

Site visit Report

GDOHWA Chhatrapur

For

Asha for Education, Austin

By

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Date of Visit: Sep 26 and 27, 2022

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Background

On 31st August 2022, I received an email request from Asha for Education (Austin chapter) to do a site visit to GDOHWA, a project in Chhatrapur, Odisha that has been supported by Asha Austin since April 2020, hence for a period of 2 years so far: <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=934>. The project has been supported previously by Asha Stanford since 2008.

Asha Austin had to decide on whether to continue the funding to this project for FY 2022-23, starting April 2022. Funds were last given by Asha Austin in March 2022 for FY 2021-22.

So they requested a site visit to get a sense of the situation on the ground.

Site visit preparation

The visit was preceded by at-least 1 preparatory meeting online with Asha Austin on 13 Sep 2022. A checklist of aspects that had to be looked into during the visit was prepared. Also I got an overview of the project and a general summary of their operation.

Travel to Chhatrapur

I left Bhubaneswar early morning on 26th September by train, and reached Chhatrapur railway station, the same morning at about 8.30am. From the station, I took an auto to Samiapalli (more a hamlet, than a village) which is about 4km from the Chhatrapur Railway station.

The village is connected by a pucca road from the station. After reaching the village, I asked around for the GDOHWA Samarth School / Hostel. Villagers pointed me towards a kutcha road just outside the hamlet, which I took to reach the Hostel gate (<https://goo.gl/maps/ZbGejBQ3wFcDDwCF7>).

The Hostel gate was locked, so I called out to some people I saw inside and requested them to open the gate. I introduced myself as having come from Asha for Education. They requested me to call Ananda ji, so he can instruct them to open the gate.

I called Krishna Kumari (GDOHWA Samarth Programme Coordinator) on the number given to me, however she did not answer the phone. I called Ananda ji next, who answered and said he will be reaching the hostel very soon. He asked the staff/students to open the gate, after which the gate was opened.

Hostel layout & Students rooms

After putting my bags in the Guest room, I went around the hostel. At that point, as staff, 1 Assistant cook (Ms. Sabita) and 1 Caretaker (Mr. Muna) were present. Mr. Rabi is also listed as a Staff member and was present but he was not doing any staff duties as such due to his mental disability, so his appointment seems to be on a humanitarian basis. Some senior students who have been associated with GDOHWA for a long time, particularly Sapna and Rajeshwari, were also helping with the hostel work along with the staff. Mr. Mungulu, a night watchman, joined duty on the second day.

The overall plan of the Hostel accommodates 3 floors, of which the Ground floor is built and is being used by students and staff, the First floor raw structure is done and interiors work is pending and the Second floor raw structure work is ongoing.



On the Ground floor, there is a Kitchen with a Dining space, towards the North. The Entrance is on the South side. Rooms for lodging of students are on both the East and West flanks. There are about 6-7 rooms on each flank. Each room has an attached bathroom/toilet and shelf space for students to keep their books, clothes and other belongings.

A room in the South-West corner acts as an Office as well a Guest room. In the middle is a large open to sky space for meetings or events. In the South-East corner is the Physiotherapy room, and a Store room of sorts next to it.

There is a staircase to reach the upper floors and a provision for a Lift (not yet in place). The construction of the Second floor has been supported by LIC, who have sanctioned Rs. 50 lakhs of which Rs. 5 lakhs has been released. Lift is being sponsored by ICICI, Fans by Gopalpur Port and the Borewell by Tata Steel.

The Ground floor and First floor construction (Rs. 130 lakhs) and the cost of the land (Rs. 50 lakhs) has been supported by Ananda ji's friends and relatives who have hence given Rs. 1.8 crores in all. An additional Rs. 30-40 lakhs will be needed to complete the construction as per Ananda ji's estimate. The total built up area is about 18000 sq ft (all 3 floors). Ananda ji as such does not draw a salary from GDOHWA, though all his boarding, lodging and travel expenses are covered by the organisation.



Interaction with Students and Staff

Overall, about 20-25 students were present in the Hostel. The number was certainly not close to 45. The explanation given by the staff and senior students was that many were on leave to visit their homes due to Dusshera Pooja and some students were at the Chhatrapur hostel

Broadly, Asha's support was supposed to be for Physically Handicapped (PH) students, with Mentally Retarded (MR) & Cerebral Palsy (CP) students being the other two categories at GDOHWA. However, in practice, there is considerable overlap in the physical and mental condition of the students and it's difficult to separate them clearly into these 3 categories.

However, there are about 110-120 students supported by SSEPD also in the mix. Since this programme was abruptly shut down in June 2022, the assumption is that most of them have gone back home.

There is no clear way to distinguish on the ground, between the two categories of students supported by Asha or SSEPD though, since there is an overlap in the physical/mental extent of disability.



23 students were present during the site visit.

Clear documentation at any point of the students enrolled, their baseline mental/physical condition and the progress they are making is missing. It was not easy for a visitor to understand who is enrolled in the school / hostel and who is not.

Vehicle for Transport of students to Chhatrapur

Ananda ji reached the school with 2 teachers (Ms. Sasmita and Mr. Jiten) and a driver, by about 9.30am in a Maruti EECO 4-wheeler (Reg # OD07AM7354), the purchase of which was supported by Asha Austin. The vehicle is used to transport students from the Hostel to schools in Chhatrapur in batches. So it takes many trips for the transfer to get done, and likewise for the students to come back.

The Maruti EECO driver has been newly appointed, and has only been working here for a few months. He mentioned that many drivers have come and gone, possibly because they don't get enough salary or they don't get it on time. GDOHWA also has another 4-wheeler (Chevrolet Tavera), however there is no driver for this vehicle at present, so it's parked in the Old hostel building at Chhatrapur.

There is no logbook of vehicle usage maintained, which is a standard practice in a non-profit organisation.



Physiotherapy Equipment / Room

After walking around the Hostel, and brief interactions with the students, teachers and Ananda ji regarding the purpose of the visit, I visited the Physiotherapy room. Some of the equipment has been supported by Asha. The room as such is used only when the Physiotherapist visits the Hostel which is on the weekends. On the other days it is not used.

I asked for some of the students to come in, so I can see them using the equipment. It appeared as if some students were familiar with the equipment and were not all using it for the first time. Some of them however needed prompting from the staff, which could be due to their mental disabilities and not really because the equipment is not used.

Students needed a lot of help and supervision while using the equipment, due to the danger of accidents/injury. Perhaps trained full-time medical/health workers could be part of the staff to make up for the absence of a full-time physiotherapist.



Kitchen / Dining Rooms

I looked around the Kitchen/Dining rooms next. Students are given 3 meals a day - breakfast, lunch and dinner, and a snack in the evening. All meals involve paddy rice, dal and a vegetable dish usually. Snacks are usually biscuits.

2 cooks handle the Kitchen work, of which 1 woman cook (Ms. Sabita) was present and the other was on a visit to his hometown (Mr. Jayahari was present on the second day). A few senior students, notably Sapna and Rajeshwari, and the Caretaker (Mr. Muna) also help with the chores. There is also a Watch person (Mr Mungulu), who was on leave but came on the second day.

So the Resident staff comprises 4 people - 2 cooks, 1 caretaker and 1 watchperson. Along with the senior students, they do the bulk of the work - cooking, cleaning of utensils, cleaning of all the rooms including toilets, and also helping the students with their daily chores. All of this is a lot of hard physical work considering that students need help with nearly everything. It felt as if the staff were constantly at work during the 2 days I was there.



Interaction with Teachers

After this, I spent some time observing the 2 teachers (Ms. Sasmita and Mr. Jiten) with the students. A third teacher (Ms. Soumyashree) joined a little later. The teachers do not have a background in special education or the subject as such, but seemed very motivated to spend their time and to work with the students.

All of them said that Rs. 10000/- a month is not adequate as a salary and so they are on the lookout for other work as well. They said since April 2022, they have been getting salaries on an intermittent basis and mostly get it in cash only.

Soumyashree has recently joined work in place of Ms. Saraswati since 2 months, while Mr. Jiten and Ms. Sasmita have been around for 3-4 years.

It did not appear that the teachers had a set plan of study or schedule of classes. I didn't see any timetable and there was no continuity with respect to what they worked with the students the earlier day. So the classes seemed to be spontaneously done.

What I could gather is that the teachers were not being paid on a regular basis, so they are perhaps involved in other paid work and hence not attending the Hostel on a regular basis. Teachers however said that they attend the Hostel regularly and also have classes with the students regularly. Students were not unfamiliar with the teachers, which indicates that they have had some interaction in the past.

Due to the nature of the students, it's not possible to group students into batches and teach/work with them as a whole. The teaching sessions have to be done on a small group or one on one basis with the students.

There is one set of students (Mentally Retarded) who stay at the Hostel at all times since they can't adjust in the regular School system, while the effort with others is to keep them linked to the School system and use their time at the Hostel at Samiapalli or Chhatrapur for additional support.

Also depending on the nature of the students, it can take varying amounts of time to see results. So with the Mentally Retarded / Cerebral Palsy students, it can take a year to just move from 1 lesson to the next. In the case of Physically Handicapped students, it is easier to get results faster. So a higher Teacher: Student ratio may be needed and so 3 teachers for even 20 students, felt inadequate.

On the other hand, the time spent at Samiapalli is only as additional support, since students also attend school/college in Chhatrapur. The Mentally Retarded students who don't attend any school, need the Samiapalli teachers' support the most.

Interaction with Ananda ji at Chhatrapur

Around lunch time, we went to Ananda ji's home cum GDOHWA office at Chhatrapur. The same building/campus had two rooms (1 each for girls and boys) where senior students who attended coaching classes/tuitions during the day stayed overnight. This place was given to GDOHWA for use by the District administration, in lieu of the SP Office building which they had to vacate.

So of the 45 supported by Asha, there were two sets of students, 12 of whom stayed at Chhatrapur and 33 who travelled from the Samiapalli hostel or just stayed there.



After lunch, I visited the earlier school building in the SP office campus with 1 teacher (Ms. Sasmita). The rooms were unkempt and it appeared that the space had not been in use for some time. The teacher herself was not fully aware of the details, but later Ananda ji said that they had to stop using the space after the SSEPD programme funding was abruptly stopped and they have as yet not recovered from that jolt. Their plan is to move all materials to the Samiapalli hostel and restart the work from there.



After returning to the GDOHWA office at Chhatrapur, I asked Ananda ji to share photos and reports of work related to the various budget items which Asha had supported. These are added to a separate folder in the Drive. Only those photos which have an unedited date-time-stamp between April 2020 to March 2022, which is the period Asha Austin supported, are included. The rest I have dropped.

Some photos names (Eg: Parent's meetings) were edited to make it appear as dated between 2020-22 which I discovered through the EXIF info and so have not added them to the Drive. Likewise, some reports were made on the spot by editing previous reports (Eg: Staff training, Parents orientation and Health checkup camps) and changing the dates, so again I have ignored these.

In response to why so many cash payments are made, Ananda ji said the staff preferred cash payments and many don't have bank accounts. Also some of them work at other places as employees, so they don't want to receive payments in their account since their regular employer may object to them doing other work, if they find out. None of this is applicable or true in my experience of work in rural India though. He said if Asha requires it, they will ensure all payments are made through bank account transfers only.

Song and Dance programme

After this, we returned to Samiapalli. Teachers and students organised an impromptu song and dance programme, where many students took part. Clearly, such events were organised in the past and it didn't feel as if the students were doing it for the first time. Also this event demonstrated the familiarity of the students with the teachers. GDOHWA employs a music and dance teacher, who visits the Hostel on weekends.



Interaction with parent

There was atleast 1 parent who visited the school. He lives in Samiapalli. His child has recently joined the school, and he comes everyday to drop / pick him in the mornings and evenings. He didn't have any complaints about GDOHWA as such. His hope is that his child gets an environment and support to study, and ultimately that he gets a job.

Overnight stay and dinner

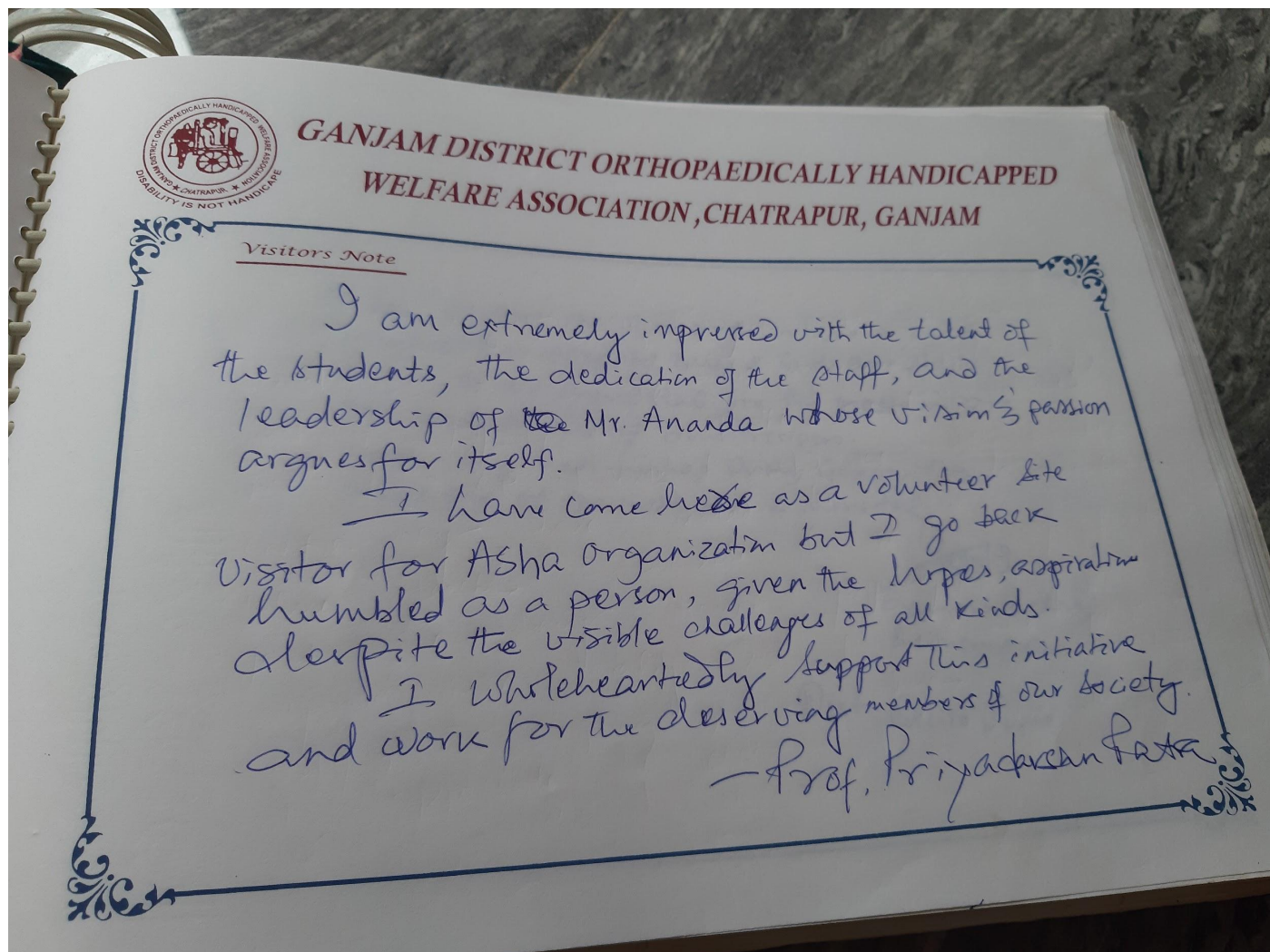
I insisted that I stay at the Hostel at Samiapalli, just so I could feel the living conditions and also taste the food, while Ananda ji and the teachers returned back to Chhatrapur. Lodging and boarding arrangements were fine overall.

Review of records

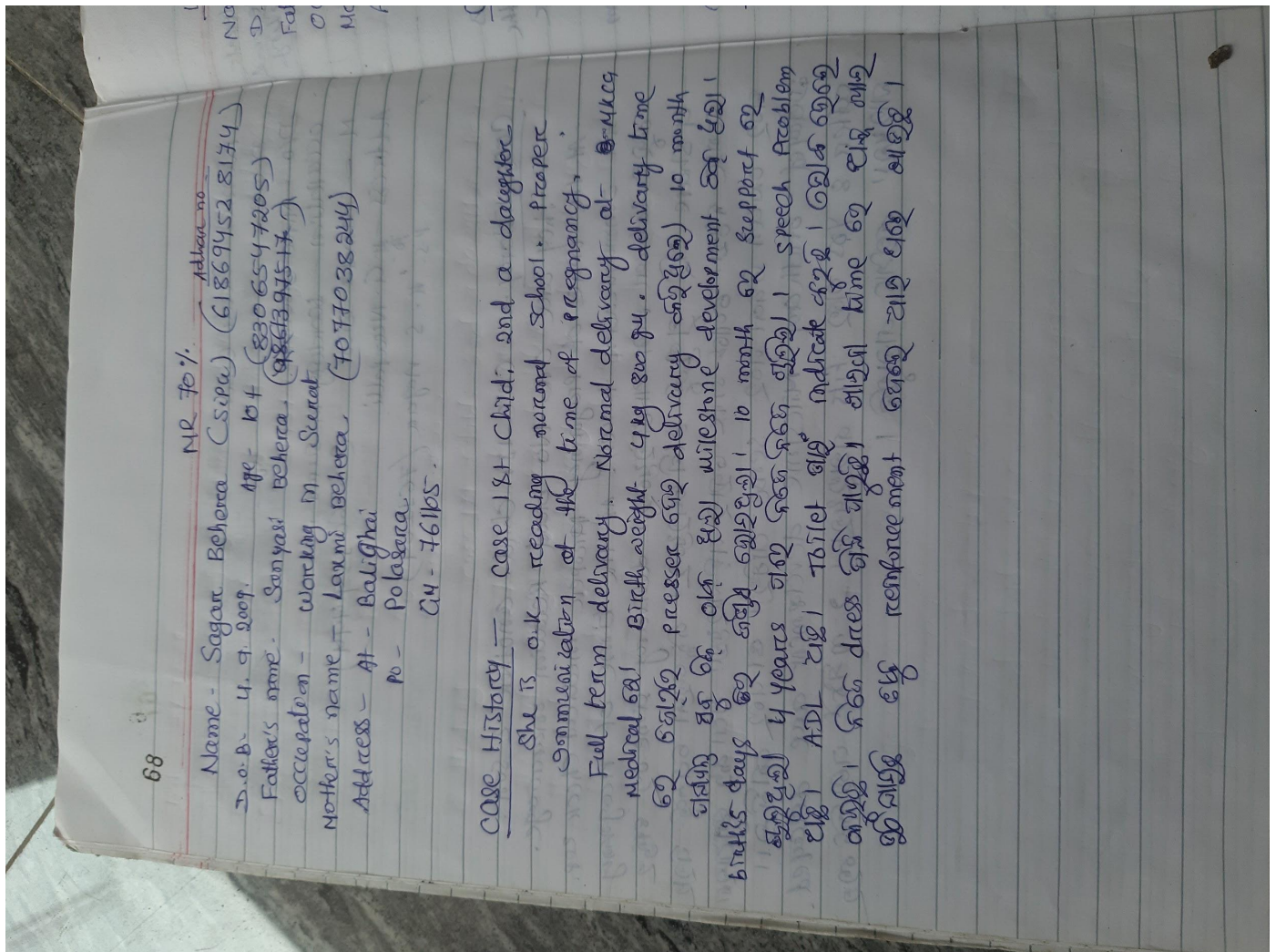
The next morning, I went through whatever records were available at the Hostel with Ms. Sasmita who arrived earlier than Ananda ji. These included the Attendance Register, Visitors Book and Students Case History.

Attendance register was updated till 16 Sep 2022 and 42 students' names were listed. There did not seem to be a separate register for SSEPD students. I learnt that Ms Saraswati, who was a long-time staff member, was responsible for maintaining the records but she left a few months back.

The Visitors book had a record of comments by various visitors which notably included many from the Government including the local administration. Most or all the comments were positive and appreciative of the work of GDOHWA.



The Students case history had some details of the background medical condition of the students, but it was not very detailed and certainly not technically sound. Also the case history is not updated from time to time, so as to track the change in medical condition of the students against a set of desired outcomes. This makes it difficult to understand the overall progress of the programme as measured through the progress of its students.



Visit to Chhatrapur hostel rooms

The various schools that the students at GDOHWA attend at Chhatrapur are:

1. Government Onslow High School - 6-10th
2. Government High School - 6-10th
3. Government Women's College - +2 & +3
4. Government Science College Chhatrapur - +2 & +3
5. Govt ITI - After 10th
6. Government Women's PolyTechnic - After 10th
7. Jupiter Coaching - +2 & +3 - This is for after school/college coaching for particular exams

Note: +2 here refers to 12th standard, and +3 to First year at College.

It is notable that the children attend regular mainstream schools and not special schools, meant only for PWDs. This will help them integrate better with the larger society as such. The mainstream schools on the other hand may need to make some adjustments to accommodate them.

After meeting the various Government officials, I visited the two hostel rooms at Chhatrapur which are in the same building as the GDOHWA office. These did not appear to be in the best of conditions. However, both were certainly being used by students.

The purpose of these rooms was to provide lodging for senior students who attend coaching and other classes after school at Chhatrapur and to reduce the time and effort of travel from Samiapalli.



There were two other store rooms which were unkempt.



Meeting with Coaching institute

I met with Mr. Sudhir of Jupiter's Education, where two students - Narayan Bhuyan and Rajendra Mudali, attend coaching classes. He said they are both doing fine. He said the overall intake from GDOHWA has reduced after COVID. Earlier 5-7 students would attend each year, and now the number is down to 2-4.



Final meeting with Ananda ji and GDOHWA team

Ananda ji spoke about his journey in this work, his own deteriorating health. His funding plans for GDOHWA beyond the Government and Asha, are based on CSR funding. The Samiapalli hostel building completion is of course his dream, and he hopes to be able to support 300 students once it is completed.

He said PWDs in Ganjam are in the range of 35000+, so there is a need for many such schools and hostels. Since their capacity is small, they select students based on strict criteria, primarily from very weak socio-economic backgrounds.

Regarding the GDOHWA Board, he said there are 7 members in all, and no one is local. The Board meeting is held every 3 months and the minutes are shared with the District collector, and the General body meeting is held once a year.

After these discussions, I wished everyone goodbye at Samiapalli and Chhatrapur and returned by the evening train on 27th Sep to reach Bhubaneswar by night on the same day.

Tasks not completed

1. Meeting auditor at Berhampur, as he was not in town

2. Meeting children and parents in their homes around Chhatrapur, due to the distance and time involved in travel
3. Meeting teachers/principals at the various schools/colleges, the children study in Chhatrapur, as Ananda ji was not keen on the same
4. Speak to 3 Diploma students at Bhubaneswar

Overall Impressions

1. Clearly there is a need for support to PWDs in Ganjam, and clearly GDOHWA is helping meet this need to some extent. The theory of change that is operating here, is for GDOHWA to act as a bridge between PWDs and the regular school/college academic system such that they can use the reservation quotas available to them and get gainfully employed in the Private and Government sector. It is stories of GDOHWA alumni who have gone through this process and have jobs today that spur the current batch of students to similarly pursue school and college education with or without GDOHWA's support.
2. There is huge scope in improving the way the programme and organisation is run and managed professionally, ranging from how the reporting and documentation is done, to how the team is built and managed, how the accounting systems are organised, how the outcomes are tracked and more.
3. It is Asha's strength to identify and work with small organisations across the country such as GDOHWA, as compared to behemoths like PRADAN or DEVALT, who may not be able to access mainstream / organised / large funding and / or professional talent to manage their organisations' work.
4. Professional talent in general, chooses not to place themselves in remote challenging locations, situations and organisations, as these usually can't pay market-linked salaries. Asha's volunteer and partner network could be of some use in this respect.
5. It is difficult to use efficiency and expansion (scale) indicators such as Rs. Spent / Beneficiary or Change achieved / Beneficiary, as most funding organisations do, to understand impact of human development work with PWDs; For eg, it can take a year for a Mentally Retarded student to complete 1 chapter of 1 subject's textbook. So it may be best to focus on effectiveness-related outcome indicators, and do as much as we can based on the resource constraints we have, whether at Asha or at GDOHWA.
6. Ananda ji's health is constantly deteriorating as he is suffering from Muscular atrophy. At the moment, however, there is a command and control style of leadership as is common in most founder-led and managed voluntary development organisations (NGOs). Being a PWD oneself does not, naturally translate into skill and ability in running an organisation and there is a role for training and coaching in between. There is a clear need for developing a second line of leadership at GDOHWA if the success of future funding is to be ensured.
7. Ananda ji was mostly cooperative during the visit and willingly shared details as requested. The only objection he raised was visiting the schools/colleges where the children studied as it would raise eyebrows among the teachers and principals.
8. In case either Asha or SSEPD or both don't resume funding, the worst case scenario is that all the students will go home and will try to continue their studies from there at their own cost, which is what has happened with the SSEPD-supported students who have all mostly gone back home. They can still get the scholarships directly from the Government. The MR/CP students who can't be integrated into the regular schooling system will be the worst-affected, and it will be upto their parents to set up a support system at their homes.
9. Overall, the nature of work is difficult. Though all the teachers and staff (barring Mr. Rabi) are mentally and physically able, working with PH/MR/CP students on an everyday and every hour basis is a deeply emotional experience, which can be depressing and frustrating, depending on your mood, due to the time it takes for results to show and the "not normal" behaviour of the students.

None of the staff demonstrated discomfort on this front, and their empathy with the students was very good to see. We take human capacity for granted in a normal situation, in this case that basic assumption is itself not valid. That the organisation is run by a PH person as well, is also noteworthy, as it is not easy to overcome one's own physical handicaps, leave alone trying to run an organisation or a programme.

Recommendations to Asha

1. As discussed in the two review calls during the site visit, Asha must conduct an independent financial audit of GDOHWA from 2008 till date to eliminate the doubt that financial mis-appropriation has taken place and to ensure setup of better financial and organisation management systems from a statutory perspective based on the audit report's recommendations. This will also provide Asha with a basis to continue funding, if there is a query by the Government to Asha. Note that the overall scrutiny by the Government is much higher in the case of foreign funding organisations.
2. If the external financial audit report is clear, Asha could continue support to GDOHWA for 1 year at a time, if clear outcomes and outputs can be developed and assigned to GDOHWA for the funds support requested against each activity / budget line item. Asha will hence need to play a more active role in the management of the project to ensure that the required systems are put in place to make the best use of the funds.
3. The nature of work needs trained professionals - educators and nurses. So the staff composition can be thought of accordingly. On the other hand, the current team, though not from such related backgrounds, demonstrated significant commitment and patience, perhaps not skill, in working with the children, based on my observations over the 2 days.
4. Since this is a long-supported Asha project (14 years since 2008), there is a need to sit down and see the long-term or strategic impact Asha wants their funds to have. This will help Asha logically transition out of this programme or take the programme / organisation to the next level. Clear outcome indicators and methods to track them need to be developed, otherwise it can feel very hopeless that a lot of money is being put in, but the results do not seem to be visible against it. For example, the Case history records could record on an annual basis the change in the physical and mental condition of the child from a medical perspective.

Here is the link to the overall Site visit folder which contains the report and photos taken by me and those provided by GDOHWA: [Site Visit - Sep 2022](#).

On a Personal note

Podapadar (<https://goo.gl/maps/26xipbzt8iewBW3M6>), which is about 3 km on the eastern side of Chhatrapur is my paternal home village. So the visit brought back memories of my childhood visits to the village. Though I did not get time to visit the village on this trip, I am grateful for the opportunity to have been able to visit the region again and to get another chance to understand the land and its people better.

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