

Bal Mahotsav & Gramya Sansthan site visit report – March 2014

Jasjit Singh

(jasjit DOT s DOT malhotra AT gmail DOT c om)

I visited the Bal Mahotsav, organized by the Gramya Sansthan, in Naugarh near Varanasi. This yearly children's festival is an event anticipated not only by the students studying at Gramya but also by the whole community. One can witness sheer joy, spontaneity, enthusiasm and sportsmanship of many young kids at display.

The semi impromptu format of the festival was the most striking theme. Kids recited poems and presented acts on social issues such as dowry, child marriage, casteism and addiction. The fearlessness and confidence of these young minds really struck me and seeing them happily walk to the stage, grabbing that mike and performing their act, further reassured me. It really made me wonder if the "city schools" have got it right where homework is more often than not, done by parents and the child ends up knowing nothing about the real world.



Day 1 Bal Mahotsav

I reached Varanasi in the morning totally oblivious to what awaits me in the wilderness of Naugarh. I

was picked up by Sandhya ji and Shekhar and then I was told that it would take around 3 hours to reach our destination. We drove through mud roads of Chandauli and I was briefed about the work Gramya has been doing not only in the field of education but also in the areas of women empowerment in Chakia and nearby villages. We reached the Naugarh office and then proceeded to the Bal Mahotsav in Laltapur. The Bal Mahotsav was presided by the regional Additional CMO (Chief Medical Officer) who encouraged students to practice in their lives the messages that they were presenting through their skits and songs.



As seen from the photographs, there was a riot of passion, energy and competitive spirit. I was introduced to the kids. Although I missed a few games that were organized in the morning but still the kids seemed all hyped up for the next events like sack racing, spoon and marble race, slow cycle race etc.

The excitement for the events of skits (natak), kabaddi and rope pulling was so high that I would be polluting the expression by writing it down in words. This time around there was another excitement in the event, a turbaned guy (me) with a mobile tablet who could click the photographs on request and show it back right away. I haven't clicked so many photographs of smiling faces in a single day thus far. The smiling faces in spite of all the adversity, lack of resources would make even a non-believer a true believer.



Career plans: I asked them questions like what do you like the most in your school, what do you want to be when you grow up, Do you like coming to school? etc etc. The answers were really interesting and reflect on what these kids could do if provided the right resources. More often than not they loved Mathematics and English. One student in 1st grade student knew what he wants to be when he grows up. Shambhu, Ram babu and Jay Prakash said they wanted to be police officers and put the anti social elements behind bars. I remember when I was a kid in the 1st grade I couldn't even hold my pants

properly forget about the 20 year plan. There was another section of kids who wanted to be doctor and help people in the village. These kids have seen the problems first hand and I am sure someone local would be far more successful in not only solving the issues at hand but also inspire others to follow their footsteps.

Gramya Alumni giving back: Bal Mahotsav also brought in people who once studied here and are now making their mark in polytechnic, BHU (Banaras Hindu University) by completing their degrees. These success stories of the alma mater not only brings back the memories of yesteryears but also inspires the kids to see them as role models. These role models or fondly called “guru jis” help the Gramya staff in organizing events and managing around 500-600 kids which in itself is a management nightmare.

Community participation: Managing an event like this with the scale and passion on anvil simply is not possible without involving the community. People from nearby villages contributed in whatever form and way they could in preparing food. I would like to add though that this has not been the case always. When Gramya started, the villages were totally against it. They even burnt down effigy of Bindu ji in protest (the heart and soul of Gramya). As seen with the life cycle of change in human society, a similar thing happened here as well over time. Phase 1, people resist change, Phase 2, people try their best to ignore change, Phase 3 people accept the change as it seems to solve their problems. A lot of sacrifice, hard work and passion have gone in to go from phase 1 to phase 3 of change in case of promoting the cause of education.



Female participation: One change that I would want to highlight here is the high attendance of women in the schools run by Gramya. This goes to show the confidence levels that the villagers seem to have in the high moral based education system driven by Gramya. So much so that the Bal Mahotsav spans over two days and the kids dance, pray, sing together late in the night and slept in the Laltapur school building. In another conversation, I heard something that totally rendered me speechless. Some time back, the parents of a girl child in the nearby village wanted to marry her off. The kids of the school got together and along with teachers/ guru ji raised their voice and prevented the child marriage. How often does one come across examples of extreme courage and spirit to do the right thing?

Social message: The skits related to how a guy in an inebriated state from drugs, alcohol etc would beat his own family, how a guy would beat the bride to death and get imprisoned after his demands for motorcycle are not met, how a child would get married and get really sick as she is not mentally and physically prepared for a married life, how a corrupt politician would take bribe & exploit the farmer to get his due who would then raise their voice against injustice. All these acts were of kids in primary and junior sections in a novel educational philosophy of Gramya in which kids were grouped according to their knowledge.

These events continued late in the night and even late in the night the kids seemed so fresh as though the day just started.

Day 2 Bal Mahotsav

I reached the Laltapur school around 8am in the morning, which according to me was very early but to my surprise, there were kids already on stage and were competing hard for the prizes in the events. Today's events were mostly towards physical sports like Physical Training and acrobatics. The things that these little kids were able to do were totally extraordinary. It does take a lot of concentration and training to run with the hands on ground while the feet are up in the air like a Scorpio.



In addition to this, many other remaining events which could not be completed last night were done. In midst of the events Neetu ji (a Gramya activist) took the mike and asked the kids which group composed and sang a poem last night on the topic that being a girl child it is acceptable to eat half the meal so that she could go to school. When the group raised their hands, she asked them not to compromise on either food or education. Both education and food are their rights and there should be no compromise in any of them. The kids echoed back her concerns and the awareness/passion towards their rights was phenomenal. These values imbibed in the kids of the region will help in the upliftment of the region for the time to come.

Event Awards: Well talking about awards, that indeed was the grand finale of the events. I really liked that instead of handing over certificates or trophies, kids were given notebooks, pens, pencils, sharpeners, erasers, Tiffin boxes. The kids were very excited in receiving these awards for the hard work behind a successful Bal Mahotsav. The Pradhan of the villages who presided over the function encouraged the kids to realize their dreams. Bindu ji then announced that whoever didn't get an award will be given a notebook and this was enthusiastically cheered by the kids. Now something to think about, How often do we kids from cities take these things for granted and say what our parents have done for us?

As I stood in front of kids I saw well mannered, well disciplines, highly talented, highly energetic kids who have been deprived of resources to grow into beautiful human beings, who could go to any lengths to help improve the society in which we live in.

Site Visits (Laltapur, Amdahan, Jhumria, Basauli Schools)

After 2 days of hard work, the kids were given the rest of the day off on Saturday and Sunday. I along with Bindu ji and Surendra ji went on to visit the sites of the Gramya schools in the region. My first hand experience of the site visitation is in line with what Chandan and Neena found [here](#).

Laltapur: Since the bal mahotsav was organized in Laltapur, I got to know the site inside out. It had three concrete rooms and two mud rooms and an additional room which would serve as Gramya's office. The plan was to have some additional rooms and restrooms so that both the school and office could function side by side. With limited resources at hand it becomes really difficult for implementing the plan but it seems the journey continues in the pursuits of providing better opportunities for the underprivileged kids to grow. It also had a library in a mud house. I was told this was where the Laltapur center started. Charts made by school kids filled up the rooms. As seen in the photographs the open area was used as both open-air school & playground.



Basauli: We then went to a school in Basauli that was recently started in a community of Kol tribes right in the middle of nowhere. We had to walk in the wilderness to reach the school. Bindu ji explained that since the Laltapur school is relatively far away, the local community along with Gramya started this one room mud compound and the teacher here was a local Gramya student who teaches with passions to the kids as though they were his own. As I entered the mud house I saw amazing posters and works of art. As we entered the room, many students came rushing to meet and greet as though a guest had come to their house.

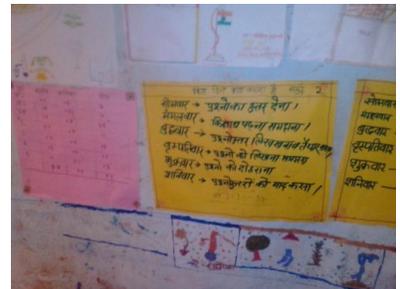


Jhumria: Next stop was Jhumria, where a two-room setup along with an additional mud room was providing opportunities to learn about their favorite subjects. Here again classrooms were filled with things created by the children and strong messages about education were printed on the walls that

reminded the kids everyday how important is education in life.



Amdhah: After that we visited Amdhah, it was really interesting to have a look at the study material that the Amdhah center had created for the kids. Carefully crafted cardboard squares had alphabets on them which children added together to make words. Just two teachers manage 100 students. It was an eye-opener as we as kids use to give our teachers a hard time even though we were just 30. On further enquiring it seems these centres have come up with a way to group students in study groups of 5-6 and while the teacher teaches in a small group others have to do some tasks or activities to understand the problem at hand in a better way. This makes the students more practical in problem solving rather than being parrots who could recite back everything in the book at the throw of a hat but without understanding anything they utter. A few kids from Bal Mahotsav here came running by and told Binduji that the local newspaper covered the Bal Mahotsav and then read the headline. It was one such experience that would make any teacher proud of the work he/she has done.



My Take

All this energy and vibrancy makes me wonder what else can be achieved by collaborating case studies like Gramya with organizations working in similar conditions and increasing scale at the grass root level. The two main focus areas that we would need to put some thoughts together would be not only to provide resources to such initiatives but also promote such organizations as success stories so that the learning achieved in hostile environments are not lost with time. On the contrary, they should provide a breeding ground for other educational societies who would want to work in such hostile conditions and make a mark for themselves in the society. I strongly feel the knowledge and know-how of Gramya when scaled and provided with required resources would shape the future of nation.

PS: If you wish to contribute for the cause, please visit- <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=253>.