
Asha Darshan

Site Visit Report

Amit Sharma - September 3 - 5, 2015



Introduction

Asha Darshan is a long time Asha for Education Partner NGO in Baksa district of Assam, and provides crucial source of primary and middle grades education to over 1500 children in challenging, insurgency ridden areas. Asha Darshan's broad area of work spans community development, conflict resolution, and income generation through vocational skill training and [women] SHG (self help groups).

This site visit was conducted for Asha for Education (Silicon Valley) to better understand Asha Darshan's grassroots work. The intent was not only to inspect but to educate ourselves of the actual ground realities of the region, the challenges the region offers and how interventions have played out over time. Whilst it was unreasonable to document the entire breadth of work of Asha Darshan, this two day journey did attempt to take a closer, unbiased, critical look into their work.

Site Visit

I arrived in Guwahati Airport at 1:10PM from New Delhi. While descending I was able to witness massive and widespread flooding in region around the Bhramhaputra plains. A few days later local newspapers were plastered with images of Assam Chief Minister conducting an ariel survey of damage caused by floods; he subsequently went to seek relief funds from New Delhi. And I caught myself wondering if a flight out of Guwahati was sufficient to establish the extensive damage from flooding but I'm not too well versed with the machinations of the state. [whilst this is a distraction from the topic, it does highlight geographic vulnerability of the region and the fact that despite schemes and programs spanning decades for flood prevention, the state continues to be unprepared and helpless. Other than offering ceremonial, perhaps necessary, yet utterly inadequate monitory relief there is little or no mechanisms to deal with this very well known annual natural phenomenon]

I met Biju Borbaruah, founder at the airport and we proceeded to Tamalpur in a Biju's new car. Tamalpur is about 85km away from Guwahati, navigating thick traffic on narrow, and very busy highway seemed time consuming, I was told that with heavy have gutted parts of the road connecting Rangiya-Bhutan road making things worst. Despite the flooding, it was hard not to appreciate textures of green filling the panorama. The journey to Tamalpur was full of great, engaging dialogue about Asha Darshan's beginnings, the current political

situation in Baksa and Nalbari, social norms of the bodo tribals, and the social asymmetry that continues to trigger violence in the region. I got to learn about the political and legislative structure in the region, the area is governed by Bodoland Autonomous Council, it has the Member of legislative assembly but the local governance is overseen by BAC. There is also Panchayats in some limited areas and it quickly became evident that the landscape is much complex to navigate. We stopped by a small eatery mid-way to Tamalpur before proceeding to another hour long journey.

We arrived at Asha Darahan Tamalpur Center, right off the Rangiya-Bhutan road, around 5:00PM, and were greeted by Asha Darshan workers Nirmala and Mandira, and few others. Tamalpur center is the focal point of all Asha Darshan's work in the area, about 6-7 workers stay and work from this facility which houses Asah Darshan's office, a resource center, living quarters, a adjoining vocational training center and a generous yard with a vegetable garden and a traditional kitchen.

The main building bears a striking resemblance to some perpetually half complete, inflation struck, Government funded construction project; the upper story is nothing more



than a roof and metal beams with no walls. The building was constructed through Asha for Education funds and needs significant investments to bring it close to completion, and it'll be able to house many more workers and resource persons. The upper stories also accommodate manual textile looms and yarn spinning machinery used for the [vocational training] weaving program, besides being the bedroom [sic] for a few workers. A small seasonal river flows right

behind the building and is surrounded by dense forest on two sides.

Adjoining the main building is another incomplete building is a weavers training center (vocational training for women) funded by DST, New Delhi. This building houses the modified textile looms used in the weavers training and has 7 such looms. Weavers training



program is conducted in this facility with two trainers and up-to 7 trainees that can participate at a time.

The remainder of the evening was spent in an engaging dialogue that covered the current status of the project, and current financial situation. Dearth of funds constantly featured in the discussion and was increasingly evident what the delay in funds disbursal has introduced tremendous pressure on the workers and the organization at large.

Asha Darshan Bogajuli Center

Our hope to start the day early on the 4th were ruined by punishing rains that started early morning and continued well into the day. Whilst the preferred medium of travel was a scooty, we decided to use the car to instead and only travel to accessible schools in the rain filled terrain. Nirmala was helpful in asking he brother to save the day and help us drive around in difficult driving conditions. After a bunch of false starts we arrived at Asha Darshan Bogajuli Resource center around 10:30 AM.

Bogajuli center is a smaller incarnation of Tamalpur center and houses about 4-5 workers and is the center for tailoring training program. Mandira ji is the sewing/ tailoring program trainer and coordinator and the center has about 5 sewing machines. This facility is built on a 8 acre farm, 4 acres allocated by the BAC and another adjoining 4 acres purchased more recently. Little use is made of, rather large grassland that is mostly occupied by seasonal weeds and bushes with little or no tree shade. The entire region is rainwater fed with

seasonal water bodies overflowing during heavy rains, further the terrain is dotted by big boulders making it non-conducive for traditional farming. What seemed an endless green farm would transform into a barren dry wasteland in dry. I raised a concern that no effort was being made to harvest rain water or to create waterbodies. The rocky terrain is well conducive to building catchments, complemented by anicuts on seasonal tributaries. I promised to try and connect Biju with Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Guwahati area to explore water harvesting options on their land as an experiment which can further become a model for the areas.

There's an adjoining room made of bamboo that is used as a storage facility for books and material. I was surprised to find that the room stacked with a rather large collection of english workbooks, picture books etc. This material was donated to Asha Darshan by Omprakash Foundation over the years. Whilst my initial reaction was that of concern around books eating dust in a storage instead of being used in schools, I ended up realizing the irony of sending english books for bodo or assamese medium schools. The disconnect between the good meaning agencies and ground realities; the popular notion of education that we all live with was evident in that small room. Nonetheless, I proposed asking the teachers to come and re-explore the books in the store, and brainstorm means of using them somehow in schools. There are some english medium, referred to as medium english, schools that Asha Darshan runs, perhaps good candidates for the material.

Satyanaraynpur Anhaypur ME School

After meeting with the sewing / tailoring program workers over tea, we left for the Satyanaraynpur ME school. About 30min drive from Bogajuli nested between bamboo and tea plantations is a Satyanarayanpur Anhaypur Middle English School. Running since 2006



this is an middle school that reached English as a subject (hence called Middle English school), and has 96 students and 4 full-time teachers.

The school has a traditional bamboo construction, mud enforced floors, no toilets and no drinking water. There's a well in a nearby village that the school gets its water from and thick bamboo plantations double up as a nature toilets. The infrastructure is relatively basic although the children do have desks. We had a spontaneous meeting with the teachers - Anita, Suman, Dilip, and Shankar in the store room that could barely keep the rains out. Despite the lack of even basic facilities the teachers were enthusiastic, spoke proudly of their students, and the fact that their school performs much better than any school in the nearby area; there's a primary school roughly 3 km away and a government middle school roughly 2 km away (separated by the river) from this school. Teachers have not been paid their salaries, which are meager by Government standards, for past 7 months due to lack of funds and delay in funding from Asha for Education (the sole funding agency supporting Asha Darshan). Although in muted voice, teachers were unanimous in noting the hardships they face due to lack of salary, an explainable yet avoidable situation.

For the next 30 minutes I sat amongst students in two different classes, Shankar ji taking an English reading session for class VII, Shankar ji was teaching dividing fractions to grade-VIII, Anita ji teaching basic fractions to grade VI. Whilst the classrooms seemed cramped and dark, students were alert and well engaged. I came out very pleased with the classroom engagement and awareness of teachers at the school.

The school is in dire need of an additional room to accommodate all children besides provisioning for toilets. Lack of water supply or a tubewell has are things particularly problematic. Although there are no toilets in the school, and none in the nearby village either, I must note that the environment was rather clean and sanitary; tribals have rather rich sanitary practices and keep their environment clean, I didn't see a roadside dump or plastic pouches or bags, or roadside refuse, which is quickly becoming a symbol of modernity - this is still an untapped market for "modern" plastic packed foods and therefore *still* clean.

Satyanarayan Asha Jyoti School

Roughly 15 min drive from Satyanarayan ME school is Satyanarayan Asha Jyoti school, one of the oldest running primary and pre-primary school that Asha Darshan runs. A 10 min walk in muddy lanes through lush green paddy fields, and into, what seemed like an unending bamboo forest, is Asha Jyoti school with 200 children; The school is right next to a

small hamlet of houses and is complemented by a generous green yard in front, a all-season well that supplied water and a bamboo forest at the back. A picturesque setting decorated with hundreds of happy faces.



The school building has brick masonry with an asbestos cement roof. The main building has a large hall that houses 4 classes and an adjoining room that is used for storage, cooking, and staff area. Individual classrooms are separated by bamboo partitions and are rather superficial separators, its a free open environment for children and although it doesn't fit the traditional mental image of a classroom, it is functional and children didn't seem to mind the open space. Pre-primary school is run in a separate, adjoining room that has a traditional bamboo construction, much like Satyanaraynpur ME school.

I met Prabhat Barman, an 11 year old veteran teacher and relatively new Geeta ji over tea and was greeted with an urgent request for funds; the mid-day meal program for children has been in abeyance due to lack of funds. Teachers haven't ben paid for last 7 months either but lack of mid may meal was their primary concern.

Devinagar Primary School

After a 40 min meeting at Satyanaraynpur Primary School, we left for Devinagar Primary School, a 15 min ride through tea plantations. Devinagar is the oldest primary school in the region running since 1978. It it wasn't for about 50-60 children running around,

the dilapidated bamboo structure could be missed for an abandoned hut; I wondered if it was



just the age of this structure or apathy, perhaps it was both. There is still no Government primary school nearby, the children from Devinagar continue to perform better in middle school, the villagers continue to volunteer rebuilding and reenforcing the bamboo structure every year. The “Development” is yet to reach Devinagar, and yet the children didn’t seem to mind; Of all the places I have been on this short journey this is the place with wildest, unadulterated, honest yet mischievous smiles.

Devinagar school has two teachers, and 80 enrolled students, and is in dire need of funds for improving the infrastructure. The walls and roof are in shambles and barely offer protection from heavy rains. The school has no toilets, and no water supply.

Simligudi ME School

After about 20 min. we left Devinagar School back towards Devinagar. Biju offered to visit another middle school located right next to a Government High School in Simligudi. We

got off on Rangiya-Bhutan road and walked through unpaved muddy road. We quickly realized that the road to be unusually busy with quite a few people waking in unison towards the Simligudi school. Upon enquiry, Biju discovered that the local MLA has called for a meeting at the High School to distribute umbrellas and mosquito nets - this despite of a absolute ban on using school premises for official functions or ceremonies. Perhaps the rules don't apply to the legislative ...

Simligudi school has 60 enrolled students and roughly 50 were present at the time of my visit. Classes were suspended due to the blaring music and hysterical announcements of impending arrival of the MLA at the function. Such was the pitch of the loudspeakers that it was near impossible for me to even hear anything the teachers standing right next to me. The teachers as well as students seemed equally amused as they were miffed at the situation and I was told that children will be sent home shortly since conducting classes was next to impossible; the nearby high school was suspended earlier in the day for the MLA meeting. Biju and I walked away deliberating *justifiable* use of MLA LAD funds that we had just witnessed.

Bogajuli Tailoring Center

We got back to the Bogajuli Asha Darshan Center around 4:00 and settled down for a wonderful lunch. We disused on a variety of topics over lunch and proceeded for a quick meeting with the tailoring/sewing training staff. Mandira ji showed the material that the center typically produces - embroidery on pillow covers, handkerchiefs, and Sarees.

We discussed how Asha Darshan can perhaps take contract work and distribute it amongst the women of nearby villages. SSB (Shastra Seema Bal) a paramilitary border force headquartered in NE is willing to give a contract to Asha Darshan for stitching and embroidering their dresses which is an encouraging opportunity. I agreed to help Biju with drafting a manageable business plan and how they can start executing such small scale contracts and scale it up. We took a leave around 5:00 from Bogajuli and off to Tamalpur.

On our way back we stopped by the Asha Darshan hand looms shop right on the main road outside the byline that takes one to Asha Darshan Center. The shop is rather basic, stocked with hand spun clothes made by Asha Darshan folks; and bore a look of an uninviting PDS (Government run public distribution service) shop. I observed that the shop

needs some basic modification to look inviting much like shops in vicinity to be able to market its products well.

The reminder of the evening, till 10:30 PM was spent in discussing about the infrastructural needs of the schools, issues around scaling tailoring and weaving program, and more importantly the budget that has been under discussion for a while at Asha for Education.

Notes

1. Teachers have not been paid for past 7-8 months due to insufficient funds and the situation is untenable.
2. Mid day meals in primary schools are in abeyance due to lack of funds and that's an avoidable situation as well. Mid day meals are the only source of nourishment for a lot of children attending the primary schools.
3. Schools like Devinagar and Satyanaraynpur are in urgent need of infrastructure repairs. Dilapidated bamboo huts don't do justice for schools with such motivated teachers and students. At the same time, more effort should be made for some of these schools to be converted into Government Schools that will allow Asha Darshan to tap into Government funds.
4. Most schools had no toilets, and perhaps tapping to Swatch Bharat Abhiyaan will allow access to funds to construct toilets. Although, lack of running water supply is a precondition that most toilets constructed under Government scheme ignore and therefore fail.
5. Schools are well stocked with material and children have workbooks and stationary. There is dearth of good reading material and perhaps using old newspapers is useful supplement instead of trying to force fit english medium material from America (as donated by OmPrakash Foundation)
6. Schools could benefit from more sports goods - footballs, skipping ropes, the basics. Most school have open playgrounds and these are fertile grounds for encouraging sports.
7. There is little or no awareness amongst local population on improved farming methods, despite of all the investments in agricultural technical institutions, our farming

practices are dated and stuck in time. At the same time, no school is teaching farming practices, or about local ecology to middle o high school children

8. There is an immediate need to introduce teaching about local flora and fauna, local crops and their cycles, about local ecology in the curriculum.

9. There's equally a need to mobilize community, including children and sensitize them to natural resource management - water harvesting through checkdams etc. to conserve water and rebuild lost practices of water use

10. Weavers training program is wonderfully constructed but it needs both investment as well as a business plan. It can greatly benefit from a business plan that articulates what to manufacture, at what cost, and some focus on marketing and branding will be useful. Perhaps a connection with IIM Shillong can be established to help devise a business plan

11. The same observation goes for Sewing program as well. There is a tremendous opportunity with the SSB offering contract work for sewing dresses that can be revenue generating.

12. Environmental, and social challenges cannot be ignored. This is a hard place to introduce change in, however, Asha Darshan, and specifically Biju ji have a tremendous public goodwill and a positive image in the community.