

Balia Gram Unnayan Samity Site Visit Report

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This report aims to provide a summary of my visit to the Balia Gram Unnayan Samity project site as well as key insights pertaining to this project. I begin with the purpose of this trip, itinerary for the day and dwell on the current state of affairs that I happened to witness. Next, I put forth an account of the meeting held with the pertinent people in charge there. Finally, I conclude by briefly discussing my key takeaways for the day and jot down a foreword for the future.

Purpose of the visit

My trip was a routine follow up of the visit last year with an intention of assessing the overall state of the pre-primary schools, the coaching programs, the library and the associated book bank program. Also, I hoped to gain cognizance of their administrative affairs to be able to identify the bottlenecks faced by the project correspondents and possible elucidations to those. There was a major disbursement of funds towards classroom development as per the 2017-18 budget and I was naturally looking forward to getting a glimpse of these classrooms. Honestly, I was also curious to meet the children who study in these schools and hear a first-hand account of their lives.

Itinerary for the day

I was received by Mr. Tarapada Chakrabarty (Board Member, BGUS and Project Contact for ASHA UIUC) at a place called Bagati which was a few kilometers away from the location of the first school at Narayanpur. He was pretty much my guide for the entire day and kept me company with his anecdotes about the history and the struggles of the villagers' here. We visited the Narayanpur, Dullya, Bahirkhond and Baliya pre-primary schools. Next, I was led to library and the accounts department followed by a meeting with the who's who of the project and teachers of the pre-primary schools and the coaching classes. The meeting went on for a good amount of time, transitioning from formal to a more informal and open discourse about issues before concluding the trip.

Accounts of the sites visited

In this section I pen down the major events that I witnessed in the course of my day at the various schools I visited.

Narayanpur

With considerable inquisitiveness I peered through the gate of Narayanpur pre-primary high schools to find children aged 3-6 years loitering all around the modest three-room single storied class-room building. I strolled from one room to another to find the children reciting poems, studying barnaparichay (Bengali alphabets). On the walls were paintings by these little kids and portraits of national leaders. I saw newly constructed roofs in the classrooms and was told by the teachers' about how the arrival of electricity eased the learning process. I came across a few parents who were lending their hands to prepare lunch for the kids in an adjacent room. Despite limited means there was no dearth of sincerity as was evident from the way they maintained charts monitoring the nutrition and age of each children, attendance registers and log books.



Kindergarten students at Narayanpur



Newly constructed ceiling at Narayanpur



Age-weight chart to monitor student nutrition at Narayanpur



Decorative wall hangings by students at Narayanpur

Dullya and Bahirkhond

The next stops were the pre-primary schools at Dullya and Bahirkhond. It was almost lunch time and I was received by children who were hungry after a day full of alphabets and activities. There were around 50 kids some of whom narrated me stories from Indian fable books and performed song and dances which they had innocuously prepared. There was a lot of excitement in the air for the Indian Independence Day in both schools which was just around the corner. They had plans in place for flag hoisting and acts to celebrate this special day. Also spotted were the familiar examples of meticulously maintained attendance registers and child health monitoring documents.



Pre-primary school building at Dullya



Paintings adorning the wall with ASHA inscription at Dullya

Balia

I kept hearing about Balia pre-primary school since the morning from all and sundry as if this was a star among the rest. I couldn't beg to differ much. This had more spacious classrooms, a capacity of holding more students, a diverse pool of staff and head teacher Mrs. Kalpana with an experience of about 25 years in the field of education. On arrival, I found myself in the middle of children relishing their afternoon meal of Dalia (cracked wheat) porridge and vegetables. I was led by the teachers to go through their organized official documents. The children showed me their exercise books where they had written essays and poems. The school also has facilities of bikes and toys for the students imbuing an atmosphere of a much-needed joyful learning.



Paintings by students at Balia

Attendance register at Balia



Students performing at Balia



Students enjoying mid-day lunch at Balia

Library, Book-Bank and Accounts office

Visiting the library had always been on top of my mind and I was not disappointed I can say. Without any state-of-art technology they were managing a stock of around 3000 books which was really praise worthy. The book bank program has equipped them with the means to buy books that cater to the needs of students who manage to continue higher education. I was apprised of patrons who come from far away villages to this sole library in the area. However, the librarian's concern about the current generation's dwindling interest in books and the insufficiency of funds to buy books to be able to keep up with rapidly changing curriculum seemed logical.

The accounts office comprised of a small room, a large number of books maintaining detailed records of all expenditures, a multitude of receipts. With no computer, they were maintaining accounting and record books.



Library at Balia

Meeting with BGUS committee and the teaching staff

Following my brief lunch, I was waiting for meeting with all the people indispensable to the implementation of the project. It began with a formal introduction of everyone present in the room and went on to address some of the challenges faced by the members. Though initially reluctant to speak to an audience yet sooner than later everyone poured their hearts out. Mr. Pradip, a coaching class teacher described a major challenge for him was to raise awareness among the parents about the importance of these classes and how he combats it by home-visits and talking to them personally. The key minutes of the meeting can be summarized as follows:

- Transportation to schools during monsoon is a hitch for children due to waterlogging and unconstructed roads
- Teachers involved in the coaching program could benefit if they get fund to enroll in specialized teacher's training program

- Balia pre-primary school could be designed to be a model school given its edge over the rest by improving some facilities
- Provision of funds for employment of additional teaching staff to take care of teachers who remain absent for the inevitable maternity period or due to other serious ailments
- Extension and renovation of school building to accommodate the increasing number of kids who come in the hope of better future every day
- Proposal to install a few computers to provide growing teenagers the necessary introduction to utilize modern technology
- Teachers appealed for a short period of leave during the scorching summer for the toddlers (they don't get summer vacation) and an excursion exclusively for the coaching students. Also, a short trip for the hard-working teachers if proposed could encourage their efforts all the more.

The discussion ended with all the members thanking ASHA, UIUC chapter for their extended support and co-operation



Meeting in progress