtar to prepare the local delicacy cooked over open fire. Curiously the entourage of the SHO (station house officer or office in-charge) of the local police station and his orderlies appeared for a meal. The

meeting room rechristened as dining hall is where we all ate our dinner before retiring for the night.

Day-3: Laltapur

Lalpur school is Gramya's biggest education center, and seems more familiar to a regular school of all the non-formal education centers. The center has secondary school grades with a library, a science laboratory, and a computer lab. I joined the students at the assembly which is organized under a giant Mahua tree, followed by a session of acrobatic display [see figure 20, 21]. As the students disbursed into their individual classes, Surendra and I navigated the classrooms meeting and interacting with children and teachers. I experiencing a lesson of Hindi Matra (vowel diacritic), an advanced Math class calculating square roots [figure-27, 28], and a language class where children were learning hindi alphabet with animated puppet-artist and teacher Ganesh ji [figure-25, 26].

I spent time observing experiment in the science labs testing for acidity of material using litmus paper, and a batch of students taking turns for a typing lesson on a computer. A single room on upper floor of the newer school building serves as a library, with a row of bookrack stacked against the wall on the far end of room, a science lab with a long table mounted with rack holding lab equipment - complete with beakers, microscopes, test tubes, and even a plastic skeleton missing a left wrist, a computer lab sporting twin set of computers (with backup power supplies) adorned with ceremonial swivel chair (colloquially computer chairs), and a cluster of sewing machines opposite the computer stations amongst the pile of boxed school bags and material. The room, clearly pushing the boundaries of

being a “multi-purpose room,” is used by groups of students taking turns to avail its various facilities. Outside this multi-purpose room is a multi-purpose hallway with a group of grade-3 students in a hindi language class as we made our way back down to meet the secondary classes in a engaging math session.



Figure-20, disbursing the morning assembly



Figure-21, acrobatics at the morning assembly



Figure-22



Figure-23



Figure-24, Surendra ji (left), with grade-1A teacher at old school building of Laltapur center.



Figure-25, Ganesh ji, using flash cards for a hindi alphabet lesson. Ganesh is an expert puppeteer, a singer artist besides being an expert teacher.



Figure-26



Figure-28



Figure-27, Student calculating square roots

I was reminded by Bindu ji of the time as I took a brief break at the water tank before making my way back to my room. We ate a quick brunch and prepared to head out to Varanasi. Bindu ji is headed to Lucknow for a meeting and has a train to catch while I have a 3pm flight to Delhi. I said goodbye to Bindu ji at the Train Station and made our way to the airport but not before making another stopover to meet Vallabhacharya Pandey, coordinator of Asha Trust (Varanasi/Kaithai) over tea near airport. At about 2:27pm, after 48 hours of whirlwind touring, and a ceremonial selfie [below] I bid adieu to Surendra ji and Neetu ji.



Left to right, Surendra Ji, Neetu ji, and myself outside the Varanasi Airport departure terminal

- [1] https://web.archive.org/web/20120405033402/http://www.nird.org.in/brgf/doc/brgf_BackgroundNote.pdf
- [2] <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=188075>
- [3] <https://scroll.in/article/1052002/how-india-made-it-harder-to-declare-a-drought>