

Gramya Sansthan



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Gramya Sansthan site visit report – January 2013

Neena Majumdar & Chandan Dasgupta – Asha Chicago)

Neena and Chandan (volunteers with Asha Chicago) recently visited some of the schools run by Gramya Sansthan near Varanasi, UP. An eye opening experience would be an understatement because what we saw and experienced has reminded us what dedication and willpower can achieve, even in the most adverse contexts.



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Gramya Sansthan was established in 1996 and is located in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It focuses on the most backward regions in the Naugarh district, about 80 Km from the city of Varanasi. The Naugarh district is divided into 10 villages. The Mooltaya tribe and Dalits (underprivileged caste) reside in these villages. Gramya's schools are located in remote areas that are not connected by any public transportation. The existing roads are in ruins and not fit for any kind of commute. Students either walk or ride their bicycles to their school.



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The area is also primarily recognized as a naxal area and hence people from the city generally avoid going there. Still, Gramya Sansthan has been forging ahead with its mission of spreading education to the most rural areas of Varanasi.



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Day 1 (Naugarh district - Gramya local office)

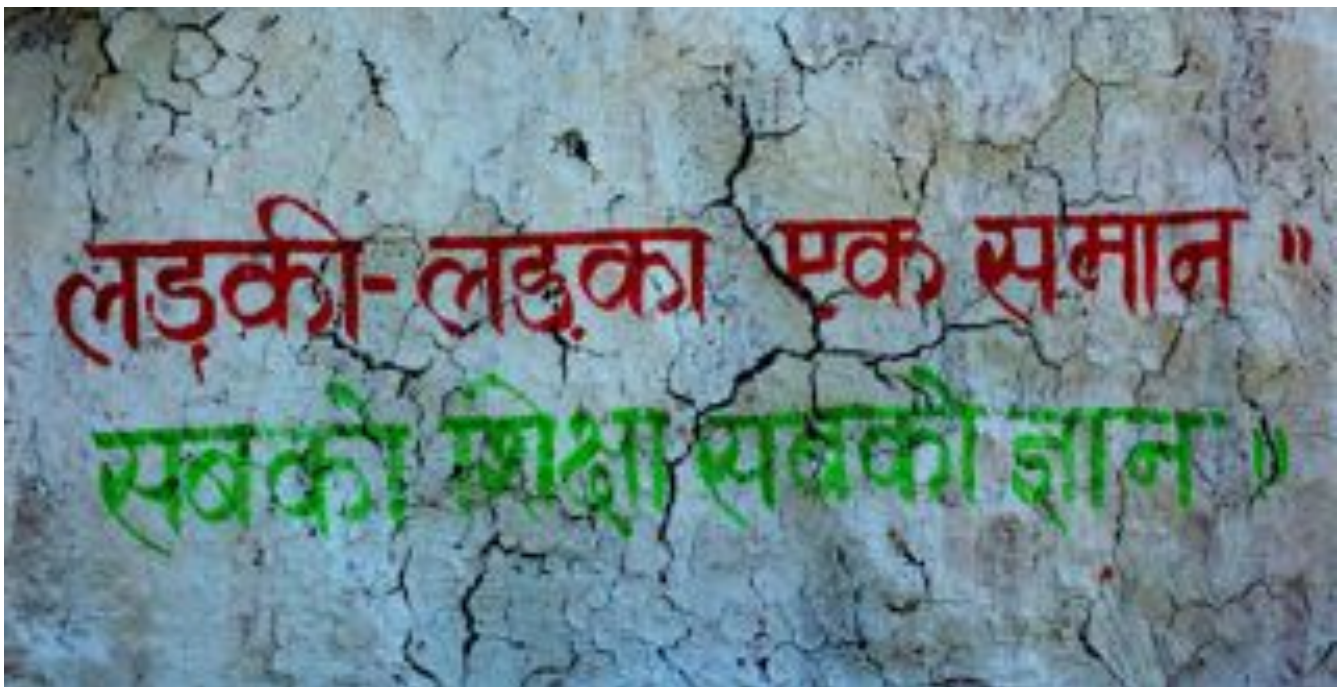
We reached Varanasi around noon and drove for about 2 hours to Naugarh district with Bindu ji and Surendra ji. We drove through barren, rocky and uninhabited land. There were no signs of any developmental work in this remote region. It was hard to believe that such expanses of land could exist just 2 hours away from Varanasi.

We were supposed to join a candle march organized by the Gramya students to peacefully protest against violence on women. This march consisted of slogan shouting and a walk of about 2-3 Km through the market at Naugarh.



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The aim of the march was to raise awareness against violent acts and encourage women to share their experiences (and also provide necessary rehabilitation support if necessary). The march was also attended by the local leaders and well covered by the local journalists. Gramya has been actively spreading the awareness that girls and boys have an equal right to education and that girls are no less than boys.



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Bindu ji, Surendra ji and Neetu ji then explained Gramya's approach to education. Instead of following the usual system of grouping students by their grades, Gramya has come up with the novel method of grouping students according to their knowledge. They (along with the school teachers) have come up with a set of criteria based on the standard state curriculum to evaluate a student and group them accordingly (e.g. criteria for putting students in Groups A1 is given below. It shows what the students should learn in 3 months, 6 months, and one year). This method is particularly useful in Gramya's context because it enrolls students from diverse backgrounds and academic abilities. Hence, this system makes it possible to divide the teacher's

attention according to the students' needs. Gramya also maintains portfolio for every child to track his/her progress. The child's progress in every subject is recorded every month in the portfolio. This is quite a time consuming process for the teachers but in the end it is hugely beneficial for the students because the learning progression of the child becomes easily visible.

गुरु-आदि कर्मिक पत्रिका	आचार्य पत्रिका	विद्यार्थी पत्रिका
<p>कविता —</p> <p>1) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>2) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>3) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>4) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>5) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p>	<p>कविता —</p> <p>1) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>2) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>3) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>4) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>5) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p>	<p>कविता —</p> <p>1) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>2) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>3) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>4) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p> <p>कविता —</p> <p>5) कविता को लिखने के लिए एक पत्रिका की शुरुआत की जाएगी।</p>

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Day 2 (Laltapur, Amdahan/Charanpur, Jhumria, Basauli Schools)

Laltapur: The next day we visited the Gramya school in Laltapur. We learned that students and teachers had come up with their own set of assembly prayers and drills which they practiced every morning before classes began. When we reached the school, the drill had just begun. It was led by a couple of senior students (who appeared to be from grade 9-10). We were fascinated by the coordination between the kids and the perfect discipline. Whether it was due to our presence or not, students (from little children in grade 1 to seniors) were doing the drill with full concentration.



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Amdahan: We then went to Gramya's school in Amdahan, Charanpur (about 15 km away from Laltapur). This school had one mud house as its main building. Most of the classes were held outside in the courtyard. Thus, class schedule was dependent on the weather conditions. Bindu ji informed us that most of the students here belonged to very poor families. They were very eager to learn but did not have the opportunity.



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We saw students sitting in small groups. The small groups represented different knowledge levels for different topics. There were two teachers for all these students. They went around from one group to another and made sure that no one was sitting idle. These teachers have been trained by Gramya to handle large number of students and also develop teaching tools that are appropriate for their students.



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One of the group was learning how to count using colorful clay beads. We learned that Gramya teachers had made those beads in-house to avoid buying costly educational tools from the market.



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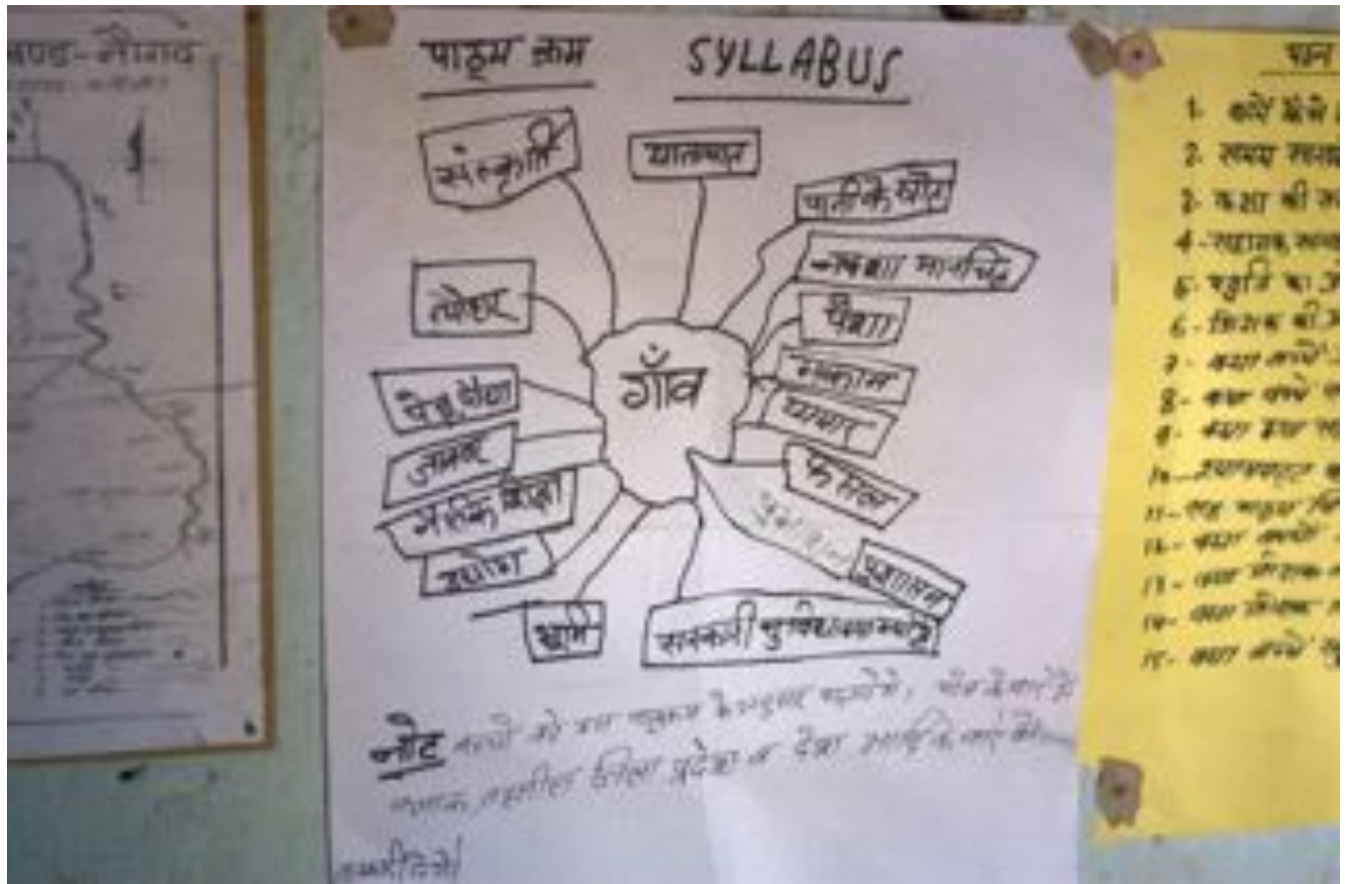
Another group was learning how to construct words from alphabets. They were using an embodied way of learning (an advanced and effective teaching technique that allows the students to role play and enact out what they are learning). Every student represented an alphabet (the alphabet was hung around the student's neck using a lanyard). When the teacher asked the students to make a word, they arranged themselves in a line by standing next to each other in the proper sequence to form the word. This technique helped the students realize that the sequence of various alphabets was very important for a word to form and have meaning. If the students made any mistake, the teacher encouraged everyone in the class to find out the mistake and then suggest a correction. Thus, every student was an active participant in the learning process and enjoyed the hands-on technique.



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We noticed that most of the students were wearing a school uniform. Bindu ji informed us that the parents, students and teacher at this center had themselves decided that the students should wear uniform and arranged them on their own without any financial support from Gramya. This reflected the seriousness and dedication of the villagers to get their children educated. We feel that the way in which the community has embraced the school also reflects Gramya's effectiveness in providing relevant education to the community. The syllabus

being followed by the teacher linked every subject with the thing that mattered to the kids and their parents most - their village. For example, when the students learned about plants and animals, they learned the content in the context of their village.



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Some of the student work was displayed on the classroom wall.



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[http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-95UZWe84t0s/USkblBmxf-I/AAAAAAAAHsU/CHK1TLrLqvo/s1600/eDSC_5561.jpg]

During lunch break, most of the students went home to have food and help with family chores.



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We were very happy to see that out of the 83 students in that school, 35 were girls.



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When we were about to leave, the students sang a couple of songs for us in their local bhojpuri language.



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Jhumria: We then visited the school in Jhumria. We saw classes being conducted inside two mud houses.



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One of the students studying in 8th grade was very curious and wanted to know more about what it is like in the US. Since they were preparing for their English exam, their teacher asked them to talk to us in English. We chatted with them about the life in US and what children here do. We were pleasantly surprised to see that the students were able to understand English very well and also speak fluently.



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The students' faces reflected the confidence and excitement that they had imbibed from Gramya's staff and teachers.



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Another group of students was learning Sanskrit and replying to questions posed by their teacher. We saw high female attendance in this school as well.



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On our way to the next school, some villagers greeted Bindu ji. She informed us that with Gramya's help some of the residents of that village had recently won their land back from the Forest Department. Some of the women had even been put into jails during that fight. These families had successfully started cultivating crops on the barren land and were able to sustain themselves and therefore they were able to send their children to the school.



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Basauli: We then visited the school in Basauli. This was the remotest of all the centers, practically in the middle of nowhere.



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The video below will help you get a feel of our walk to the Basauli school.

Situated in the middle of a forest, this was a one mud-hut establishment with no electricity.



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Students were sitting together and learning alphabets, arithmetic and language.



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Gramya teachers and staff had developed the teaching tools according to the needs of these students.



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We learned that most of the parents were gatherers from a tribal community and were illiterate. Their main source of livelihood was gathering woods and fruits from the forest and selling it in the local market. So, we were fascinated to see the excitement and gleam of hope in the eyes of the students in this small one room school.



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On our way back to Laltapur, Bachalal ji (a Gramya staff person) informed us that Gramya has been able to stop the practice of caste-based differentiation in the villages. Now students from all castes share their food and other items between each other without hesitation. Their parents have also learned to coexist and work together with people from other castes.

Laltapur: We then went back to the Laltapur center where teaching was in full swing. Four teachers were teaching approximately 200 children. There were groups of 30-40 students sitting

in an open field.



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One of the teachers was teaching addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. This was done using peas. A student was called to demonstrate in front of the group how the arithmetic operations worked. The teacher walked the students through the process while the student demonstrated their understanding with the help of the peas.

There was also a gender awareness workshop for girls on female hygiene and health going on in parallel in a separate classroom. The girls were listening to Neetu ji with full attention.



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We were again impressed by the fact that there were a lot of girls in the classroom. The fact that Gramya has been able to bring girls out of their homes and provide quality education shows the enormous impact it has had on the community.



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We then interviewed 5-6 female students and asked them about their background, what their parents did, what they were learning at the Gramya school and what they would like to achieve (one such interview is provided below). The students were camera shy but answered our questions confidently.

Day 3: Talking to a Gramya school alumni

On the last day, we spoke to a former student from Gramya's school. He is currently pursuing his Master degree in Hindi from Benaras Hindu University (BHU). He talked to us about his journey as a Gramya student and ways in which Gramya helped him reach where he is today. We found it really amazing that with Gramya's help, a student from a remote village had been able to dream big and make it to a top Indian university. We were also very happy to learn that he was still involved with Gramya's annual events and provided counseling support to other students currently enrolled in Gramya. This reflects the values and brotherhood that Gramya has been able to inculcate in the students and the local community.

Things that impressed us the most

Students -

1. Large number of girls attending Gramya schools regularly
2. Health and hygiene workshops were being attended enthusiastically by the girls as well as some of their mothers
3. Encouragement from the local community and especially parents to educate the girl child
4. Motivation among the students (both boys and girls) to learn and practice discipline
5. Dedication to learn and sit in the open for the entire duration of the school despite the harsh weather conditions
6. Close knit group where students were ready to always help each
7. Respect and understanding shared between the girls and boys

Teachers -

1. Dedication to teach the kids in the remote areas
2. Bonding with the community and trust/respect the community, teacher and students had for each other

3. Willingness to take up extra work (e.g. maintaining the portfolio) because it will help the student
4. Willingness to devote time towards building local teaching materials
5. Placing social needs ahead of their personal needs (teacher salary is just Rs. 2500 per month)

Gramya Sansthan -

1. Dedication to run schools in the remotest areas
2. Trust that they had earned from the community
3. Motivation to experiment with innovative teaching techniques (e.g. using role-play for learning, creating in-house teaching tools, and grouping students by their knowledge)
4. Providing teacher training to help teachers practice the innovative teaching techniques and learn how to manage many students at the same time
5. Maintaining contact with alumni and connecting them with enrolled students (for counseling etc.)
6. Providing a support system for alumni (students can seek help from the Gramya teachers and staff anytime and from anywhere)
7. Spreading awareness about women rights
8. Enthusiasm in teaching girls about health and hygiene
9. Stopping caste based differentiation in the villages where it runs its schools. We feel that this is a huge achievement given the long history of caste based violence in India.

To know more about Gramya Sansthan or support the project, visit the webpage -

<http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=253> [<http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=253>]