

Asha Trust - Bal Pustakalay Kaithi Project - Site Visit Report

Location: Post Bhandahan Kalan, Tehsil Kaithi, Varanasi District, Uttar Pradesh

Date: 28th February 2024

Visitor: Akshay Bhole, Asha Boston

Note - This is a limited report of the activities of Asha Trust - Bal Pustakalay Project
Asha Trust runs several other projects that are not covered in this report

Asha Boston supports the Bal Pustakalay Project

<https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=1342>

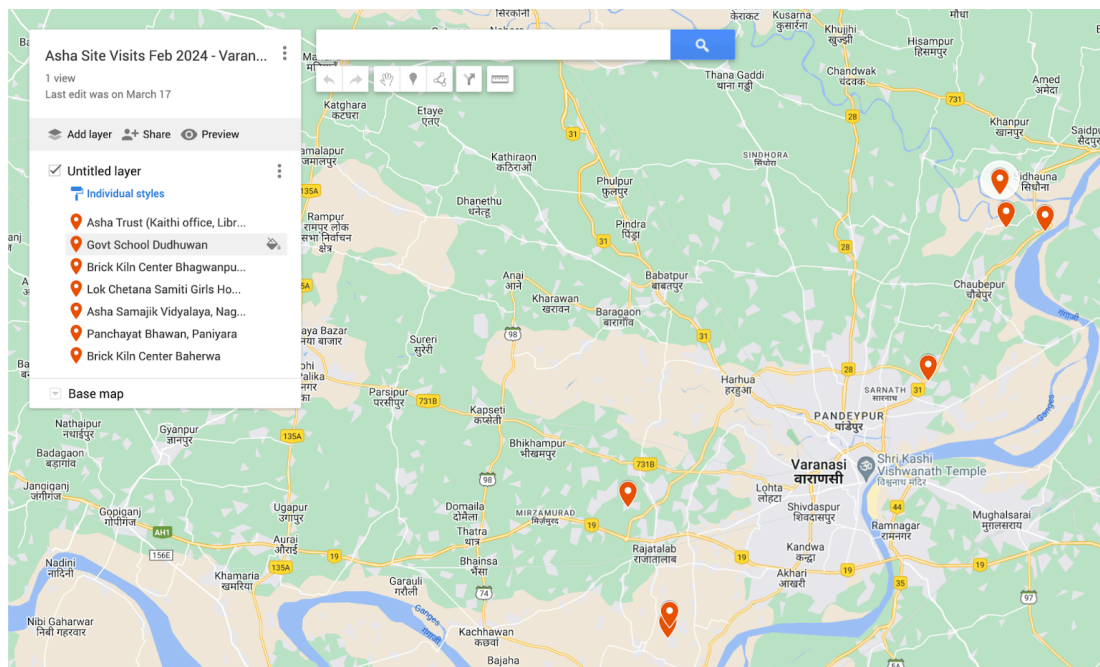
Asha Silicon Valley supports Fellowship: Vallabhacharya Pandey

<https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=611>

Asha General Funds support the Asha Trust - Right to Information and One Nation Equal Education Campaign project

<https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=919>

The Bal Pustakalay project is a collection of several libraries, e-libraries, study centers & mobile libraries scattered across the Varanasi district. There are primarily two clusters - East of Varanasi one cluster consists of a few libraries and study centers operating around Kaithi area. West of Varanasi lies the other cluster that operates in a few villages in Rajatalab area.



Pic 1 - Locations of sites visited in Feb 2024

Amit Rajbhar, a long-time teacher at ASV who quit in 2022 to start his own study center in his village Chakrapanpur has since taken over the charge of supervising most of these study centers. He originally was very focused on building up his own center from scratch - he provided the land and capital to construct a few class rooms & toilets to start teaching students in 2022-23. From mid-2023 onwards he has been entrusted the responsibility of supervising about 16 centers the furthest of which are about 60 kms from each other. He typically conducts surprise visits at each center about once a month traveling long distances on his bike. He narrated an incident at one center where a teacher was fired because he found the center not functional during one of his visits even though class was supposed to be in session on that day. His wife teaches at the Chakrapanpur center in his village. When visiting centers in the Kaithi area, he ends up staying over at the Asha Trust center in Kaithi to avoid the long commute back to his home.

Rajatalab Cluster

I visited the Paniyara center, which operates on a brick kiln. Since it rained on the day of my visit, the students were sent back home early and we ended up going over to their quarters. I interacted with some of the students who had just started learning at the center about 4 months ago. These children were of different age groups, most had never been to a school before and were barely learning to read and write.



Pic 2 - That's where classes for Paniyara center happen. Classes had to be called off due to rain



Pic 3 - We tracked down the students to their houses and I got to interact with a few

The second center I visited was a newly started library at Dhanapur village. The local primary health care center of the village offered a spare room in their building to house the library. The health care center is a bit further away, on the fringes of the village which made it a bit hard for students to get there. After a few months, they were asked to relocate and a new space was found in Dhanapur village, closer to the community making it easier for students to get to the library. The new premises had to be rented while the earlier space was free. However, this new space has the potential for expansion and I can see the space filling up with books and students as the library center grows. The current book collection and student enrollment is quite small to yet see a meaningful impact. For the 2024-25 budget, Dhanapur library operating expenses are being considered and this location will be monitored in the next year to ensure its growth and success.

Kaithi Cluster

The e-library and study center at Kaithi center is doing reasonably well. This being the primary Asha Trust office has the best means and resources. The facility is large, well equipped, has a full time staff. Students use it regularly. The challenge with this location is that it is quite further away from Kaithi town and community which makes for a longer commute to get here for students. This will be a challenge for the growth of enrollment and use of this center.



Pic 4 - The Kaithi e-library and study center



Pic 5 - Adding a new floor with a few more rooms at the Kaithi center



Pic 6 - Study center at Rudra Brick field - a brick kiln in Kaithi area



Pic 7 - Brick kiln study center - Rudra Brick fields

To mitigate that a group of volunteers reach into the community with the use of mobile libraries on bikes, doing rounds of certain villages and govt schools in the surrounding villages.

I got to visit one govt school in Dudawan and saw some Asha supplied material in use. The infrastructure at this particular govt school wasn't in good shape with classes having broken furniture and/or broken windows. While I've witnessed worse, this school at least had most of their staff in attendance and roughly 75% of the enrolled students attending on a regular basis.



Pic 8 & 9 - unusable furniture at Govt school Dudawan, Kaithi, Varanasi District

The Kaithi Bal Pustakalay initiative is expanding quite rapidly in the last few years. While there's considerable demand and need it feels that Asha Trust resources are a bit strained in terms of staffing and supervision. This is just the third year of operation and second year of Asha Boston's support. Growth has been swift so we would love for the program to stabilize and thrive in the existing locations before further expansion.