

BGUS Site Visit Report 2010

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Project location and travel: Project is located in Balia, Hooghly district in W.B. The main office is close to Tarakeshwar station which can be reached by train from Kolkata. It is also very easy to reach by car from Kolkata due to the newly constructed highway. I visited by car, took close to 2 hr from Kolkata.

Visit summary/agenda:

1. Introduction with project staff in the Balia BGUS head office/ANMR (nursing) training center.
2. Viewing of newly constructed study room (Asha funding), interaction with students
3. Viewing of library and book bank (Asha funding), interaction with students
4. Field visit to primary care centers (visited 3 out of 8: Jigra, Balia and Narayanpur)
5. Review of audit report, updates and discussion of key issues with project staff in BGUS main office

Visit findings:

General: The entire staff - especially BGUS secretary, librarian, primary center co-ordinator and teachers were all very efficient and friendly. They were very helpful in providing all the details I asked for. Also, audit reports and specifics I asked for were provided within 2-3 hrs, suggesting good upkeep of financials and records. Also, their influence on the local community was evident from the interactions I witnessed with several locals (parents, local youths asking for Puja donations, villagers): they seemed to be enjoying a position of respect and faith in the local community.

BGUS main office:

The new study room (WAH funding): I visited the newly constructed study room which Asha provided funds for. The room is well ventilated, well constructed, has sufficient desks and chairs and lighting. Comparing it to the old study place (in the library, which was dark, had only one bench and didn't have capacity to handle more than 3-4 students at a time) this seemed to be big improvement. The study room was completely filled with students studying when I visited, proving its need and utilization. Please refer to pictures for additional details.

The book bank/library (Asha funded): The library room is quite old and needs some repair work, but it houses 10,771 books (text and reference) for the book bank purpose (statistics from Ratikanta Dey, current librarian/book bank in charge). Students (11th std onwards up to MA/MSc) are allowed to borrow books for a monthly fee of Rs 5 (the fee is waived based on economic condition of the student). Currently book bank has 358 student members (11/12th std: 188, BA: 166, MA: 2, MSc: 2; 158 female, 190 male). Additionally the library houses 5667 story books. All the statistics were provided

immediately out of a record book which I checked and found was being very accurately maintained. I got to interact with 3 students borrowing books at the time when I was there. 2 of them had travelled 7 km on foot to get to the book bank and have access to much needed study materials. I was told that many of the students who benefit from the book bank are ones who come from extremely needy families (often go without meals) and travel long distances to borrow these books.

Primary care centers:

General: I visited 3 of the 8 pre-primary centers. All of them follow same syllabus. All centers cater to children for 2.5 to 5.5 years of age. The schools cover a working area of 10 villages. Number of children per school varies from 32-52. Earlier, nutrition was provided in all centers, currently only 2 schools have meal/nutrition provided to attendees (Ichapur and Shivrampur). It couldn't be sustained at the other centers due to financial constraints. Parents of most children are landless farm labors, day labors and vegetable vendors. Although the schools close by 1 pm, all teachers and students present that day waited for us to get there in all schools. At 2 of the schools I got to interact with the parents who had come to pick up their children. I was also impressed that at all three schools, teachers new why each of the students absent that day were so (there were between 2-3 absentees at each school). The teachers mentioned that they go to the houses to find out what is the reason for the child to miss school. Once again, I observed very strong interaction between the families and the BGUS teachers. For every center, once a month 'mothers meetings' are held to discuss the child's progress. Primarily, what I gathered was the level of teaching in all the centers was quite advanced compared to pre-primary (they recited full poems in English and were doing class I/II level maths). I was told that this gives them a competitive advantage once they join primary schools in the region, and this is mainly why the parents send their kids to the centers. The primary schools are burdened with low teacher/student ratio and student motivation often falls especially in the early years leading to drop outs. These centers not only provide a way to ensure basic literacy amongst the local children but also help create motivated outgoing students, who continue studying at least through primary onto secondary.

Jigra pre-primary center (New classroom built with WAH funding): Jigra was the first one I visited. The new classroom (it's a one room building) built is a big improvement over the old one (please refer to pics). The land was donated by a local resident (who is very financially constrained himself, so it is quite an inspiring story for him to donate his land to BGUS). The new construction is cement based: 'pukka' with a strong roof (both is needed to prevent rain damage to buildings, an issue I observed with the other centers I visited). It had electricity. Most students were present that they (see general section). The students were very interactive. The teacher I met was very passionate towards her role.

Narayanpur pre-primary center: The building condition (2 rooms: one walled, one open: please refer to pics) is very poor (I was told it worsened in the last rainy season). There is no electricity in the village, so the classroom was quite dark; however, bigger problem was the heat. Out of the 32 students, 27 were present that day. Here the children were quite shy and not as interactive as the previous center, however, they and their parents (here I got to meet a few of the mothers who were waiting) agreed that they like coming to the center to study. Malnutrition seemed to be an evident problem here (a few of the children I saw seemed undernourished, I confirmed with Mr Chakraborty who explained that they

come from families which are BPL and don't get regular meals). There are 2 teachers for this center who once again were very concerned towards the well being of the children.

Balia pre-primary center: The Balia center is a big one with some land around the building premise which serves as playground. However, the building condition once again was extremely poor with deep cracks propagating through walls in both the rooms and very evident roof damage. I was also told that the roof drips water into the classroom during the rainy season causing the children to get wet during classes. Once again, rain damage is the cause for deteriorating building condition. The building construction for this school was submitted for NVDA high impact proposal; however, I was told that it didn't get approved. I interacted with several parents here also, and the general consensus was that they are happy to have the option to send their child here given the condition of the primary schools. There are 3 teachers for this center and 52 students.

Summary of key concerns for primary care centers:

Construction of proper buildings is of pressing importance for sustenance of these centers. 2 of the 3 centers I visited had very poor building condition which can get unsafe with the next rainy season. I was told that of the other 5, most have similar condition with some nearing an inhabitable stage which might lead them to consider closing down of the centers.

Child nutrition: Nutrition is a general concern for the region with proper meals unavailable to several families.

Other BGUS activities towards community development in the region:

1. Construction of local houses (families selected based on economic condition by beneficiary committee of guardians).
2. Latrine construction to improve sanitation (1800 constructed so far by BGUS).
3. Nursing training center and hostel: trainees selected by Govt through declaration in newspaper, selection are need and Madhyamik marks based from amongst local residents.
4. Soil research laboratory for improving crop productivity.

Goals/Ambitions/Next steps (based on highest priority needs of the region):

I had a discussion with BGUS staff at the end of the visit on what they think is the biggest challenge/highest priority need for the region. They identified:

1. Income generation for the local families (which is the root cause behind wide spread poverty and mal-nutrition in the region). Agriculture is only part time in the region, and most people are landless laborers. Small scale industries need to be started with microfinance option available to locals for self sustenance of local endeavors.
2. Quality of education. Shortage of teachers and high number of teachers in local schools combined with low teacher pay causing lack of motivation affects the quality of higher

education in the region. Mr Chakrabarty and Mr. Pal has the idea of setting up a 'model' school with the pre-primary pass-outs which they want to be used for research on maintaining quality of education in primary (and later secondary) stds. This initiative can be brought into Asha Wide QED team's consideration.

Pictures:



New study room



Library/ Old study area



Jigra primary care center newly constructed building outside and inside



Jigra primary care center old building



Narayanpur primary care center outside (above) and inside: the 2 classrooms (below)





Balia primary care center inside and outside pictures (left and bottom)

