

Site Visit Report – Project VARUN

September 21-22, 2025

Submitted on behalf of Asha SV

On September 23, 2025, I travelled to Uttar Pradesh with my 4.5-year-old son, Vihaan, to conduct a site visit for Project VARUN on behalf of Asha SV. This report reflects that visit.

The journey from Mysore to Naugarh took nearly an entire day:

- Auto from home to the bus stop
- Bus from Mysore to Bengaluru airport
- Flight and onward travel
- Drive from Varanasi airport to Naugarh

We stopped along the way for some tea and to shop for vegetables for the next day.



Enroute Varanasi



Quick stop to buy vegetables in the village

By the time we reached the village, it was past 9 PM.

The drive from Varanasi airport to Naugarh brought back many memories from my previous site visit in 2019. And yet, this trip felt very different for two reasons. First, I wanted to see how our efforts since my last visit had impacted the children. Second, I was now returning not just as a volunteer, but as a father — and in the company of my own son.

The next morning, after a simple breakfast, we set out for the site visit. We were accompanied by Dr. Singh, who runs the organisation, along with three other staff members. This time, we focused on centres I had not been able to visit during my earlier trip:

- **Vankheta** – 30 children
- **Aurawatand** – 65 children
- **Dhannikhoh** – 38 children
- **Sidhwabath** – 30 children



Although these were new villages and centres for me, at a broader level they felt familiar — and heartbreakingly similar to what I had seen in 2019:

- Remote villages marked by extreme poverty
- Communities largely made up of SC/ST families
- Harsh heat and difficult living conditions
- A small *kachha* structure serving as the VARUN education centre

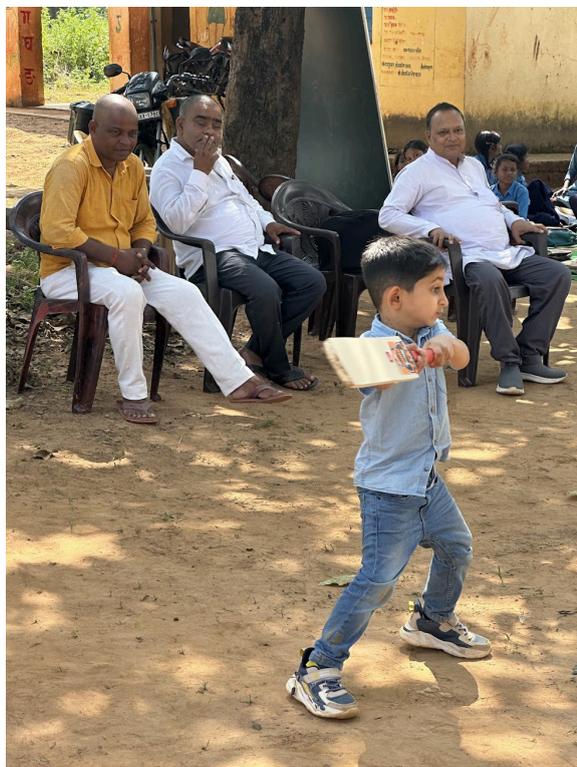


Extreme heat even in September



Thatched/tin roof over homes

As I had anticipated, the language barrier was difficult for Vihaan to overcome. To help bridge that gap, we carried a bat and a ball so the children could bond over cricket. It turned out to be the perfect icebreaker. At each centre, we spent about half an hour speaking with the children and another half hour playing with them. The children were kind and generous with Vihaan — they let him bat almost all the time, and only occasionally asked to switch.



At every centre, Dr. Singh introduced us to the teacher and walked us through the activities being conducted there. We also discussed the challenges each centre was facing.

One example that stood out was **Dhannikhoh**, where the room had flooded during the rains and part of the roof had collapsed. As a result, the centre had been moved indefinitely to a much smaller temporary space with almost no ventilation. It was so hot and claustrophobic inside that we eventually moved the children outdoors, under a tree, to continue our conversation.



At the flooded center in Dhannikhoh



Inside the center



A girl arranging a chair for us



Exhausted from blazing heat

After completing the village visits, we stopped by a stream to share some parathas and pickles that had been prepared for us by one of the staff members' spouses. It was a simple meal, but one that felt memorable in that setting.

Later, we drove back to the main centre and inspected the hostel that has recently been built using funds from Asha SV. We spent the evening speaking with children staying there, as well as a few neighbours from the surrounding area. Before leaving, we shared a quick cup of tea, a game of cricket, and said our goodbyes.



I had to cut short the site visit by a day due to a personal reason unrelated to the visit itself.

One of the staff members, Suraj, accompanied us on the three-hour drive back to Varanasi airport. That long drive gave us the chance to talk about his life beyond his work at VARUN. In the context of the poverty around him, he appeared to be relatively better off financially. And yet, what stood out to me was how familiar his burdens felt — the quiet pressure of being a good father and a good husband, and of trying to provide well for one's family. Before we parted, he reminded me that his wife had been preparing dinner for us using the vegetables we had bought the previous evening, had we stayed back as originally planned.

Every child we met reminded me of Vihaan in some way - in their energy, their playfulness, their curiosity, their need for attention and affection. Yet, their realities could not be more different. The contrast between the future I can imagine for my son and the uncertainty that surrounds the futures of these children was hard to ignore. It was a stark reminder of how much of a child's starting point in life is determined simply by the accident of birth.

In places where survival itself is a daily challenge, education can easily become secondary. And yet, that is precisely why VARUN's work feels so important. The organisation is trying to move the needle — even if only gradually — in communities that would otherwise remain invisible in India's larger story. These education centres are not just classrooms; they are small spaces where children are given structure, encouragement, exposure, and, perhaps most importantly, the permission to imagine a life beyond the one immediately around them.

Even during a short visit, it was evident how meaningful that exposure can be in the context of poverty, exclusion, and lack of awareness.

Back at Varanasi airport, Vihaan was hungry, so I ordered him a plate of fried rice for INR 800. It struck me then that the cost of that one meal could cover nearly an entire week's meals for a child at VARUN. That thought stayed with me as I slowly transitioned back into my own reality.



Suraj and me at the airport



Varanasi airport meal

