

**Background:** Uthnau works in the tribal community in rural area of Birbhum district in West Bengal. This area is on the border of West Bengal and Jharkhand state. The majority of population is from Santhali tribe. Uthnau works in multiple villages around this area with main office in Garia. Uthnau focuses on overall development of these village communities. The main focus areas are: children education, vocational training, community healthcare, awareness to constitutional rights and legal issues, popularizing sustainable development options, and developing & managing local community resources. Asha Seattle funds the education and healthcare part of this project.

**Economic situation of community:** The main source of income is farming and salaries from working in stone quarries. This area has very high number of stone quarries. Stone quarries have provided an alternative livelihood to the community but it has come at a huge price. Most of the stone quarries don't provide masks for the worker and also the remunerations are very low. The stone dust is not only resulting in many respiratory diseases for the workers and rest of the community around, but also impacting the farms productivity around the area. Given the fact that the farming productivity has gone down, villagers are left with little choice but to work in these stone quarries.



**Figure 1:** A stone quarry, locally known as a 'khadan', roughly of the size of half a football field.

**On the way to Uthnau:** Srijan and Binay from Asha Seattle joined Swati from Uthnau, in early morning of March 23<sup>rd</sup> in Kolkata and started on a drive to Garia, the Uthnau's main office. Swati is one of the project coordinator at Uthnau. She looks after majority of the education related matters. It is worth noting that she used to volunteer for Asha Seattle before moving back to India and joining Uthnau to work at the grass root level.

On the way, we discussed different challenges Uthnau is facing and the recent progress it has made in different domain it works in. Some of the topics covered were: org structure, effectiveness of people in current structure, delegation of work, and funding status of Asha and other organizations that are supporting Uthnau.

The road is in excellent condition till Mallarpur but roads leading to villages from Mallarpur are in very bad condition. It is literally like finding road between potholes and many times going off road was better option than driving on road. We reached Mallarpur around 12 Noon and continued for Garia after small stop at

Uthnau office there. Kunal Da, founder of Uthnau, met with us at the office for few minutes. He demonstrated the work done by Uthnau in mapping the region resources, e.g. water bodies. Please see the diagram below for an example.



**Figure 2:** A villager looking at the resource map of the area Uthnau is working in.

Once in Garia, we met with other Uthnau staff members and chalked out plans for that day. There are six early childhood education centers and one crèche (call Mochora) that is supported by Asha. We decide to go to Mochora the same day (it is walking distance from main office) followed by a trip to a nearby village. Here, Uthnau is presenting a drama to bring awareness about stone quarry and its impact. We decide to put off visiting few ECEs till next day morning.

**Mochora:** Mochora is a crèche that was started recently in addition to childhood education center. Many students have to stay home to take care of younger siblings and crèche provides them an opportunity to do so in parallel with their education. Parents are expected to drop students with their younger siblings and then pick them up in evening.

Currently it has good mix of age groups. We reached just after lunch time. Students were washing their utensils before returning it back. We had the same lunch and the quality of food was quite good. After lunch, the classes started. The crèche building structure is pretty unique. It is two floored house built with inspiration from local architecture. There is a small round hole in roof that allows some water to drop during rain to the center bottom, where there is a small water repository dug deep in ground. There are lots of windows to allow wind. It also was very cold compare to outside due to the material used to build it (i.e. chaff, mud, bamboo). Also, the water from roof is channeled to go to near by water pit to conserve water. Kitchen is a separate single room home nearby.



**Figure 3:** Binay and Swati at the 1st floor of Mochora.

Most of the lower wall on first floor is blackboard. This allows students to draw big pictures on them. Many kids had done interesting drawings on them. The teachers also shared with us few of the photos of earlier drawings. We briefly talked to few students and figured that they were confident and had good knowledge for their level. Later we saw them rehearse for the evening musical drama that they were supposed to present in a village near by. Their practice looked very organized.

We looked at some of the teaching and learning materials used in crèche and then went upstairs for a chat with Swati. Srijan suggested that it would be useful to keep the teaching and learning material unlocked and let the students take it at their will and keep it back in an organized way. We talked about the future plans for Mochora. Swati mentioned that she is trying to break the group into three subgroup based on their learning level. She also mentioned that it was much more successful than ECEs in terms of overall personality development and learning of the students. She is going to focus on developing more teaching and learning materials. Also, she needs to build structured syllabus so that students are aptly prepared for open school exams in future. She was planning to increase her duration per visit to Uthnau so that she can work closely with teachers.

Overall, we were pretty happy seeing how far Mochora has come along in such a short time. The quality of education leveraging alternative means is pretty good. We felt that the program will be completely developed in the next 2-3 years, though it's already at a level where the more successful components can be included in the ECE program to make it more effective.

**Awareness campaign:** In the evening we went to a nearby village to see a dance drama presentation by students from Mochora. Due to few event management hiccups the program started little later than expected. This impacted the quality of delivery because there was not enough sun light and street light is pretty much non-existent in this area.

The theme of this drama was to show how stone quarry impacts the life of Santhali's families. Most of the villagers were present which speaks for Uthnau's outreach. Even though we could not follow exact words but were able to guess the content. Students did a very good job as we could assess by seeing audience reaction. At the end of drama the stage was open up for discussion. Robin and Kunal Da were answering all

the questions. Villagers were actively involved in the discussion which also speaks of the effectiveness of such avenues in bringing about awareness.



**Figure 4:** Uthnau staff and students preparing for the dance drama.



**Figure 5:** Children participating in the dance drama.

**Early Childhood Education centers:** By the time we returned to main office of Uthnau in Garia, it was very late in the evening. So we went to sleep after having dinner with some of the other staff members. Early next day, we got ready to visit couple of ECEs. It wasn't possible to include a lot in the day as ECEs are in different villages and the commute is long due to bad road conditions.

#### **ECE at JowalBhangā:**

- Teacher: Sonamuni
- Student statistics: 41 (including younger siblings that were not studying). Ratio of boys to girls was roughly 1:1.
- Infrastructure: School building roof broke down 3 months back. Currently, leveraging aangan (common area in center of a house where rooms are on the periphery) in a student's house. That day the class was conducted under shade of trees outside of the house.

- Teaching and learning material (TLM): It was not used that day because the class was conducted little far from the usual place and carrying it would have been difficult. Even blackboard was not carried. After talking to teacher for some time, We didn't find her too keen on leveraging the available TLMs.
- Student:
  - Most of the students go to primary school as well.
  - Some of the students were drawing good pictures considering their age.
  - After talking to few students We noticed that their learning level was good.
  - Six students sang three songs and also danced to it.



**Figure 6:** Children in Jowal Bhanga ECE acting out a rhyme.



**Figure 7:** Sonamuni facilitating activities in the Jowal Bhanga ECE.

#### ECE at Jethiya:

- Teacher: Lakhman Da
- Students: 35. There were four students that came specifically that day because their regular school was closed. The boys and girls ratio was close to 1:1.

- Infrastructure: School was conducted under trees. Original school structure crumbled and currently there is no structure since last one year. Usually these structures stay for 2-3 years and cost around \$2K. There is an alternative to use stronger material that will last for many years and will cost close to \$9K.
- Teaching and learning material (TLM): Some TLMs were created by Lakhan Da. He leveraged all available TLMs. Swati suggested to use bigger flash cards for better effect.
- Students: Most of the students were practicing alphabets and numbers. A couple of them were learning addition and subtraction. Lakhan Da dictated few words for students to write in Bengali. This was on our request to see their current learning level. Only 5 students tried and others remained busy with drawing and other learning activities they were involved in. These five students did a good job keeping their age in consideration.



**Figure 8:** Children in the Jethiya ECE center studying under open sky.



**Figure 9:** Lakhan-da helping children in their activities.

**Meeting back at Garia office:** We came back from ECEs around noon. Kunal Da called a post lunch meeting between Uthnau staffs and us. We took this time to update the form that Asha project stewards had built to be filled up by Teachers and program coordinator to give a good grasp on ECEs, Mochora and teacher's

effectiveness and growth. We finalized it after incorporating feedback from Swati and Kunal Da. Swati also showed us the plant material based hand crafted local jewelry developed by Uthnau staff. They also showed the different seeds they have stored and education material they have developed for their program with Sangati to conserve varieties of produce.



**Figure 10:** Hand-crafted locally made jewelry.



**Figure 11:** Variety of seed samples as part of Uthnau's seed conservation program.

We discussed with Kunal Da about overall management of the organization and hiccups in previous day's evening event. Werecommended that he may want to consider delegating more rather than getting involved in everything, which sometime impacts overall progress. Also, we discussed that currently Uthnau is involved in many types of activities. It may be useful to consider pulling out of few to better focus on critical ones.

Once the meeting started, Kunal Da asked for our observations and feedback. Srijan mentioned that he is happy with overall program but he can't give any solid feedback because he has not observed Uthnau for a long enough time and didn't know how it has evolved over the years. But it was commendable that they have been able to build a non-hierarchical organization which imbibes the values of participatory democracy in its everyday working. Binay echoed that he continues to be impressed with the program. He also provided a comparison in status with respect to previous visits. He mentioned that there was little progress on the ECE front compared to last visit. But Mochora has made huge progress and it stands out at a different level than ECEs. He also brought up the status of ECE buildings. We discussed that it needs to be handled soon. Then we delved into the funding status. We mentioned that Asha Seattle is in tough situation with respect to finance this year but we can help explore alternative options.

After the meeting we took a group photo and then headed back to Kolkata.



**Figure 12:** Group photo with Uthnau staff and Asha Seattle volunteers in front of Uthnau office in Garia village.

#### **Summary:**

Overall, we were impressed with the way the program is running, though there is a still lot of scope for improvements with regards to project management. At the same time, we feel that their dedication, honesty, networking and perseverance for improving the quality of life of Santhalis in this area compensates for this issue.

There is urgent need for additional funding to sustain the program more effectively. Asha Seattle should consider increasing the funding to cover for rebuilding the ECEs class rooms and salary increase to cover for inflation. Mochora is doing really well and Uthnau may want to consider moving other ECEs in similar direction.

We also got a chance to observe and/or discuss other activities of Uthnau that are supported by other non-profit organizations, e.g. developing alternative livelihood, dry land farming, seed bank, activism against stone quarry, water reservation, partnering with govt to leverage NREGA for local development, support villagers to get ration card and under-poverty line cards, etc. But we will skip most of it to keep this document brief.



**Figure 13:** Rain water harvesting structure in the making in Uthnau.