

Site Visit Report for visit to Asha Kaithi Libraries and Vallabh Bhai Fellowship 22-25 Feb 2023

I had the opportunity to visit Asha Kaithi in late February 2023 to attend the Asha India conference. The 3-day conference provided a good platform to meet with Asha volunteers from all over India and learn more about Asha Kaithi's work, some of which Asha Boston has started supporting since 2022, and also interact with Vallabh Bhai who has been a pillar at Asha India for multiple decades.



Asha Kaithi Library Initiative

In the last few years, Asha Kaithi has been supporting a bunch of small libraries in nearby villages using different formats like e-libraries, mobile libraries, and a study center at Kaithi. The mobile library initiative has been rapidly expanding into many villages. To avoid repeating information I will request the reader to refer to the 2021 site visit report for a list of villages where mobile library is functional.

It was during my Dec 2021 visit that I met with one of the persons who operates the mobile library by traveling from village to village on his motorbike.

A budget from Asha Kaithi is expected this year for continued support for the library initiative. This would involve supporting honorariums for the staff working in the library initiative as well as purchasing new study materials.



Vallabh Bhai

Although I've been familiar with his work for many years having been associated with Asha for a long time, my personal acquaintance with Vallabh bhai is fairly new (since 2021). To me, it seems lately Vallabh bhai has gotten involved with Asha Trust with a renewed focus on grassroots education.

This shows up in not just the library initiative described above but also in recent efforts of collaboration with Asha Chennai and attempting to implement some of the methodologies locally in the Varanasi/Kaithi area that have found success at Asha Chennai.

Asha Kaithi has long been involved in activism in areas outside of education like RTE(Right to Education), RTI (Right to Information), and RTH (Right to Healthcare). But lately, the Kaithi Center has been organizing teacher training workshops, and hosting a library, study center, and education camps for local students.

Vallabh bhai has been trying to get more involved in working with Govt and municipal schools in Varanasi city and a major challenge in that direction has been the accessibility of the Kaithi center to students from the city. Kaithi is at least 45 minutes away from Varanasi by public transport so most schools are reluctant to send the students this far. With that in mind, a 2-bed flat has been rented in the city in late 2022 to be used to execute some developmental programs. One room in the flat is used as an office while other rooms are used for the programs. The activities at this location are primarily supervised by Indu Pandey who holds an advanced degree in Social Work from Kashi Vidyapeeth. Indu is also the sister of an Asha Fellow Mahesh Pandey who runs the Apna Ghar Boys Hostel at Asha Kanpur.

Meanwhile, the makeshift education centers running at various brick kilns in the Kaithi area have been doing well. All the Asha India conference delegates visited one such center at Rudra brick kiln near Kaithi. On the western fringes of Varanasi city lies Nagepur where Asha Samijilk Vidyalaya (ASV) run by an Asha Fellow Nandlal Master is located. Amit Rajbhar, a long-time teacher at ASV quit in 2022 because he wanted to start his own set of education centers. He had found considerable success in running two small centers in his village of Chakrapanpur during Covid lockdowns when ASV was shuttered and he wanted to make these centers permanent.





When I visited in Feb 2023, Amit had expanded to 3 centers with the main center running in his village on land owned by him. He managed to clear the crops from this land to set up the center which now has a small room and a larger tin shed next to it. CLE Trust provides some tutoring over Zoom regularly. Amit was approached by some other local organizations to become an affiliate and work under their respective banners but Vallabh bhai and other Asha staff were able to convince Amit to stay within the Asha family. Having been familiar with Amit's capabilities for a long time Vallabh bhai requested Amit to oversee all education centers that run on brick kilns. These include centers located near Amit's area of operation (west of Varanasi) as well as centers in the Kaithi area (east of Varanasi). I'm quite pleased with this outcome since having interacted with Amit extensively, I believe he will be a valuable asset to Asha Trust.

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