

Mehdiganj Trip Report

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By: Santhosh C Padmanabhan (santhosh.padmanabhan@gmail.com)

Introduction and background

Lok samiti has been a long standing project partner of Asha. Anita Komanduri and I visited Mehdiganj to participate in the National Conference on Water rights organized by Lok Samiti. Various Asha chapters have been supporting the grass roots efforts empowered by Lok Samiti.

As part of this trip we made an effort to document various aspects of Lok Samiti's work. We also interacted with Nandlal master, an Asha Austin supported fellow (<http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/nov/soc-weaver.htm>). But, more than the interaction with him, the visits to various efforts co-ordinated by him and observing his work gave a lot more information on various aspects of his work the fellowship is intended to support.

1. NJSS school supported by Asha Chicago
2. NREGA, various socio-economic issues in the villages and strengthening local democracy
3. Efforts to support the 'Right to water' of the local communities and the struggle against Coke.
4. Woman's empowerment initiatives through tailoring centers and community marriages
5. Various NFEs in the region for socio-economically backward communities

(Write up on Lok Samiti and struggle against Coca-cola is available)

Lok Samiti staff

Here are a couple of lines about the staff of Lok Samiti (other than Nandlal) based on my interaction with them.

Urmila Vishwakarma is one of the women staff in Lok Samiti and is very enterprising. She also organized community programs and gave speeches there. She took me around in the communities and was received with love and affection everywhere. She owns a bike (like scooty) and is probably the first woman in the village to drive one, while her husband rides a cycle to work at Varnasi. She spoke about how cooperative her husband was about her work.

Urmila Patel is the other woman in Lok Samiti's core group. She has done stellar work in organizing women of the organization. She had initially faced resistance in her family for

the kind of field work she does, but she persisted and her family is more accepting now. She has also been nominated for the 'Chingari' award for women playing a critical role in grassroots movements.

Suresh is one of the kids that Nandlal had taught in his very first effort in the village. He works full time for Lok Samiti and is very energetic. While we were there, he was always out the whole day. He tends to concentrate on the areas of health care issues in the village. He helps with doctor appointments, procuring medicines etc.

Mahendra is also one of the kids that Nandlal had taught. He took me around to many places in the village and also travelled with me to Jaunpur. He himself has been a teacher in the NFEs run by Lok Samiti. He is very clear and concise in interacting with the communities. He takes on the role of addressing gatherings and doesn't have any stage fear. He is also part of the kala manch team. In my discussions with him, it was evident that he is not being supported enough for the fulltime job he does. This might well be the case with other staff as well.

Mukesh was playing a more active role with Lok Samiti in the past. But, now he is the village pradhan and has more responsibilities to take care of. Nevertheless, he does contribute time and effort based on needs. He helped a lot with travel (picking up and dropping off) at the conference. He is doing his B.A in sociology through correspondence and also had exams during the conference.

Rajesh comes from one of the backward communities in the village. He is silent but, works a lot behind the scenes. He is not comfortable going up on stage and addressing gatherings. But, diligently does his role of interacting with the community on a one-on-one basis. He is also always away on field work until late in the day.

Arvind used to work full time with Lok Samiti. But, he found that he couldn't support his family with the compensation he received from Lok Samiti. So, he had to work outside and earn a living, while volunteering whatever time he had for Lok Samiti efforts. He is a very good speaker and addressed many gatherings at community programs. Even at the protest, he took on the role of addressing the communities and organizing the effort through the megaphone.

Day 1 (March 23rd)

Reaching Rajatalab

We reached Rajatalab by the Shiv ganga express from Delhi. The original plan was to get down at Varnasi, where Nandlal was waiting for us. But, the train had an unscheduled stop near Rajatalab and we decided to get down as it was nearer to the village. There were lush green fields right next to the station. We walked alongside the tracks to the station as a few kids nearby walked along curious to know who we were.

Nandlal met us at the station and we drove down to the Center at Mehdiganj with our baggages. As we neared the village, we could see a lot of slogans against Coca-cola on the walls and about 'Right to water' of the communities. The center was a building that stood out. It had a school structure and the center itself had three rooms and two big halls that could even function as class rooms if required. In the upper floor there was a small kitchen and a spacious terrace. We had breakfast and various staff members of Lok samiti came in and recognized Anita right away. We got introduced to many of them. There was also a scheduled meeting in the afternoon at the center with all Lok Samiti members and representatives of the communities. We discussed briefly all the reports, government research data and surveys conducted by Lok Samiti regarding various aspects of the struggle against Coke. The plan was to summarize all relevant scientific and factual proof in one document.



Anita at the Railway station.



The fields next to the station.

Coke's Rainwater Harvesting ponds in the Farm science center

We then met up with Mr. Sanjay Jaiswal who had come to the center to meet all of us. He is the regional coordinator for the Swadesh Science Movement and People for Animals in the region. He works in a local bank for a living and volunteers all his time for these organizations. The goals of the Swadesh Science movement are to bring scientific and rational thought into the daily lives of people. This is a grass roots movement that is organized in many villages across the country. Mr. Sanjay has been studying closely the effect of dropping ground water levels in the area. He has conducted surveys and researched data from various government departments to understand the status of the water level in the region. He has also closely followed the effect on trees and vegetation in the area. He explained to us the various data available (please refer to summary of reports document) from the Ground water department and surveys made by them. There are many wells drying up in the region and clearly the time period in which coke has been operating has seen the most wells and hand pumps drying up. The area (Araji line block) itself has been declared a dark zone because of the water

scarcity. He then explained how coke claims that its rain water harvesting plants recover most of the water they consume. He again showed clearly how the RWH area declared by coke and going by average rainfall in decades in the area, that the water reclamation math of coke was bogus. Coke withdraws about 5 Lakh litres of water in a day (official estimate as declared by coke) and the water reclamation by its own data and average rainfall in the region does not even cover a week's worth of water that coke withdraws. After this discussion, Sanjay, Mahendra and I went to a RWH plant installed by coke in one of six locations. We went to the government owned 'Farm Science Center'. There were two structures. The first one was a huge open pond (it was all dry and has been like that for months because of no rainfall) 50m x 50m in dimension. This was a simple RWH structure where, other than water in the reclamation pond there is no other storage space and it percolates naturally into the ground. We took photos of the declared capacity for water regeneration. We then took a look at the other structure. It was a roof top collection system. Water through various PVC pipes from drains on top of roofs would be directed to a storage tank. There is a filtering station after which water is directed into the nearby well. We opened the storage tank to find the entire tank filled with loose bricks. Clearly this has not been functioning for a while. We again took photos of the declared capacities. We spoke to a caretaker in the region and recorded on video his statement on how frequently water has been reclaimed and the functioning of the RWH structures.

Lok Samiti Meeting at the Center

When we returned to the center, the meeting had already begun. Lok samiti volunteers span many villages and number in more than 100s. There were about a hundred people in the main Hall. Nandlal addressed everyone and set the agenda for the meeting. The first aspect discussed was the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) scheme and enforcing implementation of the Act for the benefit of the villagers. Nandlal mentioned how the Panchayat's list of villagers seeking jobs under NREGA excluded a majority of the underprivileged. There was also not a single woman in the list. Lok Samiti had been going from door to door in many villages explaining about NREGA and making a list that would be submitted to the BDO (Block Development officer) in addition to the Panchayat's list. The BDO of the region is aware of Lok Samiti's work and is cooperative. It's important to ensure that the applications and information are provided accurately to ensure the cooperation of the administration can be carried forwards. The whole process of gaining employment has many aspects. The list preparation is just the first phase. There would then be a photography session after which IDs for every person in the list would be made. Once the IDs are ready (it was estimated to be done by April 1) work for individual on the list should be allotted. Then adequate pay for the work done should also be provided. In each of these stages Lok Samiti and the community has to closely follow the actions of the administration and ensure proper implementation. The next agenda item in the

meeting was regarding the community marriages planned for May. There is a very strong gender bias in the villages. Women are not accorded equal status and dowry is rife in the region. Even when one visits the homes in the community, women do not sit on the cot or on a chair. Lok Samiti has been organizing community marriages to fight the pressure of dowry in underprivileged families. No dowry or cash is given to the bride groom's family. All expenses of the wedding are borne by Lok Samiti. The bride and bride groom's families have fifty invitees each. The couple are given gifts to start their life with a means for earning a livelihood. Nandlal discussed the tentative date in May. The volunteers went through the current list of interested families and made sure adequate documents were available – A ration card, an endorsement from the panchayat sarpanch, age certification by a doctor etc. The plan is to support 30-40 marriages this year. Beyond that number it would be difficult to accommodate all guests in one place. Deadlines were set to receive the last application. The third item on the agenda was regarding the preparation for the conference on water rights. Accommodation arrangements were discussed. Then food arrangements were discussed. Lok samiti staff was assigned roles for each aspect. All volunteers in the meeting were provided with posters to be put up in various locations in the villages. The plans for the kala manch (street song/play team) from Ghazipur were also discussed. Their schedule included performances in every basti in the villages and volunteers were assigned to coordinate each session. A mass gathering and protest was planned for the last day, March 30th. It was stressed that the highest turnout was required on that day. The meeting and various conversations were recorded on video.



Nandlal answering questions



Urmila distributing posters

Panchayat's list of NREGA applicants filled by the couple

Community marriage form to be

NREGA job card application form protest



Poster about conference and

Lunch and evening

After the meeting, a bunch of us left to have a late lunch (at around 3 PM) at a wedding ceremony. One of the volunteer's daughter was getting married and Lok Samiti staff were invited for the wedding. I was also extended an invite (In part because I could have non-vegetarian food) to the Muslim wedding. The whole environment was very festive. Lots of folks at the wedding came forward, introduced themselves to me and spoke about Lok samiti and their experiences. One of them had been a pradhan of a village. He spoke about Nandlal and how he has created a difference in the village since the schools started. Later in the day when we were back at the center, Nandlal took us on a short tour around the center. We looked at the various efforts to

reach self-sustenance in the center. They were growing wheat, rice, tomatoes, potatoes, mustard etc. on leased land around the center. There was also a cow, a bull and a calf for meeting the needs of milk and other dairy products. In the night we sat down in the lawn and had a long chat on various aspects. Mahendra, Nandlal, Anita and I discussed each others' views on leading a life in the village when compared to living in cities. The discussions moved on to SEZs, Lok Samiti's trip to Nandigram to learn about issues there, SEZs in UP, Goa and other parts of the country. Finally, we planned what other aspects were left pending for the conference as such and how I needed to schedule my various trips.

Day 2(March 24th)

Trip to Bharathiya Jan Seva Ashram

Mahendra and I arranged for a cab through one of Nandlal's friends and left for Jaunpur to visit the Asha Austin supported school, Bharatiya Jan Seva Ashram. We left early in the morning at 7 AM and returned only in the afternoon at 3 PM. More info is here

http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/396/BJSA_site_visit_santhosh.pdf

Evening walk and meeting Mukesh

Mahendra was assigned the task of talking to communities nearby the center about the conference and to remind the volunteers to reach out to as many folks as possible in the bastis (hamlets). We walked over to Mukesh's basti. Mukesh is the village pradhan and is the youngest pradhan in the area. He is a member of Lok Samiti and plays an important role in demonstrating the participation of Lok Samiti in strengthening local democracy. Mahendra explained to me how to see real change in the villages, Lok Samiti had decided to participate in the elections. It was important that a responsible pradhan who represented truly the interests of the people was elected. Mukesh contested the election and won by a huge margin. Most of the women in the village voted for Lok Samiti and decided the elections. We met Mukesh's mom who has been a part of every protest against coke over the years. She had even received head injuries in Lathi charges made by the police. I spoke briefly to Mukesh about being a pradhan. He explained that while a lot of development work could now be implemented; there were still many other challenges. The village pradhan has her/his limits within the administrative sphere. He also mentioned how more people now come to him with requests for personal favors. He feels sad, but still has to refuse such requests and act only in the interests of the larger community.



Mukesh (leaning on cot) and his mom (sitting)



Sunset in Mehdiganj

Community program by Ghazipur Kala manch team

In the evening all of us went to the nearby basti to watch the program arranged by the Ghazipur Kala manch team. The Ghazipur kala manch team has a village pradhan from Ghazipur who pens and lends voice to songs. The team used to be a part of a Dalit rights organization and later decided to be independent. They typically partner with other organizations in creating awareness about social issues and are supported by donations and funding from these organizations. They have been associated with Lok samiti for a long time. The pradhan had written songs on water rights, NREGA awareness etc. Since, Lok Samiti was involved in organizing the conference, their own kala manch (consisting of the staff and teachers from the NJSS School) was tied up in other tasks. The songs are always in the native language of 'Bhojpuri' and are set to tune in traditional folk music of the region. The whole song-speech routine is a traditional art form that has been dying in the region. Nevertheless, it's an effective medium that reaches out to folks in the bastis and still commands respect. The night's program started of with a song on NREGA rights. Nandlal ji then addressed the crowd with a speech on NREGA, water rights and the upcoming conference. It was a concise and very factual speech, stressing to the people who had gathered the various issues with NREGA implementation and the struggle against coke. The kala manch team then carried on with their songs late into the night. Time and again, people from the village would come up to the stage and give an award to the team (donations in the range of 10-50 Rs.). Later a member of the community came to the stage and thanked Lok samiti, the kala manch team and agreed on the concerns raised through the program. He also sang a song in Bhojpuri depicting a scene from Mahabharatha, to symbolize the struggle against coke. After the program, the folks from the basti had prepared dinner for everyone – members of Lok Samiti and the kala manch team.



Ghazipur kala manch team performing (award)



Pradhan ji receiving 'puraskar'



Nandlal addressing the community programme



Community watching the

Day 3(March 25th)

Trip to Asha Shikshan Sansthan (Asha Samajik Vidyalay)

I woke up real early in the morning (3 AM) and left for Ballia from Varnasi, to visit the Asha Austin supported school, Asha Samajik Vidyalay at Reoti village. The plan was also to drop into couple of other efforts at Ballia. I left by the morning Passenger train at 4:45 and came back to Varnasi around mid-night. We had to stay in Varnasi at Ranju didi's place and returned to Mehdiganj the next day morning. More info is here <http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/398/2008Sitevisit.doc>

Day 4(March 26th)

NJSS school

We reached Mehdiganj early in the morning from Varnasi. I spent the morning at the center and had an opportunity to visit the school for the first time in the trip. The school functions till about 1 p.m. in the afternoon. I dropped into the classes with a video camera and completely surprised the teachers. The class of tiny tots (5 years or lesser) were drawing something. The teacher was not at ease here and I dropped into the next class. There were 3 different groups of children belonging to different grades. One of the teachers was absent and the students were sitting here. The elder group was reciting multiplication tables one person at a time, the second group was doing an exercise in their notebook and the third group consisting of the younger kids were also doing some exercise in their notebook. I noticed that some kids were drawing pretty pictures and guessed it might have been art class. I then dropped into the next class for 4th Std. There was a science class going on. Later, there was a period change and a history class started. The teacher (also headmaster) was telling the story of Meera. One of the kids started reading the story from the book. After each line the teacher would explain and interact with the class. The teacher explained about 'untouchability' and women's empowerment in Meera's times. He described how Meera revolted against the system by venturing out and singing bhajans on her own. When I dropped into the 5th Std., they had a science class going on. The topic that was being discussed was 'pollution'. The kids had to talk about different kinds of pollution. The teacher helped the kids a bit and the kids came up with air, soil, water and noise pollution. They then discussed each aspect and examples of such pollution. When it came to soil and water pollution, the example of coke in the community causing pollution was also discussed. This school is being supported by Asha Chicago and has been one of the first efforts of Nandlal. The teachers in the school function independently and for the most part the school follows the government syllabus and a formal education system. Later in the day, I interviewed the teachers. We discussed aspects like corporal punishment, teacher training, salaries and the interests of the teachers. They mentioned that they try to discipline the children and do not resort to corporal punishment, but sometimes do have to be strict. They did have Mahesh from Asha Lalpur visit them and provide teacher training based on Eklavya methodologies. They also have travelled for teacher training workshops. They have been receiving salaries regularly and also volunteer for Lok samiti activities outside of the school timings. They helped write a lot of the poster boards for the protest. A couple of them are also part of the kala manch team. They mentioned that kids also come to conferences and protests out of their own interest. They do inform the kids about Lok Samiti efforts, but if the kid chooses not to participate, they don't force the children or the families. We have the video recordings of the interactions in the school and the interviews.

Trip to computer center

Later in the evening Suresh and Mahendra took us to a computer center in Rajatalab. They have been learning basic computer skills like typing word documents etc. They had also described about Lok Samiti and its efforts to folks at the center. More people were interested in taking part in Lok Samiti efforts after that. When the manager of the center had heard about our visit, he wanted us to introduce ourselves, talk a little bit about our background and job opportunities available in the computer science field. We did the same and the students also introduced themselves. There were many questions as to what specific computer skills were required for the job market etc. and later one of them mentioned that he was jobless at the moment. He wanted to ask us questions outside of the computers field. We were open to it. He asked us about cultural differences in living in the US and in India. Later, he had some questions regarding the struggle against coke. He was ok with any of us answering the questions. He mentioned that he has nothing against the movement, but wanted to know if only Coke would be targeted. He said he was an ex-journalist and has incriminating evidence on tax evasion against the Birla Corporation based in India. But, his editor had fired him when he suggested exposing them. He also mentioned how he has not been able to get the support of Medha ji or Sandeep on this issue. We later discussed about how big an issue it was for the people being affected by Birla. Suresh and Mahendra explained that the current movement has gained strength from people's involvement over the years. It's not easy organizing people and one has to gain the confidence of the community to organize the movement. The coke struggle is first and foremost the movement of the people of Mehdiganj. Sandeep and others are here to support such a people's movement. As the people affected by Birla organize themselves into a movement, slowly they will find more and more support. After this interesting discussion we had to disperse. Mahendra and I had to join Urmila at the Harijan basti program.

Community program at Harijan Basti

At the Harijan (Gandhi ji's coined term "children of god" for the Dalits or "untouchables") basti, the Ghazipur team was at its usual best. Even as they were warming up with musical instruments, one of the members of the community started dancing. Many folks came out in big numbers and were anticipating entertainment. The program followed a similar pattern in every basti. Mahendra was assigned to give the speech on NREGA, water rights and the struggle against coke. His speech was factual and to the point. He brought out the various issues in an organized way and explained with great patience the NREGA system. Most folks in the basti were unaware of the NREGA efforts and very few people were in the initial survey by Lok Samiti. At the end of the program, everyone crowded around Mahendra and Urmila to give their names. They gave the contact phone no.s and also explained where the center was located. They also had a person from the community who was assigned to take the

names and volunteered for Lok Samiti. They asked the people to give the names to that person. The community also agreed on the issues raised about water rights and the struggle against coke. They mentioned that they would surely turn up in large numbers at the protest.



Ghazipur team performing community dancing



One of the members of the Ghazipur team



The community watching the program



Mahendra giving the speech

After the evening program, all of us gathered at Neetu ji's (a Lok samiti staff member) place for dinner. She and her family had invited most of the village to celebrate the birth of her baby boy.

Day 5(March 27th)

Trip to Musahar Bastis

The Musahars are in the lowest rung of the caste structure. The term 'musahar' literally means one who eats rats. The Musahars are the most oppressed class in the village's societal structure. In the morning, Urmila Vishwakarma and I left to the Musahar bastis that Lok samiti has been working with. Before we left, Nandlal ji gave me an a brief on the work they have been doing there and the resistance they have faced from the upper castes in the region. They have had stones hurled at the NFE opened in the Musahar community. Lok Samiti has also been accused of being a Christian missionary organization out to convert the religion of Musahars from Hinduism. Once we arrived at the first basti, we gathered the folks in the huts to interview and discuss various aspects. I videotaped all the interaction in the communities. After introductions, I enquired on the no. of families in the community, the schooling of the children etc. Many children still don't go to school. There is another organization that's working on providing education for the children from this basti and Lok Samiti's involvement in the education aspect has reduced. The jobs that the folks of these communities get are very seasonal and most times they are out of jobs. Once in while they pick dried leaves from the trees and stitch them with twigs to create plates. These plates are sold to shops for a very nominal amount. The community lives hands to mouth existence and have never had consistent livelihood opportunities. Then we discussed issues of access to water. They mentioned that they have only one hand pump and can't access the nearby well, because the dominant upper caste community refuse to provide access to them. There had been times when the well went dry and the upper caste community would use the hand pump in the Musahar basti. The musahars though never refused access as they felt they could not refuse water to anyone, even if its their enemy. The community wanted us to support a hand pump for them. But, this would require approval from the local village committee, government etc (given the drought like situation in the region). There was also a girl in the community who was going to get married in the community marriage in May. The community really appreciated Lok Samiti's efforts with the community marriages. We then went to another Musahar community which had a lot more families (more than 90). Most folks were out as migrant laborers in brick kilns. After further discussion, it was evident that they were working as bonded laborers to repay loans they had taken earlier. There is no school near the region. Lok Samiti tries to get the children to the NFEs. But, many kids are not regular and Urmila mentioned how some parents expect some kind of financial support as cash for sending the kids to school (the school itself is free in all aspects). Members of this community also appreciated the efforts of Lok Samiti with the community marriages. They also described an acute water shortage in the region. They mentioned that they would come out on the day of the protest to show solidarity with all bastis. All interactions have been videotaped.



Musahar basti home



Musahar basti families



Kids in the basti and twigs.



Making plates out of leaves

Tailoring centers

We then went to tailoring centers that Lok Samiti supports near the Musahar and Muslim bastis. The tailoring centers are meant for teen aged girls who have missed most of their education. The tailoring centers are a way of reaching out to the girls who would otherwise be relegated to the confines of the home. The societal structure has ingrained gender bias and most girls are not encouraged to complete schooling and be economically independent. Though tailoring seems to be a gender biased occupation in itself, it's easier to convince parents and the community to let their daughters take this training. It is evident that in a social setting that has heavy biases seeped into daily lives (which is normal for even cities and in any family in India) change can only come about gradually. Savithri is the Lok Samiti teacher in one of these centers. While it's called a tailoring center, once the kids come to the tailoring

center, they also learn literacy skills, basic language, math, social science etc. So, it doubles up as a non-formal education center for the girls. Some girls have set up their own enterprise based in their homes based on these skills. The girls in the tailoring center (Urmila and Savithri also joined them) sang a song in the traditional Bhojpuri language about how the mother favors the male kid more than the girl in the house. One of the girls mentioned that if she was not at the center, she would have done labor at the fields, cow shed or at home. There were about fifteen girls in the center, though Lok Samiti surveyed 25-30 girls in the area. Most of the families are facing dire poverty and hence the families see more importance for the girls to work for their homes. There were about 7 centers and more than 300 girls who get trained in these centers. They have also taken all the girls on a tour to cities and other places to give them exposure to more aspects than their lives in the village. There are also 11-12 NFEs that Lok Samiti supports. The plan is usually to work in enrolling the children into the NFEs and ramp them up to a level where the kids from the NFE can be integrated into the government school system. We then dropped into another tailoring center. The coordinator there mentioned that 25 girls come to the center usually. They were all stitching blouses. They come to the center for four hours from 10 in the morning. Girls who are illiterate get two hours of training in tailoring. The other two hours are spent on literacy skills and education. The girls also mentioned about the different kind of clothes they make at the center. The girls also had questions for me and didn't have problems interacting with folks.



Making blouses in the tailoring center



Savithri and the girls in the tailoring center

Trip to Kunwar Basti

In the afternoon Urmila, Anita and I left for the Kunwar (potters) basti. This basti is closest to the coke plant and has seen severe water scarcity issues. We spoke to a couple of elderly women. They gave the background on the community with no. of families, the no. of children etc. They mentioned that there were about seventy families in the

community. There were more than fifty children in the basti. All the kids go to school and some of the elder girl children go to the tailoring center. They also mentioned that the water level has gone down drastically. Wells have gone almost dry and hand pumps need re-boring. Since, the coke plant came here water issues have become serious. We observed that a couple of potters (they were father and son) were at work. We spoke to them about their jobs and the basti in general. They mentioned how water is important for not only day to day activities of the people, but also for their work. Their primary product is the tea 'khulad' (cup). A person makes thousand cups in a day and earns Rs.100 for it. They get the soil for their work from banks of ponds and rivers. It is important that the quality of soil does not deteriorate and they get pure clay. Anita tried her hand at doing a cup and it was tough for someone new to do it. The potters mentioned how they also migrate to West Bengal for a few months as the soil there is most conducive for pottery and they get good business as well. Later, we also took a look at the small furnace made out of cow dung that was used to bake the pottery.



A potter in the basti
basti

Interacting with women in the

Meeting mark, trip to Coke plant and surroundings

Later in the day we met Mark. He is a journalist who is writing a book on all the struggles against coke across the world. He has travelled across Europe, Columbia, US and was now in India. He had contacted Nandlal and Sandeep through Amit Srivatsav. Nandlal needed someone to help Mark with communicating with the community members and translate conversations. I volunteered to help out as I also wanted to document most of these interactions. After introductions, we started with an interview of one of the potters. Mark had an interesting style. He would first get the entire background of his interviewee and enquire on their life style etc. He would then get the issues in their lives and the link to the struggle against coke from there. We discussed the issues the

community faced since the advent of the company, how the company had come in the pretext of survey to thwart the claims of the community etc. They also discussed how the surrounding areas were submerged in the sludge let out by the company. This sludge caused skin rashes etc. We later took a walk and saw the wells that had dried up and also spoke to a few others in the area. We spoke to an old woman who again described the sludge and skin problems they faced. Mark would stress on details on each conversation and everyone's experience would be consistent even in the small details that Mark would keep digging for. We went right next to the plant and spoke to couple of farmers. They no longer use the land for farming and spoke about the losses they had to face. We discussed aspects of the sludge overflowing into their fields, current water scarcity, the polluted soil etc. All the conversations have been recorded as audio files.



Translating for Mark



Dry well



The coke plant
next to the plant



Dried up well and barren fields

Day 6(March 28th)

Conference Day 1

While we were busy going from place to place to learn more about the issues the communities were facing, Lok Samiti staff and volunteers were working hard for the conference. Many of them spent long nights and sometimes even skipped meals. The day finally came. The conference was set up in a mangrove with a simple stage and lots of chairs put up. There were many speakers in the first day of the conference and Sandeep addressed the gathering about water rights. The minutes of the conference is here

http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Austin/Projectpics/Mehdiganj/Water_Rights_Conference/

Interviewing Siyaram Yadav

In the morning of the conference, a scheduled event was the opening of a pond that Lok Samiti had created. Mark and I decided to skip the event and went to visit Siyaram Yadav, an ex employee of coke. Siyaram Yadav described the issues he and other employees had to face with Coke. From the beginning, there were gross violations like minimum wages not being paid, safety equipment not being given (many employees were injured because of broken glass), no bonus and temporary employees always on contract not being made permanent etc. Siyaram described in great detail, providing names of government officials, government departments and coke officials in the plant, the atrocities committed against the contracted employees of coke. He explained how they were not allowed to form a union and how mysteriously the government Labor department lost their file. When they returned from the Labor office, the chief organizers of the struggle learnt that they had been fired for no reason. He also described how Coke had stoked caste feelings to split the employees by firing employees only from a particular caste. He described the court cases slapped by coke on him and other organizers of the struggle. He also described the current issues faced by employees and also volunteered to arrange for an anonymous meeting with a current employee if required. Siyaram joined other members of his family and took up farming after all the struggle he had to go through. But, even with this occupation the family is facing huge losses due to decreased yields because of water scarcity. The fields are going dry and his well has almost no water. If the fields don't get water in time, the standing crops dry up and the vegetables shrink in size. A much more detailed interview of Siyaram is available on video.



Dried up vegetable garden
an early stage



Tender pumpkin that dried up at



Siyaram (middle), his brother(left) and his father



Almost dry well at the Siyaram household.

Interviewing Raj Narayan Patel

Raj Narayan Patel is one of the first villagers to raise voice against coke. Coke had indiscriminately dumped sludge onto the farmland right next to the plant. Raj Narayan was one of the farmers and questioned coke's actions. When it was evident that coke didn't care for them, he organized the farmers to form the 'Gaanv Bacho Sangarsh Samiti' (Save the village struggle committee). The organization now works with Lok Samiti in fighting Coke's presence in the village. Mark and I interviewed Raj Narayan. He described with great detail how coke had dumped sludge on the fields and caused losses worth lakhs of rupees. He also spoke about the health hazards that it created, including malaria due to the stagnant water. He spoke about Coke's attempt to redirect the sludge through pipelines to the Ganges and the current way of dumping sludge in pits in Bhikaripur. Mark asked precise questions to correlate the information

that we had gathered the previous day. We will have a video recording of the interview.

Asha Parivar meeting

Folks from different Asha chapters across UP were at the conference. They had come here to express solidarity with the movement and take part in the protest. In the evening of the first day, we had an Asha parivar meeting. This was to discuss the concept of self-sustenance of various grass roots efforts and Asha parivar itself. It was an interesting discussion. One aspect that was evident from the meeting was that many folks freely expressed their opinion. Sandeep or Nandlal did not dominate discussions. The idea of self-sustenance through local donations from the community was put forth. The folks arguing against this approach mentioned the accountability pressures that build up with such a system. In many cases they would be protesting against prominent persons in the community and its not right to fundraise for the organization by approaching them for donations. Possibility of the money coming from a corrupt source was also discussed. The discussion was captured on video.

Day 7(March 29th)

Conference Day 2

I spent more time at the conference on the second day. In the morning session various movements against Coke took the stage. Folks from Kaladera, Ballia and Mehdiganj spoke about the movements in their villages. Nityanand from the Bhopal gas Survivors Movement also addressed the gathering. In the afternoon we had the opportunity to learn about other grassroots movements in the UP area. The struggle against the SEZ (coming up with the Buddha statue and theme park) in Khushinagar, The struggle against displacement caused by the Ganga Express highway, the struggle of the tribals for forest land in Sonbhadra and many such efforts were put forth to the audience. Many sessions were recorded on video as well. The minutes of the conference is here http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Austin/Projectpics/Mehdiganj/Water_Rights_Conference/

Interviewing Baliram Yadav

Baliram Yadav is one of the prominent leaders in the struggle against Coke in Ballia. They have been successful in shutting down the coke plant in their region after many atrocities they had faced. Mark and I interviewed Baliram to learn more about the struggle in Ballia. Baliram described how the effluents and sludge released from coke started killing plants, fishes and animals in the area next to the plant. He described how

they had taken up the case with the Pollution control board. He explained how the village pradhan was corrupt and it was not possible to carry on the struggle unless the movement could take on the administrative role in the village. So, his wife contested the elections and won as the Pradhan of the village. From that point, the movement took shape and Coke even started offering bribes and making threats to Baliram's family. He explained in great detail how after a prolonged struggle, they were successful in getting the police to investigate Coke's unlawful activities (capture of village land for roads, indiscriminate dumping of hazardous wastes etc.) and forced Coke out of the region. This interview was also recorded on video.

Interviewing Sanjay Jaiswal

Mark and I interviewed Sanjay Jaiswal with the Swadeshi Science Movement. Sanjay gave us a background about the movement, his role in the movement based in Mehdiganj and their efforts so far. He then discussed the scientific aspects behind coke's claim of water harvesting. He described the surveys undertaken across the villages in the area. Through simple math he explained how with the average rainfall in this area over the last decade (or even the last few decades) that coke's rain water harvesting calculations are all wrong. He also mentioned that there has been absolutely no rain in the last three years. He gave us an idea of various scientific reports that have incriminated Coke, including the report by the commission set up by Coke itself (TERI). Sanjay further explained how the Mehdiganj area is supposed to be in the 'Dark' zone (the highest category for drought prone areas) and Coke has no business extracting water from such a drought afflicted area. The entire discussion was recorded on audio.

Discussion with UPCB representative

When we returned to the conference site, an interesting discussion was happening. An UPCB (Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board) representative spoke at the conference. He had suggested that Coke had submitted adequate proof that its waste was not hazardous and it was doing enough Rain water harvesting to reclaim all water that it extracted. A discussion followed immediately and appropriate facts from scientific reports were put forth to him to explain the community's position. Through the discussion and the documents that the representative carried, it was revealed that Coke's authorization to operate had expired long back and it was grounds enough to stop them from functioning. More information is available in the minutes of the conference - http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Austin/Projectpics/Mehdiganj/Water_Rights_Conference/WaterRightsConference-Day2.pdf

NAPM meeting

In the evening there was a scheduled meeting of NAPM (National alliance for People's Movements). They discussed the status of the people's movements in each region, the challenges they faced, the plan of action and how they can make use of the support across the coalition of movements. The representative from each movement spoke about their experiences and challenges. One outcome that came out of the meeting included finding a resource person who would research on corporate and government agencies that are behind these huge projects. They also decided to network more between the movements in the same region. Nandlal is the UP state coordinator of NAPM and suggested that all movements come together to plan a protest in front of the Legislative Assembly with a list of demands. The Ganga express highway project was discussed in detail and how it lacked planning and transparency. The entire discussion was captured on video.

Day 8(March 30th)

Conference Day 3 and Protest

I fell pretty sick in the night with food poisoning and hence could only be part of the events in the morning. The day started off with a press conference where Sandeep, Medha patkar, Amit Srivatsav, Nandlal and many others spoke to the reporters. Later, about two thousand people marched to the gates of the coke plant and laid their demands. There was huge police presence and even in the searing heat the protest continued till noon. More details are available here http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Austin/Projectpics/Mehdiganj/Water_Rights_Conference/

Day 9(March 31st)

Rest, touring educational bus and Return

The doctor had advised rest for me and hence my travel plans got shifted and I had to spend an extra day at Mehdiganj. I got to see the 'Eureka' bus at the NJSS school. The bus has educational toys and other fun games that works on various skills of the children. This is supported by a corporate based in Varnasi. They visit schools once or twice in a month.

The whole day everyone in the center took great care of me. Thanks to their help I recovered fast and we took the night train to Delhi.



Eureka bus
making words)



Game with alphabets (its about



Game for improving hand-eye coordination
cards



Memory game with matching