

Field Report

Aastha - New Delhi

March 5th, 2026



Suraj Singh pulled into a tight ally adjoining a open dump as the navigation assistant announced our arrival to the coordinates that Prateek had sent earlier. Prateek is the executive director of Astha. The facility was a large gray building with a modest courtyard and a small board bearing the signage of Astha. I found the main gate was bolted and a small crowd milling about nearby. It was slightly over 10:30 A.M. when I called Prateek, who appeared at the gate after a few minutes. As we made our way into the main office, I met with a few of the other office bearers - Jyothi (head administrator), Binod (program manager), and Danish (program manager), before settling around a the small conference room for a conversation.



Entrance to the Kalkaji center from the courtyard

At this point, a word about this facility is perhaps prudent. The building Astha runs its facility is leased at modest cost of 5k/6mo by DUSIB (Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, Govt. of Delhi) since 2005. The lease is conditional for Ashta to conduct programs and services for children with disabilities for at least 3 days per week. The facility is modestly sized, has a open front courtyard, small conference rooms and an office space, and a central courtyard with large hall where training programs and conducted. Astha has

additional facilities in and around Delhi, particularly in Mazdoor Camp and Batla House that runs programs for your adults and children with disabilities.

Binod Kumar is an affable middle aged Astha veteran of 24 years. Binod has deep experience of working with people with disabilities, their environmental, structural, social challenges and interventions thereof. He was deeply motivated by Radhika Mulick Alkazi the founder of the organization, and now serves as a program coordinator. Danish is a tall, soft spoken man who has been with Astha for a few years principally focussed on lifeskill development for young adults. Danish is a former UPPSC (Uttar Pradesh Public Services Commission) officer who served as a BDO (block development officer) before leaving the services in favor of social work. He is principally responsible for managing the the lifeskill program at Mazdoor camp and Batla house facilities making the best out of limited resources at his disposal. Prateek Aggarwal initially joined as an intern from TISS, has been with Astha for about 9 years and now serves as executive director.

Astha runs a broad spectrum of programs for the disabled - from early childhood intervention to lifeskill development for young adults. It has a developed a robust community network and a healthy set of skillful adults who have graduated from their intervention programs and returned to serve the cause. The Giri Nagar, Kalkaji center principally runs the early childhood care, and at present provides the program for 40 young children, offering capability assessments, counseling and training programs for children and parents. A training session was in full swing at the time of my visit. Binod explained broadly their span of engagement in the community, emphasizing their focus on improving overall quality of life and financial inclusivity by identifying opportunities for skills training for young adults. He proudly shared

a recent success story of 8 Astha cohorts securing jobs at Mitti Cafe - a chain of cafes managed entirely by adults with physical or intellectual disabilities. There are quite a few instances of successful training and placement in hospitality sector with Lemon Tree [hotels], and in service delivery segment with Zomato for instance that has served as a strong source of encouragement for the parents as well as sensitized the community at large. Alongside the training and care program there is an emphasis on linking individuals with government grants and schemes, ranging from securing UDID Cards, to applying for pension grants and securing access to local government schemes.



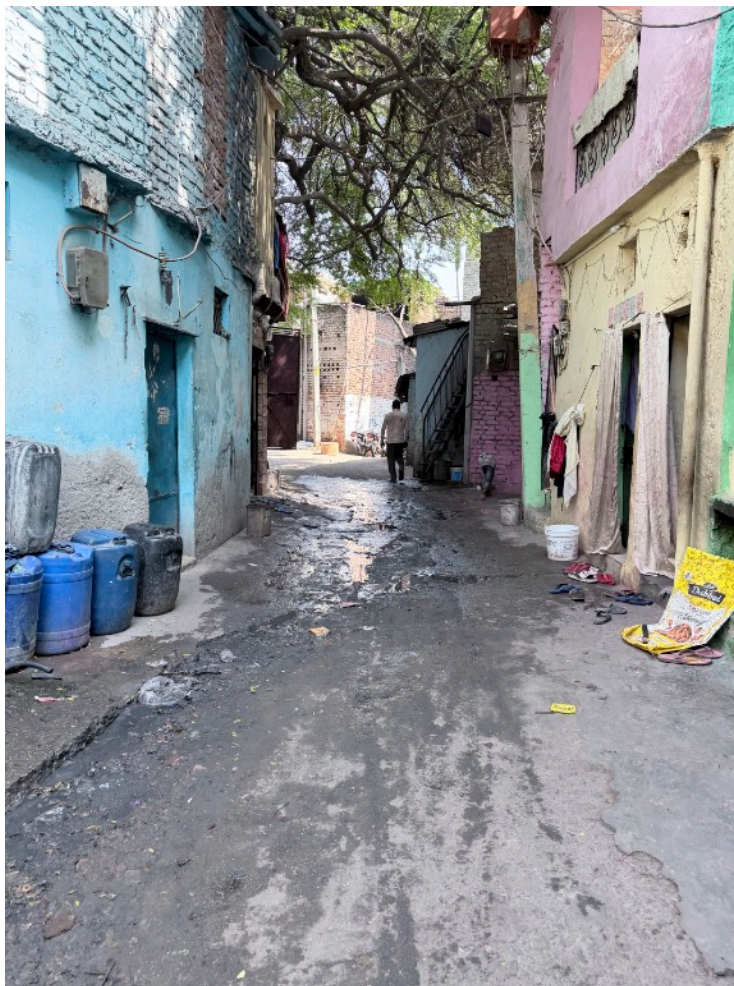
Training material on the wall in the central courtyard of the kakaji center



Young children with their parents in the group session

Group session at kakaji center with young children and parents

At around 11:15AM Binod, Danish and I left for Mazdoor Camp center. Under Binod's navigation, Suraj Singh slowly meandered us through the busy streets of Okhla. We disembarked at the mouth of a narrow street and made our way on foot to the center which was roughly 100ft from the main road (see inset). This center along with Batla House serves 79 young adults in lifeskill training program funded through an inclusive education grant of Tech Mahindra. The session was underway at the time of our arrival. We were greeted cheerfully by the students as we made our way to the far end of the single long hall that makes up the facility.



Alley leading to the Mazdoor Camp Center

The cohorts were organized into co-ed groups neatly seated on the matted floor. Looking back at the entrance from the far end, the left side contains collection of resources and teaching aid organized into neat stacks and cabinets, The opposite end has a wall mounted television and a computer desk. Walls on both sides were decorated with colorful motifs and illustrations. Binod and Danish sat along side me around a small desk as we observed the session. Behind us was a curtained partition separating a small kitchenette and utilities area. There are about 37 young adults in this center. Neha Rehman is a special instructor who conducts the sessions under contract for conducting 20 sessions over 3 month period. As Neha was instructing the group Sanjeev was dictating her in sign language. Sanjeev is the resident language therapy expert who worked with children with speech and hearing disabilities. Mamuni is the resident special educator along with Laxmi who is a community volunteer and a parent of a child with disabilities and an Astha cohort. Also present at the center was Arif who is a social worker with Astha who focusses on advocacy, policy and community outreach. Beauty Devi is the resident community worker who along with Danish miraculously stretch themselves between Mazdoor Camp and Batla House center to run this program. Finally the center has a resource workers Mamta who helps the operations at the center and helpfully offered us a ubiquitous cup of tea.

Astha has a well managed and thoughtfully evolved program for the children with special needs. They maintain a through record of the cohorts from early assessments, therapies, ongoing assessments, and medical records [see inset]. They have a strong community outreach program and maintain a pole

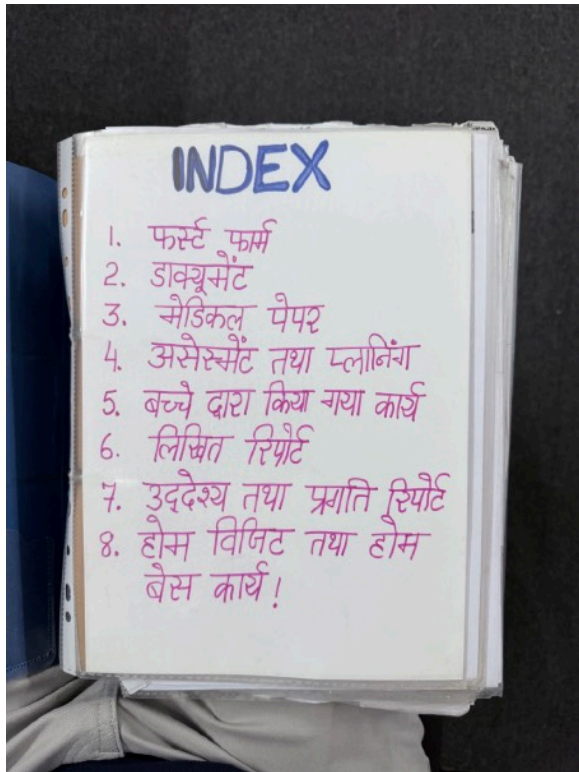
position amongst a network of organizations. The center has a large assortment of teaching aid, audio-visual and interactive material that is either acquired and or custom built repurposing everyday materials to assist with instruction. These utilities and devices are developed to help cohorts



Binod at Mazdoor Camp Center, group session underway in the background

overcome their specific physical limitation, help with therapy, or/or aid in development or motor skills. For instance soldering a spoon on one end go a bike handle with finger grooves makes the spoon easy to grip and maneuver for a shaky hands, discarded foam sheets are cut and clothed in cotton covers and turned into a savior for a shaking neck, and a small cotton stuffed hand band is a miracle assistant in holding a pen and developing fine motor ability. Mazdoor Camp is a site scrap collectors and makeshift recyclers

and have found meaningful ways to use everyday material into meaningful tools.



As Mamuni and Danish were exhibiting the training materials and documentation they maintained for their cohorts, the room turned dark. The groups under the watchful eye of Neha and Sanjeev all faced the television and watched a short video with rapt attention. The clip was from a Hindi movie (the name of which I do not recollect) but was themed around promoting collaboration. The video exhibit was followed by a brief group discussion on the theme and a group exercise. Each group was to collaborate with each individual using their unique strengths in stacking a set of cones and spot markers making a stable tower. It was wonderful experience to see the collaboration in the group and watch the competition develop between them to successfully make the tallest tower. It is these such small exercises that



Group Session with Neha (standing far left) and Sanjeev (standing center)



Group session with Neha (standing far right)



Neha and Sanjeev conducting group session



Mamuni displaying a time table that cohorts use for managing schedules



Arif observing the group session



Inoperative computer at the mazdoor camp center



Learning and training material at mazdoor camp

help these cohorts acquire and develop critical social skills, collaborating in small groups, and gaining confidence in their own unique skills while learning to overcome their distinct challenges. I was able to spend a brief moment with the instructors and interacted with a few cohorts - and, on my way out, learnt about the growing challenges Asif faces in his advocacy work. It was



Danish (foreground), Binod (background) exiting the Mazdoor Camp center

painfully obvious that advocacy, while impactful, is increasingly perilous in the prevailing environment. And while there is no dearth to creatively coined schemes sponsored by the state and union government, access to such schemes remains quite mired by typical bureaucratic hurdles and subversion. The discussion made is obvious that Danish and Beauty Devi are stretched thin in managing the program and could use another experienced hand with the program. Additionally, the

facility, whilst well kept, has limited capacity. And the center could use

additional resources, especially the computer that the cohorts are excited to use and learn from, is nonfunctional.

After spending about an hour at the center, we made our way back at around 12:30 P.M. It took a short trip back to Kalkaji Center, and we reconvened with Prateek for a follow-up conversation to discuss the challenges and future of the program. Prateek described the distinct challenge the organization faced with an FCRA certification, primarily due to an oversight where a check issued by the organization was exercised when the FCRA renewal had lapsed. The lapse occurred during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic when the chief financial officer was indisposed and there was no available backup. The lapse, although minor in nature, was in violation of strict regulations of FCRA resulting in the denial of FCRA certification. This created hardship for the program, and they had to creatively combine the programs across multiple sites to drive efficiency. They were also able to reuse some existing grants, as well as secure a one time contribution from an individual donor to the tune of ~5L (500K) that helped them manage their operations. Thankfully, they have now secured an FCRA certification valid till 2031. Whilst this was a unique set of conditions that cratered this perfect storm, Prateek expressed a need for an expert who can advise them on FCRA compliance - which is becoming increasingly difficult to follow. FCRA advisors come at a premium that the Astha team finds unaffordable. The lifeskill program is in dire need of investment and can use at least one more community worker to augment the team that has been overburdened. There are obvious shortfalls in resources, such as computers and other related multi-

media equipment that perhaps can be addressed relatively easily. I advised Astha team to itemize their specific requirements that can be considered in future grants.



(Left to right) Binod, Prateek, Danish, and me outside the Astha center at Kalkaji

We ended the meeting at roughly 1:15 P.M. I was full of admiration for the work that this team does in adverse conditions with limited resources, as I finally bade good-bye with a ceremonial group photo.