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# Saurabh Sharma & Aheli Choudhury

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Saurabh Sharma and Aheli Chowdhury are Asha for Education fellows since 2007. Funders of Joint Operation of Social Help (JOSH) their body of work ranges from RTI activism, mobilization of University students in Delhi (a movement that eventually spread across India), RTE activism, to intervention in government schools and Education policy in general. Originally supported by Los Angeles chapter, Saurabh and Aheli have been supported by Silicon Valley chapter over past 7 years.

I arrived at Trilokpuri block #5 around 1:15pm on a Tuesday afternoon. I was driving from Gurgaon and the ride took over an hour to get to the other end of Delhi. I had called Aheli to schedule a meeting with her and Saurabh at the JOSH office. I met Saurabh outside the rented building that houses JOSH office on the first floor and a resource center for language classes on the second floor. JOSH also runs a separate resource center in Trilokpuri for young, predominantly muslim, women focussed on vocational training. Saurabh and Aheli arrived in Trilokpuri around 2009 and started working with the youth first with organizing them with open discussion forums, and conducting English language classes, and eventually evolved into a community mobilization movement to improve the government schools as well as accountability of the government schools across Delhi.

Trilokpuri is a resettlement colony of low-income families setup in 1975 that witnessed brutal anti-sikh riots of 1984. Trilokpuri became a site of communal violence in 2015 when after a calm of over 30 years hindu-muslim riots erupted during festival of Dussehra. Trilokpuri also carries a notorious reputation for high-crime rates and rampant drug abuse amongst youth.

Work os JOSH and through it that of Saurabh and Aheli, is broadly spread across four major areas (a) RTE advocacy and making government schools transparent and accountable, (b) Conducting workshops and meetings to mobilize students and parents on improving the quality

of education, (c) mobilizing youth into an open forum for exchange of ideas and encourages debate, and (d) Run a resource center in Trilokpuri for young men and women focussed on vocational skills and communication.

I spent two hours in an engaging dialogue to learn more about their journey as Asha fellows, and their specific experiences in dealing with education in government schools. The following section provides chronological account of their work as was discussed over 2 hours, unless stated otherwise the body of work noted here is attributed to both Saurabh and Aheli.

Saurabh and Aheli come from a Right to Information background with many years of experience in advocating for transparency and accountability in governance. JOSH itself started as a vehicle to create awareness about RTI amount the youth in Delhi. They have been associated with Aravind [Kejrival] and Maish [Sisodia] since early days of Parivartan. In 2006 Aravind launched a “घूस को घूसा” (literally meaning *punch the bribe*) campaign against corruption. The aftermath of this campaign was mobilization of youth against corruption, and sensitize them towards RTI and government accountability. A 15 days workshop with 150 youth volunteers from across different Universities in Delhi was conducted. This movement spread across India where 55 cities in different states saw RTI workshops for students conducted by multiple NGOs and agencies. The workshop was quite successful and in their words

*[the young students who participated in the workshop] developed a realization of the issues much behind just corruption and governance. They realized about the lives of people around them, the house maids, the drivers, who are a part of their lives but their lives are opaque. They began to understand problems with the government schools (the only accessible schools for low income families), their problems with PDS, with getting kerosine and LPG.*

Motivated with the success of student workshop, JOSH launched an initiative on road quality with the students from IIT-Delhi. Volunteers from IIT-D and JOSH did survey of over 600 roads across Delhi and filed RTI on road construction and quality. This work that forced them into dealing with the nexus of PWD and contractors got much publicity in the print media and saw many success stories. There were numerous instances, much in other RTI based initiatives, of pending road projects completing on-time.

This success and experience from engaging with PWD motivated them to expand on this work to students of Delhi University. Their experience in engaging DU students was dramatically different though, the students were gravely concerned with University operations and naturally wanted to pursue issues that they were contented with. Between 2006-2009 working with students

from across DU, an accountability campaign was launched that resulted in DU being the first university to publish its budget and expenditure statements online and led to significant improvement in redressal of student complaints related to infrastructure and resources.

In 2009 they started working with 15 youth in the urban slums of Trilokpuri out of 800Rs/month rented facility. The project was aimed at providing an open forum of discussion for the youth on issues ranging from employment, education, globalization, and politics, as well as a resource center for English language classes. It must be noted at this point that English speaking is a common aspiration amongst youth. Besides being a social currency English language is considered a rather important skill for securing a job at any showroom or store or in the BPO sector. I did meet an enthusiastic group of young men and women at the resource center during my visit. This work was primarily funded by Asha fellowship grant and partly through their own resources. It was essentially out of this open forum among the youth that issues plaguing government schools started surfacing. And JOSH formally started intervention in functioning of government schools by filing the information requests under RTI and collecting data.

With notification of RTE, information came much easier and the focus shifted on RTE compliance and enforcement in government schools. There are 16 government schools across 36 blocks of Trilokpuri. Most schools are overflowing with students, have poor infrastructure. The initial work of JOSH was to collect data on all the schools in their area and catalogue problems that the children faced in their schools.

It should be noted at this point that there are three different flavors of government schools in Delhi (a) GNCT Schools - Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Schools run by The Government of Delhi directly, (b) MCD Schools - Municipal Corporation of Delhi Schools run by the Municipal Council of Delhi, and (c) NDMC Schools - New Delhi Municipal Council Schools - run by the NDMC catering to NDMC and Delhi Cantonment areas. These schools are covered under vastly different departments, and regulated differently.

In 2011, JOSH working through community of students and parents collected 800 cases related to schools in their area. A social audit, a jansunvai, was conducted by JOSH and NCPCR inviting all principals and Dpt. Education Directors. Over 2000 people attended the social audit meeting and over 30 cases were heard by NCPCR and was covered extensively by the print and television media. This was a turning point that mainstreamed education as a delivery issue in urban and peri-urban setting, and particularly in Delhi. Although NCPCR failed to followup

with the 800 cases of RTE non-compliance registered, it did bring about a significant hang amongst the community, particularly amongst the students about their rights. Interestingly, 3 days after the social audit, in a meeting between [Delhi schools] teachers union, NCPCR chef Shanta Sinha, and then Delhi CM, it was decided to stop any future social audits and barred schools from participation or attendance in such events. It was also observed that political linkages between the then sitting MLA and sitting MP was used as a means to stop the process of social audit, besides this further established the reach and strength of teachers' union. The popular argument provided was that social audits were a means to harass the teachers, although most complaints related to teacher absenteeism and harassment from teachers themselves.

JOSH met with NCPCR on this subject of social audits and eventually escalated to CIC on transparency and accountability of government schools. Under the guidance of CIC, a meeting between Dept. of Education, NCPCR, and JOSH was called to determine means to make schools open for an audit. As a result of this meeting, under the guidance of Shilesh Gandhi, Dept. of Education notified last day of each month to be designated for open audit by any public citizen. Note that last day of each month, in government schools, is reserved for administrative work - its a day when schools open but only for administrative work and no children are in attendance. Armed with this notification, JOSH encouraged other NGOs and community in general to conduct social audit in all schools across Delhi, and parents from over 40 NGOs descended on the schools to assess the state of schools first hand. This event was covered in national and local media and quickly became inconvenient for the incumbent government officials as well as MLA. In a particularly damning report, a prominent TV news channel beamed rather bleak pictures from government school n Sadar Bazaar, Delhi, a constituency of then sitting Minister of Education in the Central Government, making the situation unpalatable for the Government. Subsequently, the order to inspect the schools on the last day of every month was cancelled with immediate effect. This order was binding on 950 GNCT schools (5 of which are in Trilokpuri area) effectively them inaccessible for any social audit. The MCD schools are still open last day for every month for inspection.

JOSH appealed with CIC and asked NCPCR to coordinate between the NGOs and Dept. of Education. The Government of Delhi subsequently reinstated the order and followed up to challenge the validity of its own order in the Delhi High Court. Saurabh Sharmas was made a party of this case and the case continues to be pending in the court. The government in its petition cites opening the school for audit on last day every month as a rick to children which is counter intuitive to its own regulation which declared the last day of every month as administrative work day when no children should be present at the premise.

Much work of JOSH in last few years has been focussed on addressing the problems related to teacher absenteeism, infrastructure and financial irregularities in the government schools. Whilst GNCT schools continue to be outside of audit, they have been able to work within community make the MCD schools accountable. There is significant work that JOSH is doing in the space of grievance redressal in context of schools and education delivery - which is very different from service rendered through other government schemes like MNREGA or Medical services. There's also additional

JOSH was a member of a NAC sub-committee on Section-4 (Suo Motu Disclosures) and made recommendation on school inspections and grievance redressal clauses in its implementation. These recommendations whilst were admitted, and got blessed by the leadership, it did not go any further than a recommendation. Subsequent change in national and then Delhi leadership effectively voided much progress that was made over years by NAC and DOPT committee recommendations.

After about 2 hours of discussion, we proceeded to visit the resource center where I met about 7 young boys and girls who have been involved with JOSH for many years. I also visited the resource center for women that has been running with a NCW grant. And I left Trilokpuri after spending over 4 hours with Saurabh and Aheli. In a way this meeting has been a walk through complex ecosystem between bureaucracy, politics, the vast economic divide between the residents of Trilokpuri and their masters, much like how East Delhi was always the “other” *forgotten* side of Delhi. I left with an eerie feeling how the modus operandi remains the same with education delivery system pan-India. And suddenly Trilokpuri school didn't seem all that different from a middle school in rural Jhadol. In this context, I feel that Saurabh and Aheli's work is even more important, for there's little being done to address issues plaguing our schools in urban and peri-urban setting.