

## Site Visit Report (Asha for Education) – VARUN - 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> November 2017

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### Details:

- On 8<sup>th</sup> November 2017, I met Dr S P Singh near Naugarh market around 5 pm (after my visit to another organization Gramya Sansthan supported by Asha for Education). We talked about his journey and formation of VARUN (VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION FOR RURAL UPLIFTMENT AND NETWORKING). In the early days after getting Doctorate from BHU, he used to travel on feet for multiple days from one village to another. The people were more hesitant and it took years to get their support for acceptance of better agricultural methods and to build primary schools in such remote areas. Some of the villages are still quite disconnected during monsoons and the only way to access a market is 2 hrs of walk. He also described how giving toffee to kids became a game-changer for increasing attendance amidst first generation learners in the early days. They used to be Banabasi people living and depending on Jungle completely. There are mostly Salgaon trees as well as Mohua trees. Now these banabasi people have much better exposure. They slowly adopted to farming and their productivity from farming also significantly improved thanks to the expertise of Dr S P Singh.
- On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2017, Dr S P Singh and I visited 5 centers – **Jhariyawa, Hadahi, Nauvanar, Dhobahi and Aurawatad**. Ramkrit, a community mobilizer (and previous student) of VARUN accompanied us. These areas have scarcity of water, consistent rains as well as arable lands for farming. Very bad connectivity by road has reduced the ways of income too. Malnutrition is a big problem. Being mostly first generation learners, the children need special care. However, in multiple villages, the distance to nearby Government school is 2+ km and it may need crossings across small streams. Hence VARUN has established 10+ education centers in multiple areas when they saw a need of primary schools. They also shifted their work when a new Govt school came up in that area. It felt good to see Children in each center getting toffees from Dr S P Singh (reminded me of his initial days of establishing schools in these remote corners). While in the schools, I have interacted with the students (academic as well as personal) and teachers.

- **Observations in different schools**

- Jhariyawa

- The kids can reply to my questions in Hindi
- They can do addition and subtraction (verbally and on board). Most students know tables till 12
- Kids are registered in local schools and get their uniforms/books from there. However due to the distance, they need the VARUN school right inside the village
- Little kids can respond to the flash cards and they can count
- The kids were in the same room
- I saw a hand-pump for water in this village near the school
- Village mostly agricultural but the villagers earn from physical labour work (mazdoori). Some of them work for forest department time to time. The scope of NREGA is very limited in most areas of UP.

- Hadahi

- Math wise they are close to the level of Jhariyawa
- Lower classes were limited to ABCD. Class 5 knew few English words
- Hindi wise the kids were good
- The water of this village comes from a well.

- Nauvanar

- This is a recently opened centre.
- The kids used to go to a school at Keshar but the distance was a bit problematic.
- These kids in Class 5 were smart. I asked them the whereabouts of their elder brothers and sisters. Most of them are studying in Naugarh after Class 6, some in colleges.
- The village gets water from a well.

- Dhobahi

- This is one of the remotest villages in this area. It comes under the Dam area and when the water level is high, they are restricted to walking only. Nearby, I saw some mustard farming. Most areas, the rice paddy cultivation efforts failed due to rain issues. In most online maps, this village is shown inside water next to dam.

- The children were very shy. Their clothes were not clean. Lack of exposure can be one of the reasons.
  - Their math skill for the age was acceptable.
  - There were lots of little children (younger siblings of the students) making noise apart from the students. We requested the teacher to separate out the 3-5 yr old children or give them some activity while focusing on teaching the older students. Thankfully, the fire damage is being fixed and there will be more space.
  - I had lunch (bati chokha) in this village. When I went back, I told them to jump and do some exercise. That photo session went well.
  - **The good news for this school is that given the remoteness, they are given priorities in the residential govt girls' school in Naugarh (Kasturba).** Many of the sisters of current students are studying there assuring their future till higher classes.
- Aurawatad
  - When I reached, it was already 3 pm and school was over. We saw some PT exercise/routine demonstration.
  - I had little bit of conversation with kids.
- Most villages are 10+ km away from Naugarh and right inside forest areas. It took us less time through short cuts via dried up streams and rocks. But via regular route it may take 1+ hr from Naugarh by bike. I could see the markings of forest departments. Even in winter, the day temperature was quite high and I could only imagine how it will be in summer (reaching easily 45 C). There is no electricity in most of these villages. It is just 100 km from Varanasi but it feels like a different country – disconnected and neglected. It felt good to meet people like Ramkrit who had studied in VARUN schools and is now working with the same organizations. Many students from these schools have come out of this area and got jobs in cities.
- Suggestions after visit
  - More focus on the scholarships and opportunities available from Govt (like the Kasturba school)
  - Some story books with pictures or comics in each center (mostly Hindi, some basic English)

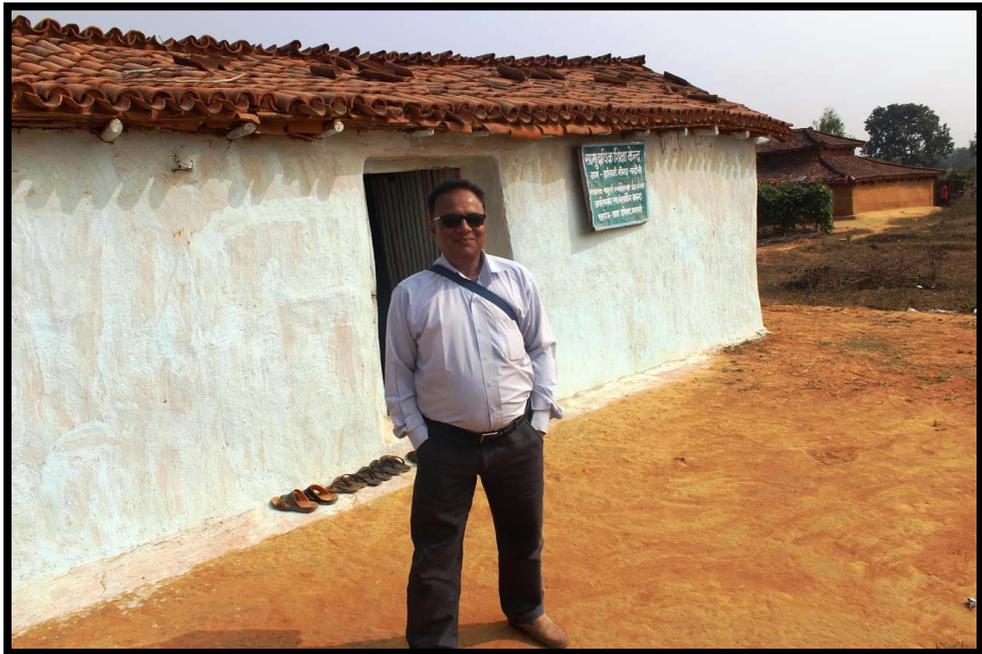
- Tracking students from VARUN schools at higher classes, in case some of them drop out due to financial reasons.

### **Overall impression**

- This is the background of the people VARUN are helping in daily basis
  - Electricity – No
  - Drinking water – scarce
  - Toilet count in village – 0
  - Source of income – heavily dependent on rains and it is not happening much (I saw many dead Paddy fields), one person from each family is doing physical labour work outside village to earn; the NREGA work is nonexistent.
  - Access to first step of education - Distance to primary school -2/3 km (involves crossing streams in monsoon, not possible for 5-8 yr olds)
- Still there is hope as the villagers have people like Dr S P Singh who has been working in such villages for last 26 years. These centers can bridge this gap of education in primary level. There are many firsts due to VARUN - first graduate in village, first jobs as teacher, and the list goes on...
- Yes, the children are shy, they do not know much English but most of them will finish high schools and they will make their villages better, some of their elder brothers/sisters are doing B Sc/B A, they will follow their footsteps.
- I have visited 50+ projects across India and from that experience; I can say VARUN is working in an area most Indians from Metros do not know exist. The people of these villages are still waiting for those facilities that became something for granted in many areas of India, 20 years back. Hence such project needs more support from Asha for Education. The more the students from VARUN come out, get exposure and become successful financially, the better these villages will be.



**Road from Naugarh to Jhariyawa**



**Dr S P Singh in front of Jhariyawa center**



**Students of Jhariyawa center**



**These paths become bottlenecks in monsoon (Way to Hadahi)**



**Students of Hadahi**



**Dr S P Singh (left on the back), myself (in the middle) and the teacher (to the right)  
with the students in Hadahi Center**



**Hadahi center from distance**



**The new center in Nauvanar**



**Students in Nauvanar**



**Farm lands en route Dhobahi**



**Students of Dhobahi**



**Little children playing outside Dhobahi center**



**Photo session after lunch**



**The bike path between Dhobahi and Aurawatad**



**Students of Aurawatad center**



**Posing with Aurawatad students**



**Posing with Dr S P Singh (left); Me (Padmanava Sen) on right**