

Aasra Site-Visit Report Feedback Q&A

Sathyanarayan Anand

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Questioners:

GR : Gayatri Rao

LAL: Lalith Akella

LAV: Lavanya Madhusudhan

PS : Priya Shankar

Health

1. (LAL) *What are the current health care resources? Do they have easy access to doctors? If not, what can we do to improve this situation? How much does it cost to go see a doctor?*
 - a. Private Doctors charge anywhere between Rs.30 - 100 for consultation and their prescriptions have to be bought at market rates. The average Musahar branch and leaf plucker earns Rs. 10-15 a day and hence, cannot afford to see the village doctor.
 - b. The nearest government hospital is about 14 kms (9 miles) away. Consultation is free and any prescription they give costs only Re. 1.
 - c. Because of distance, only if the illness is serious or if Aasra manages to arrange for transportation, do these people go to see a doctor and buy the required medicines.
 - d. The chapter can increase funding for health camps and be more active in following up on what exactly is done at these camps.
2. (LAL) *Are the kids/parents given any vaccines?*
 - a. All children have been vaccinated against polio.
 - b. From time to time, government vans come around with vaccinations and medicines to prevent outbreaks of specific diseases.
 - c. Other basic vaccinations such as hepatitis-B, rotavirus, varicella, etc. are missing.
3. (PS) *How often are health camps conducted? And where? Is there a central location or are they simply at each school?*
 - a. Last year (2007) was the first year that a health camp was organized. It was held at Mankaiyan village. This year it'll be bigger and better advertised. Musahars from all four villages we're supporting will be brought in for the camp.
 - b. The camp will be held on either 2nd October or 14th November, 2008.
4. (PS) *Which communities are benefited from them?*
 - a. The camps are open to anyone wanting to attend. The main marginalized communities of the area (Musahars, Ghaunds, Khatiks and Muslims) are specifically targeted and brought in.
5. (PS) *Where are the doctors coming from?*

- a. Last year only local village doctors helped out but this year, they plan to bring in doctors from the government hospital 14kms away and also personnel from the Central Medical Office headquarters at Varanasi.
6. *(PS) What all is provided at these health camps? From prior knowledge, I have heard that some of the major issues in U.P. are skin problems, diarrhea, respiratory infection, measles, and of course, malnourishment. Might it be possible for us to fund multi-vitamin supplementation at the schools?*
 - a. The focus is on problems of eye, digestion, bone and nutrition.
 - b. In addition, doctors look at any specific illnesses of the patients.
 - c. Vitamin supplements would be difficult as Aasra is not involved in providing food at any of its centers. Ashok Kumar monitors the mid-day meals at his school in Kansraipur and the MDM project will help solidify this monitoring.
 7. *(PS) How is maternal and infant health being provided for? How many Anganwadis are there in the area? I know that if any area has more than 40 children but not Anganwadi it is entitled to having one. Having one of these may help build community.*
 - a. Anganwadis exist in all villages and are used by mothers and infants. Aasra workers take anyone in need to these centers.
 - b. The government provides Rs.500 at birth, Rs.1,400 for infant care and two free checkups at their hospital for the first two kids of a family. Aasra workers are involved in making sure that the money and checkups are delivered on time.
 8. *(GR) As you have mentioned in your report, medical aid is available to the people of these villages only when Aasra brought in its own doctors. Could we arrange mobile medical van facilities by taking assistance from some Govt welfare organizations that might be affiliated to the Aasra programme?*
 - a. I think the health camp is a good first step to get involved in. We should see how that goes. The teachers and Ajay Patel are anyways on the lookout for diseased children and adults and do what is necessary to get them to a doctor.

Education

1. *(LAV) At what age are the AASRA teachers (planning to) merge the students into the government schools?*
 - a. Every child will be merged into a class appropriate for his/her age.
2. *(LAV) What quality of education do the government schools provide? I am just concerned that with all of the hard work that the AASRA teachers are putting in to bring these children to a certain level, if the government school is poorly run, will all of that work have gone to waste?*
 - a. I think that is a risk that'll have to be taken. In the end, employability of these children in the general market depends on whether they have their Grade 10 certificates or not. The NFEs cannot take these kids above a certain level.

3. (LAV) *If the children get used to the Eklavya teaching methods used at the AASRA schools, will they have difficulty when sent to government schools where Eklavya methods may not be used?*
 - a. Good question. Eklavya's methods might be more effective but again, we're constrained by how far the NFEs can take these children. At some point, they'll have to be integrated into regular schools and have to deal with regular teachers/books and also interact with other kids from the village.

4. (LAV) *What do the AASRA workers see as the long term outcome of this project? What types of jobs do they anticipate that these students will hold once they complete their schooling? Will the students be motivated to move outside of Varanasi to seek better employment? It seems to me that it would be detrimental to them to stay in these villages as there are very limited opportunities for lucrative employment.*
 - a. Aasra's schools are primary schools. Their goal is to make these kids ready to join government secondary schools. Once they finish some measure of government schooling, they'll be on the same market as all the other kids.
 - b. Point to note - Aasra is also involved in improving living conditions and employability of adults in these communities. If this works, then these children might even think of going to college or at least have better opportunities of employment locally, by the time they graduate.

5. (LAV) *You mentioned in the report that the headmaster of the Kharagrampur school requested another teacher - what was your impression of the capacity of the Kharagrampur school versus the other AASRA schools? Do you feel that there is a demonstrated need for another teacher there? If so, we should look into hiring another teacher here.*
 - a. I don't think it is our prerogative to provide teachers to government schools. Almost every government school in the country is short on manpower. Our focus should be on the kids we're currently mentoring and their communities. I think the initiative to hire more personnel should be with Ajay Patel and Asha Kashi.

6. (LAV) *How far away are the schools from one another? How feasible is it to create one central school?*
 - a. These villages are very close by within 1-2 miles of each other. If a center is established, then at least 5-6 villages will be within walking distance.
 - b. Ajay Patel has procured two rickshaws from the government for two Musahar families. He says they will use these rickshaws to bring in children from villages further off and also try to get more rickshaws from the government.

MDM

1. (LAV) *Is the village school at Kharagrampur included in the MDM monitoring scheme? Will they ensure that the corruption of the village Pradhan does not continue to prevent the proper preparation and distribution of the mid-day meals at this gov't school?*

- a. Yes, it will be. The MDM project will aim to ensure the smooth functioning of the mid-day meal scheme, free from the Pradhan's interference, at all schools that it monitors. Success will depend on many village-specific factors, the most important of which will be the support of the villagers and the influence that the Pradhan holds over them.
2. (LAV) *Did you see the data collection form that the MDM monitors plan to use? Perhaps we can offer suggestions if they can email the form to the chapter.*
 - a. We were sent this form by Vallabh Bhai sometime back. Manisha sent out a translation in English on March 10th, 2008.

Basic Supplies

1. (PS) *I think it's a great idea to invest in uniforms at both the NFE's and the government schools. I feel that this will already increase the self-confidence and lessen the difference they might feel between themselves and others in government schools. Might we also be able to invest in footwear (made of plastic that will not be damaged) that will at least cover their soles- tape worm, scabies, and many other infections could occur. You mentioned in Jogapur that many students would run barefoot in the slush- perhaps, this could help prevent infection.*
 - a. I'll ask Ajay Patel to send in estimates for uniforms and footwear for the needy kids. He said that he'll also send us names of children who'll receive these clothes.
2. (PS) *One thing we should discuss, after we set up infrastructure for these schools is helping fund scholarships for students like Izhaar and helping pay for clothes, shoes, notebooks, etc. I am sure there are other children without parents or family support that are in similar situations.*
 - a. Good idea. We should include these basic supplies in our next budgets. The scholarships bit is trickier as the NFE students are being merged into government schools and these schools are already supposed to provide scholarships to children from backward communities. Asha Kashi and especially, Vallabh Bhai are involved with this.
3. (PS) *Might we be able to look into educational toys that serve both the purpose of education and recreation? Games like Snakes and Ladders or Card Games might be useful- these are the ones that I can think of off the top of my head, but we may want to look into Indian brands.*
 - a. We already have a budget for toys and games. We can look to increase it and put in a word with Ajay Patel and the teachers about the kind of games/toys we want the children to have.
 - b. A point worth noting - almost every child was interested in sports (cricket, badminton, football). We should consider the idea of funding sports tournaments.

4. *(PS) Motivational stories/education: Besides the basic requirements of math, English, and science, do the teachers teach moral or motivational stories? Especially for these small and deprived group of children, reading Amar Chitra Katha or motivational stories about heroes, etc might be a good tool for these children.*
 - a. We could use the Temple funds to get the entire Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) collection for these kids. The complete collection of 439 titles is available for around Rs. 10,000 or US\$250.
 - b. To the unenlightened – ACK comics are a household name in India. The ACK brand is ... “synonymous with the visual reinvention of the quintessentially Indian stories from the great epics, mythology, history, literature, oral folktales and many other sources.” To the best of my knowledge, these comics are not biased towards any religion.

5. *(LAL) Any educations materials, book shelves we can take care of it right away.*
 - a. We should look at procuring Eklavya’s teaching kits for teachers.
 - b. I spoke to Vallabh Bhai and he said that getting Eklavya’s books for the children is not necessary but the teaching kits will prove very useful. In addition, the four teachers are in line for three Eklavya training sessions in the next six months.
 - c. Vallabh Bhai will send us the estimates for Eklavya’s kits.

Housing & Construction

I’ll answer the following questions together at the end of the section.

1. *(LAV) For Jogapur, we should definitely see if we can build a permanent rain-resistant structure...the effectiveness of providing education is really reduced if teaching is irregular and must be put on hold whenever it rains.*
2. *(LAL) How much will it cost us to build common homes for the Musahar community people? When I say common homes i meant building many rooms under one roof and sub divide those rooms to different families....find out if anything like this is feasible? If we can get an estimate of this, maybe we can put this towards our long term goals for Aasra.*
3. *(LAL) We can look into building rooms for the NFE’s again an estimate of how much it will cost us would help and we can put this towards long term goal.*

After speaking to Ajay Patel and Vallabh Bhai two options have emerged, one of which is logistically better than the other. The first and less preferable one is to build two rooms to serve as classrooms in the two communities of Jogapur and Mankaiyan. This option runs into problems of ownership as the land on which the rooms will be built will belong to the community. There might be trouble in the future over how the rooms are to be used. In addition, if the children from these NFEs are merged into government schools, then the utility of these rooms is gone.

The other more preferable option is to build a Musahar center where classes will be run in addition to the sewing and embroidery center. Ajay Patel also mentioned that they’re looking to start a candle making center. All this could be run and managed from one place. As I previously mentioned in question 6 of the Education section,

these villages are within 1-2 miles of each other and getting to center would not be all that difficult for many people.

There are two pieces of land in the area, one belonging to Ajay Patel's father and the other to Ashok Kumar. They're both willing to give the land for the center's use and Vallabh Bhai said that they will transfer the ownership of the land to Asha's trust foundation before the center is built.

We will be getting cost estimates for both options over the next month or so.

Communication

1. *(PS) You mentioned that data collections for MDM will be sent via Microsoft Excel. Who exactly is capable of sending us this material?*
 - a. Ajay Patel and Vallabh Bhai can both send us the files.
2. *(PS) Could we in any way help ensure better communication, providing them with computers, etc.? Is this something that might be needed?*
 - a. We have already approved funds for laptops to be sent to them.
3. *(PS) I am really looking forward to getting to know the children! Sathya, what is the best way for our group to get to know them on an individual basis. I like the idea of frequent teleconferences. Now that you have made this connection, how can we send mail, etc. to these children? Also, maybe setting up scholarships could be a way to connect? What do you think could work best?*
 - a. Teleconferencing might work but we'll always need someone who speaks Hindi to be on the call. We should definitely talk with the teachers and parents at the very least.
 - b. Interns would be a great way to maintain contact. The intern could be asked to communicate either way and even send in videos of what the children want to say.
 - c. Scholarships get tricky once the NFE kids are merged into regular schools.

Community Programs

1. *(PS) I definitely think that funding and developing the sewing center is a great project to take on. Additionally, one could consider an alternate mechanism like selling handicrafts. Perhaps that could be another layer to their income potential in the future.*

(LAV) The

sewing center is a great idea for the women - Rs. 2000-3000 a month is a pretty decent amount for these women to be earning, and if their husbands are also working, it's a pretty good amount. I definitely think that we should find out more about how the sewing center operates and see if there are opportunities for expansion.
 - a. Ajay Patel has already bought equipment to teach embroidery and two more sewing machines to expand the sewing center. Embroidery lessons and the expanded center will begin once the monsoon season finishes.

- b. There are plans to start a candle making business in the community with Aasra's support.
 - c. My impression is that Aasra is already making progress on this front and we should wait to see how things turn out for a little while before suggesting further expansions.
2. (GR) *Can the Aasra coordinators back in India try to get loans from nationalized banks that could help these people start some kind of a small business (maybe in groups) or are there any griha mahila udyog organizations around where some of the women folk can find work?*
- a. Loans are given only to Self-Help Groups (SHG) these days. We'll have to look at registering Aasra as a SHG before applying for loans.
 - b. Women are already being encouraged to join the sewing center. With its expansion to include embroidery and candle making, I think there are enough options to manage for now.
 - c. Ajay Patel mentioned that there is the problem of untouchability in having the Musahars start a direct business. Hardly anyone would buy or even touch goods being sold by a Musahar.
3. (GR) *Could we help organize counselling programs specifically dealing with topics related to healthcare for women, prenatal & postnatal care, importance of sanitation and teaching men and women of the community techniques to create and maintain clean living conditions as much as they possibly can with resources available (I do believe we need to try and gear efforts towards creating concrete homes for these people). Again, can training programs be arranged for men and women within the community to help build community health volunteer groups who can then become providers of basic primary healthcare. Maybe that could help solve concerns related to immunizations as well to some extent. We can try to raise funds to provide for medical kits and medications.*
- a. We can suggest integrating these into Aasra's health camps.
4. (GR) *Some of the things we could probably undertake- try to see if we can organize career counselling/ general counselling programs for children, vocational training programs for adults to help build skills that can become income sources (like for instance as suggested by Lavanya- training programs can be arranged to teach people how to grow a good crop if the land conditions they live on permit it, but again do they own that land?) Are there any night schools that adults could get enrolled into? If not, can we arrange evening classes to counsel adults as well?*
- a. Aasra is already involved in getting job cards for these people. In addition, they try to get them employed in factories wherever possible.
 - b. The literacy rate among adults of this community is 1-2%. So, their options are quite limited.
 - c. From what I've seen, a Musahar center is the best way to start in this direction. Once classes and women's programs are up and running there, we can start looking into livelihoods as well.