Voluntary Association for Rural Upliftment and Networking (VARUN)

Site Visit Report

-Neehar Jandhyala
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**Region**
VARUN works in remote area of Chandauli Dist., near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh closely bordering Bihar. This area is quite neglected and has remained backward. It certainly has pre-independence environment, totally cut-off from the rest of the world. This area has wide-stricken poverty at multiple levels. It has historically been affected by naxal ideology and carries image as place for kidnappings. I was warned not to visit this region by my acquaintances when I proposed the idea. Road to the villages are very deserted, which got laid few years ago and look new.

People lead very simple lives and are very welcoming. They live in mud house structures totally eco-friendly which keeps interiors cool in spite of heat outside. Most of the villages don’t have electric lines established. Few of the villages which have the lines established suffer from power-cuts for long hours. There is much water scarcity with water bodies low in water levels and soiled. But people look amazingly accommodating and manage to lead satisfying lives.

My site visit was coordinated between Mr. Deen Dayal of Asha-Varanasi (Kaithi) and VARUN accompanying me right from pick-up to drop-off. Visits to all the educational centers was only possible because it was summer and water bodies which usually pose reason for inaccessibility were all dry. There are a few Govt. Schools at primary level that were sighted while I was doing the sight visit but most of them are non functional because of missing teachers.

**Team**
Dr. SP Singh visited this area in 1991, while pursuing his PhD at BHU. He hails from Buxar, Bihar. His work focused on agriculture and it ended up with guiding people on various types of crops. By guiding farmers to grow vegetables, he helped many to save some money in the bank. He mentioned that after having his PhD degree in hand, he had this thought of returning to his village near Buxar, Bihar but each time some new task or challenge came up which prevented him from going back to his village. He continued to interact with villagers and took up the initiative of starting educational centers. He remained as a bachelor and has dedicated his life to work in the villages. Dr. Singh has supported the education of few students, monetarily. He continues to do so in few cases. He was telling students in Shahpur that there was an incident in his life that inspired him to pursued PhD. A visitor commented about his town that in spite of so many people living there, there were hardly any person who had a degree. So, he made up his mind to study as much as he can and excel academically.
Education was not welcomed during the initial years of VARUN, with resistance from villagers who feared that their daily life would be disrupted if the home-staying kid goes to school without taking care of household needs. This attitude has changed now and villagers are sending their kids to schools willingly. Popularity of education had spread with other village folks asking VARUN to start an educational center in their village.

Mr. Anjani Singh is a close friend of Dr. SP Singh who lives in Varanasi with family. He teamed up with Dr. SP Singh to help him with the cause and registered the organization name as VARUN. In the early days, there have been few friends Dr. Singh from BHU who helped with approving provision of organic seeds to farmers on loan. Farmers could return back the loan as seeds itself.

Currently, there are a few more dedicated people at VARUN who could be slated as next generation volunteers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ramkrit</td>
<td>Shahpur</td>
<td>Shahpur resident. Been with VARUN and under guidance of Dr. Singh ji, he is being promoted as community mobilizer. He is a Graduate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Bhavan Kumar</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Disabled teacher. Skilled in carpentry, etc. He is a graduate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Gurbhari</td>
<td>Shahpur</td>
<td>Middle-aged person who also has been part of VARUN for past few years. He studied up to Intermediate. His kids attend this center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Chandrasekhar</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Vinod Kumar</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Education up to Intermediate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Satendra</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rakesh Kumar</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Dr. Singh knew him since a very young age and grew up under guidance of Dr. Singh. He completed Intermediate and has joined VARUN to help Dr. Singh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Bindu Kumar</td>
<td>Dobahi</td>
<td>Graduate. He travels 8kms everyday to reach Shahpur center.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Visit to Educational Centers:**

Mr. Ramkrit and Dr. Singh led us on motorcycles to visit the centers in the order shown in chart below. Dr. Singh mentioned that since this was a holiday season, he had to request all the kids to come for one day for my sake. He also mentioned that he is confident to see full attendance because they will be expecting candy's. So, he carried a bag full of candies that could be distributed. He mentioned that this actually was an accidental discovery but surely struck with the idea, after having
seen good attendance due to anticipation. These were during the early years of VARUN's starting educational centers.

**Interaction with students**
At every center, I tried interacting with kids by asking few questions. Few of the questions I asked and answers I got were with an intention to see if there was a sense of direction in teachers and students. I found that kids were quite shy and the reason could be that there are not much visitors here and anyone visiting them is a foreigner. Shahpur was the only place, pretty much, where kids were outgoing. And the reason could be that this center has been the central region of VARUN for all activities. Children here are growing up seeing Mahila mandal meetings and other activities in action, which certainly has made a visible difference in the way kids have interacted with me and with Dr. Singh. Worthy to mention that all the education centers have debates conducted on few random topics related to farming or education, etc.

**Interaction with Mahila Mandal**
This meeting was in Shahpur which is the most active establishment of VARUN. Most of the women who turned up for this meeting are parents of the children studying in the school. This was a meeting arranged by Dr. Singh so that I can interact with them rather than the regular meeting. Amongst them was wife of Mr.
Punnu Singh (forgot to note down her name). Mr. Punnu Singh was with VARUN for a long time before moving on to other job to earn more money. There was an attendance sheet which had names of all the women with signatures or thumb-prints across their name.

After I was introduced, Dr. Singh mentioned to the parents that the school’s success and the village prosperity lies in their hands. Discussion went on towards the current situation of Govt. School in the region in a village called Jamsod. This school has teachers appointed but none of them are turning up and the initial discussion was on whether that problem should be tackled or not and if yes, how to do about doing it. They discussed that Panchayat is already aware and DEO should be informed about this.

One lady was vocal about girl child education being a concern because of the insecurity of sending her outside the village for higher studies and postponing marriage. Dr. Singh replied to this that he does not have a solution yet, but a solution is possible only when all come together to solve issues.

All women participated in discussions and seemed vocal and thoughtful. But when I asked the question if the parents would send their girl child to Varanasi if the education prospect was promising, there was unanimous "No". When I further questioned their thought, there was an old woman who was quite unhappy and walked out of the room signaling wastage of time. She further goaded another woman to come out of the room.

To test their view of education, I asked how were children making difference in their lives. Most of the women see their kids as someone who should help monetarily. Importance of education in helping kids to grow intellectually has not yet been recognized as the central idea.

Considering that a them that the education is a life-time process and they should learn from their kids so that in the process kids will be much more motivated. To this, there was a lady who kind of belittled her kids saying what will they teach elders. Dr. Singh and myself tried to defend education and other women seemed to agree. This lady in question also did not want to learn how to sign her own name instead of thumb-print. Dr. Singh pointed out openly that she should broaden her mindset. Few other women in the crowd also supported this.
Educational Centers

Dobahi
Our first stop was at Dobahi school which is covered 3 sides by water and 1 side by hill. This is a village of 16 families and could be accessed by us on motorbike only because it was summer and the water body surrounding the village was dry. During winter or rainy season, the only way to get to this village is by crossing hill. The road is just a made up path rather than a formal one. Reaching this place from Naugarh was pretty much like navigation in sea. I just had a sense of direction and it looked like people also usually get here following the same principle.
Image on left is bridge through Kramnaka river which cuts off this path seen here during monsoon and winter.

School building.
School is headed by Mr. Bhuvan Kumar, shown here. He suffers from polio. Mr. Bhuvan Kumar has been with VARUN since the beginning of the project’s establishment and is more than just a teacher. He would take care of any maintenance of the school and volunteer for other events.
This region is hit by drought. We were served with water and later was shown the source of this. It comes from a 10 feet deep pit with about 1 foot of muddy water inhabited by 2 frogs. Villagers would collect water in a pot to wait until the sediments settle, filter it through a cloth and boil it before drinking. Picture below on the left shows a woman there trying to collect water. It takes about 2 hours for the water to ooze after which it is drawn out and sediments are filtered through a cloth. Villagers were advised to boil the water before drinking.

There is a borewell in this village that is lying abandoned. Dr. Singh notified media about this. Borewell in this village is lying abandoned because of some breakdown issue. This report has triggered some action to fix the borewell.
There are a little kids in the middle (like the one in red color with finger near mouth) who are siblings of students just accompanying their brother or sister. Dr. Singh mentioned that when there is an advance notice given about his visit, these kids would certainly visit for the candy.
Interaction with kids at Dobahi
Kids were quite shy here initially because 4th grade kids were very few and majority of them were girls. In addition, there were hardly any people in the village and they are seldom visited by outsiders. They were quite warm when I was leaving though because they got toffees from Dr. Singh.

Q: What games do you play?
A: We play running-catching within the compound, fugadi (2 people swirling)
Q: (Pointing to poster that had Devanagari alphabets – to 3rd std.) Can you tell me what is this?
A: *Got the answers to the letters.*
Q: Can anyone tell me what is the capital of India?
A: *No response until Dr. Singh made a girl stand-up and she answered*
Q: Who here can build the school like this? Describe to me how this school was built (structural design)
A: *They were all silent until Dr. Singh picked a 2nd grade boy to answer. All the kids supported him in answering how the mud walls are built.*
I was asked to give a little pep talk while the toffees were being distributed.

One of the budget items every year includes money for repairing the roof because the wood usually gets decomposed and gets brittle very easily as shown in the picture below.
Kids were very enthusiastic while giving a send-off. They were quiet in the class all through the time, when I was with them.
In the center holding stick is Sarpanch of the village, Mr. Pyarelal.

**Auratawand**

This educational center is about 5 kms and took about 15 minutes to reach. We spent around 20 minutes over here interacting with kids. This village had bigger homes and more people were to be seen.
(Above pic) Educational center @Auratawand. Dr. Singh entering. 
(Below pic) Mr. Vinod Kumar (near the entrance, far behind) is the teacher. He 
travels 5kms everyday on bicycle which takes 45 minutes to 1 hour and described as 
young, energetic and enthusiastic. He is new to VARUN and got recently hired 
(about an year ago). (ghost image near the cane-door is because I was taking panoramic pic on my 
phone and the movement of the body turned out to be processed that way). 

Left-most boy in the front is Amarjeet. He is sole care-taker of his 3 brothers 
because his Mother died and his Father has abandoned them. Dr.Singh was 
mentioning that this kid is smart and capable. 
Right-most row are 1st std kids and each row to their left is next grade. Likewise, 
left-most are 4th std kids. As seen in Dobahi, there are lot of kids who are just 
accompanying their siblings to school.

Interaction with kids at Auratawand
Like in Dobahi kids here in lower grade were shy. 
Q: [Pointing to the wicket and stumps] What is that game called?
A: Replied in Hindi as balla-gend. Then Dr. Singh asked back what it is called in English and reply came good.
Q: How much is 13+26? -- 3rd std kids.
A: Answered it after a long pause.
Q/A: Dr. Singh asked a girl to come show her book. Asked her about what she was writing.
Q: What is the capital of India?
A: Higher grade kids in the front answered.
2 girl students were picked to sing a song. They were confident and quite involved while singing (shown in picture below). Every song ended with "Jai Hind Jai Bharat"

One of the notebooks held by kid in the first row.
Views of the village -- Auratawand:
Jhariyawan
This village has about 27 families. This village also suffers from bad water problem. As seen in picture below, this school is quite isolated.
Picture below shows Mr. Gurbhari Singh, teacher at this education center. There are 27 kids in this school. When I visited there were 25 and 2 were absent. I was told about this upfront by Mr. Gurbhari Singh. Kids here were little more less shy. It could be because of the time of the day when they were nearing their lunch time and were looking forward for me to finish my visiting them so that they can get home for their food.

Girl with pink skirt is Mr. Gurbhari Singh's daughter. His wife is village is part of village Panchayat.
Interaction with kids
Q: Pointed to Indian Map and asked them to show me where is New Delhi and Varanasi. They could not. I showed them where all I traveled on the Indian map.
Q: What is the time now?
A: There was a little lag in answering correctly. It was 12.25pm while the answer was 12 noon. Some prompt and there was one student from grade 4 answered correctly.
Little more interaction where I talked a few kids before we signed off. It was beyond students lunch time.

Hadahi
This village is about 20 minutes from Jhariyawan. Electricity reaches this village but they suffer from long power-cuts, especially during summer. There are about 20 families in this village. Mr. Chandrasekhar takes care of the center here.
The mound seen in the above picture is where flag hoisting was done in January. Kids here were similar to the other centers. Interaction with kids was very similar to the other centers I visited too. It was past their lunch time and I did not want to take up more of their time.

Interaction with kids
Q: I pointed to a slate that a student was holding and asked what he was working on. He answered accordingly.
Q: Dr. Singh asked some interactive questions on who did their homework.
A: Surprising honesty where few kids did not raise their hands and openly said that they did not have 'light' (power) most of the time and during the little time they had power they did not work on their homework.

I meanwhile that I came from a very long distance and they had the right curiosity to know more. Overall it was a nice experience even at this center.

Dr. Singh picked this student to sing something. At the end of it, Dr. Singh was saying that everyone enjoys this guy talking or singing as he is very funny and the whole class started laughing. It confirmed my impression that Dr. Singh does interact quite actively with all kids in all centers and this is pretty much his daily routine to give surprise visits.
Dhabanga educational center is being operated in Bihar which is on the banks of river Guravat which divides UP and Bihar. This area was accessible because it was summer else, it is a little difficult to cross the river. This area looked poorest compared to the rest of the areas. It took about 45 minutes from Hadahi on the bike. It was quite hot when we reached there and I was quite dehydrated because of the heat. Worth mentioning here that Mr. Deen Dayal who is from Asha-Varanasi was fasting that day and still managed to help me out go around all the places (quite amazing). It is but quite heartful to see kids waiting for me patiently. The uniqueness of this center is that there are more girl children than the boys. This center was opened after the closure of center in Imlidiyah because most of the people there were nomads and about 70% of the population fled from the place.
On the left in the above picture is the new school under-construction. On the right is the present center towards which Mr. Deen Dayal (green) and Dr. Singh (blue). Dr. Singh was describing that biggest problem in this center is that people are highly caste conscious and division is quite deep. Finding a teacher itself is quite a challenging task apart from convincing the people to send their kids forgetting the caste divisions. Area is quite backward and barren. VARUN has barely made an impact in this area except that few families are taking a step forward towards education and sending their kids to school.
This school's teacher is Mr. Rakesh Kumar who studied upto intermediate. He was known to Dr. Singh from a very young age and got some education under guidance of Dr. Singh.

We interaction with kids

We had little informal talks with the kids at this school. One kid sang but I did not ask a lot of questions to students here.

Shahpur

This is the main center where VARUN started its efforts. Mr. Ramkrit who is currently one of the most active member along with Dr. Singh in the field graduated from this center and became active in teaching. Currently VARUN is looking after providing support to 6th to 8th grade. Primary school has been established in Shahpur and kids are attending school for lower classes.

Experience at Shahpur was unlike any other educational center. Interacting with kids here was extremely encouraging. They are not just grown up kids but few of them seem quite confident and ambitious. It was 3pm by the time I reached and everybody was waiting patiently for me. I had been told earlier by Mr. A K Singh multiple times earlier that the support which Asha for Education – Silicon Valley has provided for this center has been extremely crucial and only because of that support that they were able to continue with their endeavors. It seemed to concur those statements. Visiting each center and finally visiting Shahpur does give a feeling of optimism that the goal of socio-economic development will be achieved.

Teachers here are Mr. Satyendra Kumar, Mr. Santosh who hails from Sonebhadra (55 minutes away) and Mr. Bindu Kumar who is a post-grad. He travels 5kms everyday to this school.
Below photograph was taken while we were leaving Shahpur and were heading back to Naugarh. It was more than an hour past the time everyone was dispersed.

Grade 6:
Q: Why are you looking to get education?
A: (a student volunteered to answer).
Sir, I come to school to get some knowledge. After I grow up I can do something in life. (there was a brief pause and seemed he was not convinced of his own answer. Then he said this...) I am no different from you.
A: A girl volunteered to sing (pink/yellow outfit on the right).
Q: Who is the president of India?
A: (a lot of voices) Pranab Mukharjee.
Q: And Vice-President?
A: (left most student in white shirt in front row answered correctly as Md. Ansari.)
Q: Dr. Singh requested someone to sing songs.
*Girl in the right picture is singing. She was clear and readily sang.*
I asked a few more interactive questions and moved on to next class.
Grade 7
Q: Do you like coming to school?
A: Yes, we do.
Q: Why?
A: There was a very long silence before Dr. Singh spoke to them saying that if they were not interested in coming, you may feel free to leave. Do you want to do that? Then there was a “no”.
(Student on right saying “Jai Hind Jai Bharat” after singing a song)
@Grade 8
Q: Does anyone want to contest in panchayat elections once they grow up?
A: No answer.

Dr. Singh pointed to a boy (red pants on the left in pic below) and said : "You don’t want to contest"?
Boy: No, I want to get into "Fauj" (army). There were claps for this answer from the class.

Q: Does anyone wants to come back and teach here?
A: There was no answer but one girl said that she would give it a try if situation in her life permits.

I spoke to them how Dr. Singh has come and settled here in their village even though he is free to go back to his home town, Buxar. And, the onus to carry forward the mission is in their hands. At this point Dr. Singh asked "Shall I go back?"
A: The entire class responded no.
Proposal to construct girls hostel

Adjacent to current building in Shahpur is a land donated by a local person. Dr. Singh has got quite a bit of pressure from the parents to find a solution for the girls who are educated upto 8th std and the education can further be supported. But there is one more request by the people of nearby villages to solve the problem of educating girls beyond class V, because currently Shahpur is the only center for VARUN that is having grades VI to VIII.

Proposal is to build a girls hostel here. Dr. Singh has mentioned that he does not want to take any step of building without local villagers involved. So, this idea is in brain-storming stage as of now.

Below is the donated land, viewed from hall where Mahila mandal meets.
Proposal for computer education
Dr. Singh sees it as a very good ROI to provide computer education to kids here. There are a few students who seem bright enough to get trained which would provide opportunities for self-employment. Idea is to install solar panels and have 2 computers, preferably laptops.

Naugarh
This is where Dr. Singh lives and has VARUN’s registered office. All the furniture has been donated by various people in the village. Dr. Singh lives in a small room opposite to this very office shown below. Also to mention, this is also the library. A lot of books have been donated by multiple people. Few years ago, few books were given to Kasturba Gandhi Girls Hostel as a help. This act has indirectly helped VARUN to gain admission for few girls in the hostel. He mentioned that they moved to this compound last year. It is in this very office that Dr. Singh holds multiple meetings. It is a cramped place but things do get done. There is a small stretch of road from the state highway that leads to this village. Dr. Singh was describing how the contractor was trying to cut down the spending and cutting corners by hiding information of where to lay down the road. But as it turned out that the contractor was staying temporarily near Dr. Singh’s residence and he could convince the contractor to lay the road for accessibility.
Summary and Conclusion
VARUN organization and its work happened with Dr. Singh visiting this place on his academic pursuit. The work clearly happened due to the sheer determination and pursuit of Dr. Singh, to help people who asked for help. It is imperative for AFE-SV to support this project for coming decade if this work has to be sustainable, especially there is no sight in near future for these educational centers to be converted to Govt. Schools.
VARUN is run in a very unorthodox manner in terms of organizational structure. Reason is – delicate nature of people. The very concept of schooling, meetings and experiments in agriculture were earlier considered as cultural shock. I have an impression that if more VARUN educated students graduate and come back to join the organization and contribute, there is little help for Dr. Singh. Many kids who have graduated from these schools are working elsewhere and have been setting an example to the people to explore more outside. Further, there is nobody else and nothing in this area that can make the kind of impact VARUN is making. Biggest reason being- the trust, people have developed over VARUN. This organization needs more people like Mr. Ramkrit, who has been with VARUN for sometime now and has been getting some valuable training from Dr. Singh. He is now a graduate.
People here live their life each day as it passes and don’t really have the attitude to plan for days ahead. It is VARUN which taught them how to save money and taught the concept of banks. Surprisingly, even though the farmers associated with VARUN grow vegetables and implement techniques like crop-rotation, there are still many farmers around that region who don’t do this but continue to grow same kind of crops every year. This shows that ideas are not spreading as per expectations.

Problem of naxalism is quite low now. But speaking to Dr. Singh, he mentioned that police sometimes raid these areas and harass people for no reason. So, the problem of naxalism cannot be completely ruled out in future. Kids need right kind of education and protection. And, this is one of the top priorities of VARUN’s educational center. They have a keen goal of preparing students who can improve the overall situation in the area. Beyond that, I got a sense that VARUN could create a possibility to make Shahpur a "model village" for other villages in the area to follow. Mr. Anjani Singh mentioned that this was one of the ideas they had quite sometime back.

**Miscellaneous**

Below is the photo of Mr. Ramkrit’s residence where we had our lunch at 4pm. We were served with local mangoes which were extremely delicious and Mr. Ramkrit’s family was very welcoming. As seen, this place is quite neat and clean owing to mud. These houses seen are actually within one compound and a common entrance is behind Mr. Ramkrit. Streets are much narrower than what is seen here.
Lot of villagers make a living by going around in the forest and collecting wild fruits. Couple of trees mentioned here:

Mahua fruit

Chiraunji Tree
Shahpur street: