

KJSA Site Visit for Asha-MN (by Anirban Patra on January 22, 2015)

I visited the four schools run by KJSA during my trip to India. Bimal da (Bimal Mondal) was my host during this visit and showed me around. The four schools run by KJSA are located in:

1. Gabtala – 110 students approx. – pre-primary to 4th grade
2. Jamtala – 60 students approx. – mostly pre-primary with some students in 1st to 4th grade
3. North Kaorakhali – 100 students approx. – pre-primary
4. South Kaorakhali – 80 students approx. – pre-primary

Most of the schools are built on donated land. The Gabtala school is in a small building adjoining the house of one of the teachers. The North Kaorakhali school is in a building adjoining Bimal da's house. Note that all the schools are housed in pukka buildings. However, they are in quite poor condition and could use some repairs, especially to the roofs. Except for the South Kaorakhali school, the rest all have tin sheds.

My visit was during January when the new school year begins in Bengal. There was some ongoing enrollment and attendance was in the 70-80% range in most schools.

I didn't have a chance to interact with the parents, but Bimal da informed me that they generally prefer the KJSA-run schools over the government primary schools. The parents are mostly contract workers in the local fields.

There are three teachers in each school and they are paid a monthly salary of Rs. 1100. These teachers live in the nearby villages and seemed reasonable satisfied with their jobs.

One of the main teachers at Gabtala and Hare Krishna da (another employee) informed me that they are all trained in and use the Montessori method for teaching the kids. Not many books are used, and a lot of the teaching material (pictures attached) is prepared by the teachers themselves.

The mid-day meal is not really a meal, but more of a snack. It generally consists of either of cake, biscuits, Bengal grams, eggs, etc. It was evident that due to the cash crunch they are facing right now, this snack has shrunk even more. On the day I visited, biscuits were being served at the Jamtala school.

One of their main concerns right now is the FCRA certification due to which Asha-MN has not been able to send them any funds since October 2014. Bimal da mentioned that he was supposed to visit a person in Kolkata the next day to try and expedite things. With the existing situation, his main trouble is paying monthly wages to the teachers. Food for the kids' mid-meals is being purchased on loan from the local grocery stores. I followed up with Bimal da on Feb. 4th and he said that the paperwork is ongoing and he expects this to be resolved in a month's time. In the meanwhile, Bimal da is managing the schools through personal donations.

Overall, the site visit was very informative of the present status and problems that KJSA is facing in running these schools. In spite of all the problems, Bimal da seemed very optimistic and hopeful that these issues would soon be resolved. Once the FCRA certificate is taken care of, Asha-MN should work with KJSA on bringing the mid-day meal back on track. One suggestion would be to ensure that the nutritional value of the supplied food is maximized using the available resources. Asha-MN should also work with KJSA on providing funds for some repair work, if possible. The teachers' salary, though meagre, seems to be sufficient for now in the rural region.

Photos taken during the visit are in the following.

1. Gabtala school



Students standing in the courtyard outside the Gabtala school.



Students reciting rhymes and folk songs in Bengali.



Teaching material prepared by the teachers themselves.



Inside the school building. A large part the construction has been done using funds received from Asha-MN.

2. Jamtala school



The school building has one open side by a pond, which receives rain during the monsoon season.





There are gaping holes in the roof and could use some repair.

3. North Kaorakhali school



This school adjoins Bimal da's house. It has a relatively good attendance.



Some of the teaching material hung on the walls. Teachers (mostly female) also take care of the immediate needs of the children.

4. South Kaorakhali school



This school is housed in a pukka building with a concrete roof. However, there are no doors or windows built as yet.

