



ASHA DARSHAN

Progress Report
April '06 – January '07

Tamulpur, Baksa
Asom.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginnings. Biju Borbaruah has been involved in social work since 1996. In her childhood she had witnessed the corruption that had permeated all levels of government, because of which insurgent outfits like ULFA, NDFB, BLT, and BTF were formed. Problems upon problems were heaped upon the people and the poorest were the ones who suffered the most. They were afraid to raise their voices, they suffered silently.

In 1996 she joined an organization that she presumed was working for the benefit of the poor. Yet after two or three months she realized that this organ of human welfare, a non governmental trust was itself flawed from within. They had cheated the people of a housing scheme, where only three of the twenty eight houses proposed to be built were constructed. The remaining money went to individual pockets. She decided she would not work for the organization a single more day, she left.

On retrospection, she realized that her hasty decision to quit had not been right: she was fleeing from her duty when she should have stayed to stop it. She decided never to flee from injustice again. She vowed to fight for social injustice wherever she would encounter it.

She worked thereon in an organization by the name of RVC in Dhemaji district where she was trained on how to organize Self Help Groups (SHGs) among poor women. After a year of work, she got associated with TAGS, in Kumarikata- a Gandhian organization devoted to the

welfare of the rural poor under its founder, Ravindra Nath Upadhaya, lovingly referred to as *pitaji*. Till date, Asha Darshan and TAGS work together on various fronts.

When she came to Tamulpur it presented a dire spectacle of downright destitution: there were schools but no teachers to run them; leave aside government schools- even the non government ones were faring poorly. There was no work to fill the vacant hours of the unemployed. Male members went to Bhutan to work as wage labourers, for the women it was difficult to do even that. Many people had settled in grazing reserves after the formation of East Pakistan, they had not been given legal rights over the land they occupied.

Angarkata, one such erstwhile grazing reserve, was the genesis of her social work in this region. In 1997, she started spreading awareness regarding the benefits of SHG formation in many villages here, something that had not been attempted by any other voluntary or government agency in the past. People were suspicious of her. Initially, they suspected she came from the CID. They even called her alone one morning to interrogate. But gradually, her persistence conceived and the women began to organize themselves into SHGs. Bogajuli, a forest reserve, had similar problems. The people were in constant fear of eviction. Being in the vicinity of the International border with Bhutan, they were suspected by the Army of being spies, where the insurgent groups had their camps. Here also, the people began to join hands with her and SHGs were being formed. Various workshops for these SHGs were organized, along with workers from Anganwadi. The SHGs were finally being accepted as an effective mean of subsistence and dignified living. Around this time, Sabita Roy, a local girl joined her in her activities.

Sabita had been the secretary of the Mahila Samiti. These Mahila Samitis were simply namesake organizations. Seeing the promise of development in these SHGs and the MSS she joined hands with Biju to

combat poverty and ethnic disharmony. Together they travelled the villages educating people about the benefits of SHG formation. First they discussed the problems that these villages faced, then made them to sit together and reach a collective solution. It was difficult for the villagers to understand these concepts in the beginning. Initially they were suspecting that Biju and Sabita would run away with the money. They held the same about Banks, which they thought would run away too. Sabita says that most of them were not even aware that banks existed. Initially she herself did not understand what the MSS was. She received training in MSS from Kumarikata. Presently, she is the Office In-charge and a trustee of Asha Darshan.

In 1999, when future-Magasaray award winning Dr. Sandeep Pandey visited the area, he found her determination and efforts commendable. To curb the disease of illiteracy that was all pervasive in the region, he assigned her the task of starting grass root educational institutions- *Balwadi's* (crèche schools).

Sobita, Biju and other team members went to villages and talked to people about the problem of education, starting Balwadi centres after holding discussions with the village management committees and common villagers in general. Ten such Balwadi's were started in 2001.

Meanwhile, simultaneously working in the sectors of women empowerment and education, Biju was also discussing the problem of peace with Ravindra Bhai. Various insurgent outfits were active in the region. To combat them, a new force was needed. Along with five other women, she went to the Vaishali district in Bihar where a training seminar on the *Mahila Shanti Sena* was being held. Returning to Asom, they decided that the formation of the MSS along with the SHGs was absolutely necessary to bring peace back into the region.

Alongside, the SHGs had improved many lives- the women were becoming more and more self reliant. Inspired by her enthusiasm four

more village girls joined hands in her efforts- Parvati, Ambika, Deepali and Pranati.

Pranati Dhar was a member of the Maa Laxmi SHG in Angarkata when she joined Biju's team in July 2001. She was studying in her inter class. Due to domestic problems she had not been able to complete her higher secondary education. She completed it later giving the examination privately. Pranati went to UP where she was trained in detergent manufacturing and soap making. She came back and began imparting these skills to the SHG women for further self empowerment. Presently, she is the educational coordinator of Asha Darshan.

The trust was **formally registered in May 14, 2002** and till date it has worked with unflinching determination in the fields of **education, women empowerment**, maintenance of **peace and stability** in the region, and in **health and environmental awareness**.

The following are systematic answers paraphrased from conversations with volunteers pertaining to the questions which were to serve as guidelines for filling this report.

On the question of motivation: It is difficult to single out "factors" motivating the efforts of us women: this is an area where destitution, illiteracy and unemployment prevail. Depression is everywhere- if the sad faces of our elders, the wails of our neighbours, the sight of our under nourished children are not enough an urge to join the wailing refrain for solidarity, then we would simply ask: what else is?

Religious Affiliations: The constitution of our members is symbolic of the ethnic heterogeneity of this region, Our volunteers come from diverse tribal and non tribal backgrounds and work with immense camaraderie. In the face of this, there is no question of a religious

affiliation. We respect all religions, customs, rites and sentimentalities; yet, we strive to work for the ideal of human dignity and upliftment.

Non Educational Activity: As already mentioned, before indulging in education our group was and is still actively involved **in formation and guidance of self help groups among poor women** for their self sustenance. Apart from that, Tamulpur has a history of insurgent activity; our group was monumental in **organizing peace rallies through Mahila Shanti Sena**, that helped restore equilibrium. Apart from this, we have also **staged street plays spreading awareness for malaria prevention**, and are spreading awareness for prevention against other diseases also. We have also **organized veterinary camps**. Furthermore, we have planted saplings for making the environment cleaner and help elevate community consciousness among the people.

Regarding the **FCRA approval**, it is unduly held up despite our DC's permission. We have received prior permission from the Home Ministry, yet we are **awaiting the final permission**

EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

A list of the schools, along with the names of the teachers running them, their type, and total enrolment of each centre is provided at the end of this section.

We here address the questions given to us as guidelines, and answer them categorically.

Setting: The schools operate in a **rural** setting.

Type of Education imparted: Our program includes both **basic literacy** and **vocational training** to the people. A vocational training centre with help from SSB (Sasatra Seema Bal) has been set up in the Bogajuli area. They donated eight sewing machines for operating this centre. Our staff (Nirola, Deepali, Nirmala) imparts training in embroidery, stitching, etc.

A shop has also been rented near the Tamulpur Block office. Two sewing machines were donated by AID. AID also funded for honorarium to teachers who imparted training in stitching, etc for a year. SHG members who were interested in generating income through sewing etc were trained here. Other SHG products are also shared here. AID project has also funded our efforts in women empowerment: SHG formation and promotion, bank linkage, etc.

Conventional or Alternative? It is necessary to point out here that a direct answer cannot be given to the question of whether the teaching techniques adopted by the centres are alternative or conventional. Consider this visit to the Nagapur crèche for instance. The children stood up as we entered the classroom and chorused the traditional greeting *lumbai*. On receiving instruction from their teachers, Urmila and Lakshmi, they sat down in cross legs, closing their eyes for a brief session of meditation. After that, they stood up to sing a song (in Bengali) about a football game (this was because the teachers were trained at a workshop held in Vikramshila, Bengal). It was one of the three Balwadi's currently operational under this trust, a Bodo medium play school. Mid day meals had been served in this centre till January '06. Because of lack of funds it had to be stopped. Yet the centre ran in admirable poise, in contrast to the EGS school running nearby which had no attendance of teachers. The children took out their textbooks and started reciting passages from their textbooks. The language was Bodo but the script being Devanagiri, I was able to check their recitation. Urmila meanwhile takes the attendance- the

kids categorically reiterate with *lumbai* as their names are called: thirty of fifty seven students were present. After the recitations were complete, the students made patterns of dry seeds. The centre also houses abandoned looms, it had previously been a TAGS weaving centre.

In effect, **the teaching techniques, are a compromise between the conventional and the alternative**: while children are taught Bodo and Assamese, made to make patterns of seeds and mould mud into pumpkins, at the same time they are taught modern English language, science and math. **Conventionally**, examinations are held regularly to test their rigors of theory and **alternatively** they are taken to exposure trips and field visits to widen their understanding of things.

Pranati Baideo, the education coordinator, said that the new books the government had prescribed laid more stress on the “alternative” way of learning. But the teachers have not been trained in this teaching technique hence this “method” or “style” of imparting education still has not been effectively implemented.

Additionally, in a refutation of our definitions of conventional and alternative, there are dances and songs which are supposed to enhance learning capacity: a drastically alternative way of learning yet rooted in native convention.

Economic Background: As is already said the people here live amidst poverty and hence, there is widespread illiteracy among the adult population. The children however, despite their abject privation, are enthusiastic to learn: they come to school carrying ragged school bags with their hair neatly oiled and combed, the tatters in their dusty clothes are neatly stitched and despite the cold weather they sit on the floor over jute sacks. Some of them even go with their parents to haul bricks or to crush stones in dry river beds. Pranab Saikia, who handles the accounts and monitors the progress of the schools, says that some people question the very need for education. They claim that even after completing primary or middle school, because of the scarcity of employment, their child would eventually have to fall back to crushing stones or doing other kinds of menial labour. Such is the regard of education held among the labouring people.

Admission Criterion:

Balwadi

- Education begins with the Balwadi's where the children are taught songs, dances, games, alphabets, elementary reading and writing etc
- Normally we allow children within the age group of 2-5 yrs to enrol in our Balwadi's
- However, there are still students who have not had any education in their early years. Even at the age of twelve sometimes, these children are completely ignorant of the joys and benefits of education. To such children, we advise our teachers to allow them to attend, and to take special care of them as they feel embarrassed in studying with a younger flock.
- The fee charged from the students is nominal. Formally the children are charged Rs 2 for each month in Balwadi and Class I. However some low income families are not able to pay even this amount, we allow them to attend for free.

Primary School

- The primary school comprises of classes one to four.
- The syllabus of the primary school is pegged with the syllabus of the Education Guarantee Scheme. The government textbooks which are distributed for free are not given to us directly. At the BO office, we are given the textbooks that are left after being distributed amongst the registered schools.
- There are however some books which are not available here(Hindi textbooks, some Assamese textbooks). These textbooks are bought by us, utilising the reading material funds provisioned in our budget, and given to students at prices lower than the actual price. Nevertheless, for some economically deprived students we relax this fee.
- For classes II to IV, the fee charged is Rs 5 per month per student. This year onwards we shall strictly urge the fees to be paid duly. There will be, however, some students who will still not be able to afford the school fee, we would allow these students to continue nevertheless.

As of present **1020 students** are enlisted in our schools (**475 girls, 545 boys**) to teach them there is a salaried staff of **30** teachers.

Comment: This includes Dansrang Primary School, Anthaibari Primary school, Satyanarainpur MV School, Lakhinarainpur ME school, Garughutu primary school, which are our new centers and excludes Khumguri Balwadi and Amlaiguri Balwadi which were closed recently. The reason for closure was that the teachers were not being diligent in their job, having less students than what they reported. Our field visits confirmed a discrepancy and we decided to close the Khumguri center. Another school, Upendranath Brahma English and Bodo medium Primary and ME school has been established in Khumguri. Amlaiguri however was closed because government had started a school under the EGS.

Mid-Day Meal: Due to lack of timely pecuniary funds, the mid day meal which had been operational for six months was **stopped in June 2006**. However, we have received funds from our funding chapters for restarting the mid day meal program. **The Mid Day Meal Program will be revived in all our schools from February '07.**

Health Care: In the year '06 five primary school students died of Malaria. In Bogajuli, April, 2004, Asha Darshan had organized **free medical check-up** camp. Two hundred and fifty people, including children and adults, attended this camp. Ten women from Asha Darshan and three doctors- Dr. Keshav Barman (Doctor and medical officer), Dr. Daben Mahanta (MBBS, MD) and Dr. Kamal Khaund. (Disability specialist) were present to coordinate the camp.

Free medicines are distributed in our Drug Distribution Centres run in collaboration with TAGS.

More recently, we have organized **health awareness regarding HIV- AIDS** in six places (Kauli, Nagrajuli, Tamulpur, Bogajuli, Angarkata and Darranga Mela). The **veterinary camps were held in six villages** (Angarkata, Vinvapur, Bannogarh, Dolongpar, Kahliapur, Ulubari) we were also helped by SSB. We **also work along with TAGS in organizing Malaria camps during the rainy season** when the disease tends to assume epidemic proportions. During this time **two nurses, from among the Asha Darshan and TAGS staff, are stationed in three villages (Bogajuli, Kauli and Angarkata) where low cost medicines are distributed.** We are also involved in **Mother and Child Healthcare.**

Fellowships to students:

Pradeep Bhagat was a resident of Harotala village near Darranga Mela. His father worked as a mason. He had a younger brother and two sister, but their father did not care about them as he had another wife with two step children. He was a bona fide student of Don Bosco School Kumarikata till Class X, and passed his high school in first division. But due to lack of expenses he was not able to pursue his dream of completing his education. He had approached us for help, but we were able to finance him only a year later. During this period he was working in a shop in Guwahati. We were able to finance his education for a year, utilising funds from the scholarship program of Asha Owner, Chennai. In a letter attached herewith, he writes *“I would like to give special thanks to ‘Asha Darshan’ for providing me financial assistance for my higher studies, which I never thought it to be.”* His expenditure details, mark sheets and letter of thanks are included in the annexure. His studies have come to a standstill as he awaits further assistance.

We have been approached by other students also but because of limited funds we have not been able to provide financial assistance as of now. Khargeshwar Taluqdar, a resident of Dolongpar village was the son of a carpenter. He constructed a small room of bamboo while he was preparing for high school so that he could study in peace. He secured first division in High School, securing more than eighty percent in Mathematics. His request is being considered by us. Other students have also requested assistance but we do not have adequate budget capacity to finance their education.

Clothing: We ordered one hundred uniforms (red and black checked shirts and blue shorts) from Delhi. They will be distributed among the students of all Asha schools at a reasonable price. We shall also try to find a local equivalent of the cloth so that we may be able to provide it to the students at a cheaper price. All Uniforms carry a tag which reads, in Asomese: **Asha Darshan Shishu Niketan, Tamulpur, Asom.**

School Buildings: The buildings for running the schools are mostly provided by joint contribution of the villagers. The erstwhile Nagapur centre (now it has shifted to Swargapur-Nagapur area) and Satyanarainpur centre were donated by TAGS. In the Namati Primary School, Jhargaon, the army has sanctioned a community hall with school building. The classes in the new premises will commence soon, currently classes are held as usual in the old premises.

Teachers:

- This year, the teachers were selected after conducting a written exam and an interview. Earlier, the Village Education Development Committees and the villagers among themselves used to decide which people were to be chosen as teachers.
- Minimum qualification required of teachers are B.A\B.Sc passed for ME school teachers and Higher Secondary passed for Primary School Teachers. For the post of Balwadi teacher, we require the applicants to have at least passed High School.
- The salaries given are Rs. 2,500/- for ME school teachers; Rs 2300/- for primary teachers; Rs. 1800/- for assistant teacher; and Rs. 1500/- for Balwadi teachers.
- The performance of the teachers is monitored by volunteers who constantly visit the schools on a random basis. The opinion of the students and the villagers are considered and the competence of the teacher is estimated. For instance, Malati Das, a Balwadi teacher in our Singramari center was removed owing to constant complaints of irregularity.

Average Distance: Children living within a **1.5 km** margin come to our Balwadis. The distance travelled by them to reach our primary schools however, are greater. It can be roughly approximated to be **2- 4 km.**

FUTURE OF STUDENTS PASSING OUT: We provide education at crèche, primary and ME levels. The children passing out of these educations, barring a few exceptions, go on to further their education in high school and higher secondary school levels.

Details of other schools in the area:

Details provided to me at the sub office E&D (Tamulpur Block)

- There are 274 LP schools run by the government.
- 2 Tea Garden Schools
- 6 MV Schools
- 3 ME Middle Madrassas
- other ME schools : 59 (non governmental)
- Total Recognized ME schools: 62.

- 42 schools under Education Guarantee Scheme.

Note: There are many villages which do not have any school in near by areas. These villages ventured to manage their own schools by forming a village management committee. These committees along with the villagers run schools by appointing teachers from among the villagers. These teachers are not given any salary, but are granted random favours from the villagers in return. These venture schools have not been recognized by the government and they have failed miserably. **Asha Darshan** works to improve the status of these schools. Most of the schools run by us have earlier been venture schools.

Why are the children not attending government schools? There is no comparison between government schools and our schools. As an example, I shall state the EGS School the government had set up near the Nagapur Balwadi centre. The government building in contrast to the Asha Darshan crèche school, did not show signs of abandonment, but the absence of any teacher for days, and the children- from the young to the twelve year olds- playing on the grass, and being wasted to vain hours boldly speaks out of the ineptitude of the government in putting its money to effective use.

Wherever possible, the villagers always prefer to send their children to our schools as we are more approachable to them, unlike the government officials. Furthermore, **our teachers are much more regular and compassionate towards the students than the distressed government school teachers who have not received salaries for years.**

Involvement of parents: There is a Self Help Group in every village where our school is running. The issue of child welfare is discussed in SHG meetings and discussions. The water filters and other equipment which can not be safely housed in the school buildings are housed in the homes of the villagers. The SHGs also help in persuading parents who are not sending their children to school.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Shishu Mela: A Shishu Mela was organized from 22- 24 December last year. It was held in three places (Namati, Singramari and Angarkata). Four schools jointly participated in the Angarkata Shishu Mela. Sporting competitions were organized and prizes were distributed among the children. Story books were given out as prizes. The event was funded by TAGS and Action AID. Our volunteers were actively involved in organizing the event. This served as a practice for organizing such events in the future. This year, we plan to organize a Shishu Mela on the same design, bringing together all the students from our various schools to promote the spirit of education, sportsmanship and unity.

ME Schools: Till last year no full fledged ME schools were run by the trust. This year, owing to requests from the people, we have decided to start ME schools. In the Satyanarayanpur centre classes upto Class V were being held. Due to the absence of any other ME school nearby the villagers have compelled us to upgrade it to Class VII. We are appointing two new teachers for this school. One will be a science teacher and the other will be a subject teacher (English). The selection procedure (written + oral) is complete; the results will soon be declared. A staggering venture school had been running in Lakhinarayanpur. The villagers had been requesting for an ME school as the venture schools were in a pitiable condition. The students traversed long distances to study either in Kumarikata or Khairani, both of which were quite far away. Students passing out from primary schools in five neighbouring villages came to study in this school. We have decided to convert the existing venture school into an Asha Darshan school. Three teachers from the earlier venture schools have been retained on recommendation from the villagers. A science graduate has been appointed as the science teacher; an Arts Graduate has been appointed to the post of subject teacher.

Education for the Handicapped: Our trust is also planning to start an education program specializing for the needs of the handicapped. We are planning to survey the villages across the block, collect the experiences of the handicapped people across the block, gather their distress stories and accordingly set up centres. This is still in the planning stage.

Health Champaign: Discussions with the villagers are also underway of distributing basic first aid training and medicine kits in school.

SUGGESTIONS TO ASHA

1. We request Asha members and trustees to make more visits to the area as this will enhance the motivation of our members to work and they will also get to know in further detail all the work that we have been doing.
2. Our water filters etc can not be safely housed inside the school buildings as most of them are in a sorry state. Sometimes, because of the rains the schools close down, to end this, the premises would have to be remodelled. Renovation would also invite satisfaction from our students and their parents. School buildings would also enhance joyful education- meaningful wall paintings, etc. **We would invite funding from Asha Chapters for improving the state of the buildings in which our schools operate.**
3. **We would want the funds to be directly transferred to our SBI accounts as the ICICI centre is in Guwahati. It is far, collection takes too much time, and additional bank charges are also levied. This would save us from unnecessary time delay and bank charges.**

Our Account Details are as follows:

Asha Darshan.

SB 1095 8153 602

SBI Rangiya Branch.

4. Furthermore, we would request you to send the required funds on time as it causes undue delay in our activities, this brings about lax in

discipline and once discipline is lost, it will be difficult to restore equilibrium.

5. Salaries of teachers and Asha workers are a committed expenditure and it should not be a subject of clarification in budget queries.

ANNEXURE

ASHA DARSHAN SHISHU NIKETAN 2006

SI No	Name of the center	Name of the teachers and assistant	Class	Enrolment		
				Girls	Boys	Total
1	Center No 1 Vill- Garughutu (Bogajuli) P.O- 2 No Kalipur Dist- Baksa Assam – 781360	Mr Kobiraj Mardi	Class i Class ii Class iii Class iv	07 09 08 05	07 05 05 04	14 14 13 09 50
2	**Center No 2 Vill- Lakhinarayanpur (Angerkata) P.O- Kumarikata Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr. Dulal Mitra Ms. Nilima Paul Mr Paresh Sarkar Mr Subhash Choudhary	Balwadi Class- I Class- ii Class- iii Class- iv	18 14 2 13 5	13 11 13 15 7	31 25 15 28 12 111
3	Center No 3 Vill- Dansrang (Bogajuli) P.O- 2 No Kalipur Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr. Shantiram Musahary Mr Dumini Basumutary	Balwadi Class i Class ii Class iii Class iv	10 15 7 7 13	5 4 14 16 13	15 19 21 23 26 104
4	Center No 4 Vill- Anthaibari (Bogajuli) P.O- 2 No Kalipur Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr Deepak Basumutary Ms Veeralal Narzary Ms Sumitra Musahari	Balwadi	15	28	43
5	Center No 5 Vill- Nagapur (Bogajuli) P.O- 2 No Kalipur Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 (Assam.)	Ms. Lakshmi Basumutary Ms. Urmila Khaklary	Balwadi	30	27	57
6	Center No- 6 Vill- Paharpur (Kawli) P.O- Sidhinathpur Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Ms. Reeta Devi	Balwadi	17	19	36
7	*Center No 7 Vill- Singramari P.O- Kumarikata Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr Bhadraswar Munda	Balwadi Class- I Class- ii Class- iii Class- iv	9 5 5 6 5	9 11 1 5 5	18 16 6 11 10

				30	31	61
8	**Center No 8 Vill- Satyanarayanpur (Angerkata) P.O- Chechapani Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr. Naresh Sarker Mr. Bimal Barman Mr. Prabhat Barman Ms. Gita Devi Mr. Bedbahadur Mr Shailendra Baishya Mr Chandrakanta Upadhyaya	Balwadi Class- I Class- ii Class- iii Class- iv Class- v	38 16 25 10 9 15 113	42 16 22 20 18 11 129	80 32 47 30 27 26 242
9	Center No 9 Vill- Hajongbosti (Angerkata) P.O- Kumarikata Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Ms. Champaboti Hajong Ms. Prajjala Hajong	Balwadi	24	31	55
10	*Center No 10 Vill- Namati P.O- Pachim Jargoan Dist- Baksa Pin- 781367 Assam.	Mr. Kamalkishar Sarker Mr. Jadab Das Ms. Meena Brahama	Balwadi Class- I Class- ii Class- iii Class- iv	26 7 13 8 4 58	25 11 7 10 5 58	51 18 20 18 9 116
11	*Center No 11 Vill- 2No Santipur P.O- Kumarikata Dist- Baksa Pin- 781360 Assam.	Mr. Dilip Kharka Ms. Sabitri Devi Ms Mamuni Sarkar	Balwadi Class- I Class- ii Class- iii Class- iv	19 24 9 3 x 55	38 28 12 6 6 90	57 52 21 9 6 145
Total				475	545	1020

