

Asha Fellow Nandlal Master's Work (Report for Asha Bangalore, October 2013)

Summary (in Varanasi-Rajatalab area):

1) **Navjyoti Swawalamban Sewa Sansthan** – Nandlaji's role to coordinate in the school and the centers. This year, a lot of efforts are given towards getting RTE compliance for the school.

The organization provides primary education in 2 main centers and non-formal education in about 10 centers including **6 kishori kendras and more than 30 self-help groups** in eastern Uttar Pradesh. The organization also runs vocational training centers and supports various social causes. Asha Chicago provides support for teachers' salaries, training and school supplies. More details available at <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=124>

2) **NREGA** - Nandlaji is involved in the coordination. A workers union has been formed and current there are 4000 members. The objectives are

- a) To help someone not working under NREGA to be included in the 100-day-work scheme
- b) To make sure everyone gets paid for the days they work for. Till now, most workers get 30-days of work (Talao) for the high population density and not enough NREGA work.
- c) Name and other corrections needed
- d) To train young leaders. Currently, efforts are focused on leaders among Dalit girls (3 women leaders in Lalitpur, Sitapur & Chitrakut)
- e) Also, there is focus of NREGA work among Mushahar and other minority communities in the area.

3) **Chance India program** - This includes coordination among students (primary/secondary) and admit them to schools (40 children from Rajatalab, 25 from urban). Rural students from Rajatalab area are in the age group 12-20 (Class 5 to BA 2nd year). The group in urban area includes younger students (5-10 age group)

4) **National level groups** – Involvement in national level groups like National alliance of peoples movement (UP) that work for Human rights. The Coco-cola movement is led under NAPM and LokSamiti. They also work with people suffering from Land acquisition problems.

5) **RTE and RTI work** – RTE work involves campaign across non-profits and school. Even they go to schools to raise awareness on the infrastructural requirements and 25% quota. For RTI work, he helps local people for writing applications to State Magistrate.

6) **Sajhya Sanskriti Manch Culture**- Nandlal-ji is the secretary for last 3 yrs for this organization. They work for different social and cultural issues including but not limited to communal harmony/peace, Ganga issue, unity across minority groups and helping the poor.

7) **Asha trustee, UP** – Nandlaji is an Asha Trustee and takes care of work led by Asha Trust in Rajatab area. (example – Mass wedding, Varanasi relief work in 2013)

Examples:

RTE Compliance

Construction work done and can continue school even in presence of RTE amendment.

A picture of the construction below:



KISHORI Camp

Article at Hindu:

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/a-different-spin/article4779864.ece>

Unlike most people who abhor the scorching Indian summer, 15-year-old Puja awaits it each year in anticipation. The summer provides this Class 10 Hindi medium student an opportunity to learn things she is fond of, things that are not taught at school or home. Puja is accompanied by some 60-80 young women between 14-20 years of age who assemble at a local summer camp where they engage in sewing, painting, dancing, singing, designing, cooking and other such activities.

For Puja, who aspires to be a doctor, the last five summers have been spent well.

“From 9am to 3pm for a month, it’s all fun and time passes so quickly. Our trainers encourage us to study, to learn new skills and we are often taken to different places. All this makes us think ‘we can also do it,’” says Puja.

Most girls slightly older than Puja have picked up beauty techniques, which they put to use in local marriages as beauty experts, while weaving and stitching are preferred by many. Paper-making, candle-making and, maths skills and computer training are also on offer.

The summer camp is organised by voluntary organisation Lok Samiti. For the past decade, it has led a full-fledged and brave hearted struggle against beverage giant Coca Cola’s bottling operations at Mehdiganj, Varanasi. The excess ground water extraction by the company has not only aggravated the existing water crisis in the area but also hampered cultivation and environmental resources, thus ruining livelihoods. In Rajatalab, where Lok Samiti operates, most communities engage in weaving Banarasi sarees for their living.

Once a thriving industry, the local handicrafts have been ruined by the coming of power looms and the overall globalisation. To bring relief to these families, besides running the summer camps, Lok Samiti provides basic literacy skills and vocational training to over 200 young women in its educational centres called Kishori Kendras. Most of these women have never attended school and thus the Kishori Kendras are their only hope of learning. “We are also looking at increasing income opportunities for these women by attempting to sell the handicrafts and other fancy items made by them in the Kishori Kendras and summer camps,” says Nandlal Master, founder of Lok Samiti. The idea is to make them self-sufficient.

A grassroots social activist, Nandlal started out in 1994 by organising evening schools for children and five years later he founded Lok Samiti with the support of his colleagues. The organisation today runs 10 night-schools and two day-schools that reach out to around 500 children under the name of the Navjyoti Swavlambam Seva Sansthan. While foreign volunteers contribute to the training in the summer camps and Kishori Kendras - for instance, by teaching classical dance or taking English language classes - Nandlal hopes that at the local level the government would extend more support.

“We will request the government to allot us space during exhibitions so that these handicrafts are marketed well. The money will be used to better facilitate the camps and some of it will be given to the girls,” he says. Fortunately for the women and girls, their parents have been supportive and encouraging. Vinod is happy that his daughters have picked up things of basic etiquette, apart from other skills and arts at the camp.

“My younger brother’s daughter is quite deft at painting, and through the camp she is now capable of drawing beautifully the cultural things of Varanasi; things of daily life,” he explains.

However, with no permanent support, running on donations and supported by volunteers, Lok Samiti has limited facilities to achieve its targets. Nandlal also feels that the one month long camps are too short to impart any sort of concrete skills. “Camps lasting three to six months would have helped our cause. Technical skills like computers require that long. We hope to get government help.”

But even without such support, the various Lok Samiti groups, now spread in 25 villages, focus on educating locals about their rights and raising awareness about problems specific to each village. It has also played an important role in the creation of 35 women self-help groups in the area and raises

awareness of social issues through their street play team, Kala Manch. Each year, they also organise dowry-free mass weddings for poor families.

Kishori Kendras in Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi district cater to women whose families honed the art of weaving Banarasi saris but lost out to the onslaught of the power loom



NREGA Work

MNREGA Workers' Union and Public Information Center successfully established

The MNREGA workers' union in the Varanasi district is slowly becoming stronger. There was an ongoing effort for a very long time to establish an office from where the workers' group could voice their demands/rights. In that regard, a new MNREGA union office and a public information center have been established in Rajatalab near Arajai Line-block market, behind Union Bank. These new offices were inaugurated by Magsaysay Award winner, Dr. Sandeep Pandey, and Block Development officer from Arajai Line-block, Mr. Shravan Kumar Rai. MNREGA workers' union president, Ms. Shakuntala, opened the offices by cutting the thread during the ceremony. Loksamiti's coordinator, Nandlal Master, subsequently spoke about the Public Information center and informed everyone that the general public can exercise their Right To Information (RTI) at the center to obtain information from any government department. The center will help the general public prepare their RTI application. Along with this service, the information centers will also provide information about MNREGA, PDS, pension and other welfare schemes to the general public. People can come to the center at any time to get information about these things.

A seminar was also held on this occasion. Speakers at the seminar encouraged workers to come forward to fight for their rights. From the perspective of the Union, it was deemed necessary that it should have its own office. Also, as everyone is aware, there is widespread corruption in the implementation of the MNREGA policy as well. So the public and workers' group should come to the center and seek as much information as possible and should push the government for the correct execution of policies. The Block Development Officer of Arajji Line-block, Mr Shravan Kumar Rai, congratulated workers' group and Loksamiti on the opening of the MNREGA union office and public information center. He addressed the women from the musahar and muslim community and promised to get maximum jobs for them. He also said that he would like to have a monthly meeting with the Union members. Active members of the Union, chief employment officer and several employees from the block were present.



SHG work for Women

We completed artificial jewelry Training program for Self Help Groups (SHG) Women. Total 30 Women were learning this Program. Program organized by Lok Samiti Varanasi. Union Bank of India sponsored this Training program. Women made artificial jewelry, handicraft, and other items. Last day Union Bank of India organized one event program and they distributed certificate for all 30 Women. Now we are selling all artificial jewelry, handicraft, and other items.



Dowry-Free Wedding

102 couples got married in a dowry free group wedding

2 Muslim couples also got married in the group wedding organized by Lok Samiti

102 couples got married by rejecting social problems like dowry in a group wedding organized by Lok Samiti. An interesting fact of the group wedding this year was that 2 out of 102 couples were Muslims. The group wedding was organized at the Hanuman temple premises in Beerbhanpur, Rajatalab, Varanasi. Thousands of people attended the event and blessed the couples. The atmosphere at the event place was amazing. People danced, enjoyed each other's company, and were so happy. The people presented great example of Ganga-Jamuni culture (Hindu Muslim unity culture). The event also motivated people to raise their voice against dowry and female infanticide. Presidents of hundreds of village committees and different people from different social organizations played the role of the parents for the couples. Making a commitment to live with each other for an endless period, the couples started their newly joint lives with simplicity and gentleness without excesses of modern weddings. After watching this noble event, a lot of participants decided to get their children married without dowry in future. A few foreign guests also participated in the wedding program.

The wedding of Muslim couples was organized as per Islamic traditions.

Shri Surendra Patel, Sate Minister for Public Works and Irrigation, Uttar Pradesh Government, gifted a bicycle to each groom and his wife Smt. Prabha Devi gifted beds to all the brides. Mr. Abdul Samad Ansari, Ex. Member of State Assembly of Uttar Pradesh, gifted a Banarasi Saree to every bride. Mr. Govind Ji, a social worker, from Popular Bakery gifted a color TV to each couple. Mr. Munna Maurya gifted fans, President of Araj Lines Block Mr. Mahendra Patel gifted wrist watches and Mr. Keshav Bhai

Patel gifted clothes to the couples. Union Bank Rajatalab branch gifted dishes to all of the couples. Mr. Ashutosh Rai, Principal of Kasturba School, Rajatalab, Mr. Tejbahadur Singh and Mr. Vijay Yadav from Adishakti Gramya Vikas Seva Samiti arranged food for almost ten thousand people participating in the event. Mr. Nandlal Master, organizer of the program, said that workers of Lok Samiti had started preparing for the event about a month before it took place by collecting donations. They had collected contributions (cash, gifts, grains etc.) worth Rs. 17, 15,092 (One million seven hundred fifteen thousand and ninety two only). This contribution included gifts worth Rs. 12,40,000 (One million two hundred forty thousand) and cash of Rs. 4,25,092 (Four hundred twenty five thousand and ninety two). A contribution of 400 KGs of grains was also collected.

Varanasi Flood Relief Work:

INR 6+ Lakh have been disburses to setup health camps and for disaster relief & rehab in need basis. A picture of the flood relief work is posted below:

