

## Uthnau Site Visit Report: 20-21 May 2014 by Swati

### Background:

I have been a project steward for Uthnau 2001-2007 and then worked at Uthnau Apr 2008 – Mar 2009. I was involved with them till about 2010 and visited them last in Mar 2011. After that I was barely in touch. I was pulled back into the loop since a site visit was badly required and no one from Seattle was able to do that soon enough. Time was critical since lack of site visit was impacting fund transfer.

The project stewards Binay and Subhasish, Kunal representing Uthnau and I had a telecon on 3 May. The 2 main questions Binay wanted me to look into are:

1. The curriculum of Manj Awrah and
2. The issue of hostel for older children – why, how many children per year etc.

### Visit:

This was a short visit from Tue, 20 May morning to Wed, 21 May afternoon during peak summer reaching 44-45°C in the afternoon. We got nicely roasted for 2 days.

Kunal, Arun da, a former Manj Awrah student (girl) and Palash, from Kishore Bharati, accompanied me in Ganadevta. Kunal had to get down at Bardhaman to take care of hospital issues and rejoined us in the afternoon. [Sonamuni was hospitalized and there were many complications. She is still recovering.]

We went straight to Manj Awrah. The top floor has been converted to a liveable space with partitioned “rooms” and a functioning toilet. Also there are lights and fans. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> visit when never went to the Uthnau office!

Children were already there though less in numbers as it was harvesting season. Some of the Manj Awrah graduates, who are now in govt schools, also came since the schools were closed for summer vacation. Sadi, Baburchi and Mohan were present as teachers. I looked around what different groups of children were doing:

- Some young ones were on drawing shapes on the floor and lining up seeds along the chalk marks
- Another few were counting pebbles and matching them with number cards – discussed some nuances with Sadi regarding this
- Mohan was teaching older children in a group with straws (but no rubber bands)
- Few children were writing the alphabets and numbers on the wall – they didn’t understand Bangla well enough for me to interact with them

I also had on and off discussion with the teachers. They mentioned some curriculum they are working on and I flipped through that as well.

During the children’s bathing time, I had some discussion with the teachers regarding the hostel issue and things in general. After lunch the children took a nap. Afterwards Palash had a story-rhyme session with them and they performed various songs and dances for him. There was clear cross-learning among different children coming from different communities with different languages (Santhali, Bangla and Hindi) from different villages.

In the evening the children for tuition classes came. I had a long discussion with Kunal followed by a meeting with everyone. Post dinner we had a star-watching session.

On 21 May, another guest, Rupa, came – she, along with her friends, wants to help Uthnau in some way and she came to explore the possibilities. Mohan went to fetch her and later also dropped me at Rampurhat. I took pictures of the curriculum and had another round of discussion with Kunal.

### In details:

#### Manj Awrah:

Uthnau’s activities, especially the involvement of the salaried staff are crystallized around Manj Awrah. The facility works in 2 shifts –

1. Original “day-care” where children up to the age of Class 4 come in the morning and stay till late afternoon – most children are from Garia, ≈ 10 from outside, out of them ≈ 4 from lower castes; most children are Santhals
2. After-school tuition center in the evening 6:30-9:30pm for
  - a. Manj Awrah graduates in Class 5 (the 2014 batch) and non-Manj Awrah Class 6-8 – ≈ 9 children taught by Mohan
  - b. Non-Manj Awrah Class 2-5 – ≈ 10-11 children taught by Sadi

**Positives:**

Undoubtedly children find it an inviting place – because of water, space, freedom to be themselves, resources – toys and other materials, friendly adults. So those, who have been to Manj Awrah ever, try to come back even after they get enrolled in other schools. Then they will come to Manj Awrah 1<sup>st</sup>, go to school from there and again come back to Manj Awrah in the evening. If the school is closed they will spend the whole day in Manj Awrah.

The learning levels of the children are certainly better than those in govt primary schools. They do not fear teachers and communicate if they have difficulty in following lessons.

Co-curricular activities are strong and children learn from each other and guests. I found them performing action rhymes they learnt from CMS in 2007.

**Concerns:**

No one is really checking how much the children are learning or can it made better. The teachers can be more engaged with the children on a regular basis.

Since the overall age has dropped a bit, books are accessible to only older kids. So the earlier engagements of children with books, I found missing this time. This could also be because of fewer students present.

**Attendance and enrolment:** Thanks to the anti-Uthnau campaign, for the last few years, there is very high turnover of the students, i.e. there is a constant out-flux as parents are withdrawing their children from Manj Awrah. As a result there is a constant in-flux as well. Parents are taking them out as soon as they pick up reading-writing. So a child who joins as a toddler leaves after 2 years as opposed to 3-4. Children who join at an older age are leaving after few months. **Given this, one cannot expect any teacher to feel enthusiastic about teaching anything to anybody. You really need a stable student population to have meaningful classes.** So what is happening in Uthnau currently is a lot of spontaneous learning facilitated to a great extent by a very child friendly environment. Together that is generating better results than the govt primary schools. ***Unless this issue is tackled i.e. the anti-Uthnau campaign is countered effectively there is no point discussing curriculum or anything related to quality of learning. This ties in directly with the issues Uthnau overall is facing and that goes beyond Manj Awrah.***

**Teachers:** Mainly Baburchi, Sadi and Mohan – Arun da is involved in kitchen garden and star-watching and Sonamuni is very sick right now

**Baburchi and Sonamuni** – highly depressed and de-motivated, also feeling very alienated from Garia village since the crisis (details later)

**Sadi** – the most balanced person (possibly also because she is not from Garia) but getting heavily mentored by Mohan and Arun da – this may not be good in the long run

**Mohan and Arun da** – both Bengali and successful in the mainstream education as children, so they view the traditional ways as better than the changes that are now coming into the school system – through textbooks etc.

Mohan in particular is too articulate and dominating and needs a comparable supervisor to counter him; at the same time he is the one only one who can handle Classes 5-8 in the tuition center.

**Hostel:**

Here are the year-wise numbers of children graduating from Manj Awrah

**2011:** 1 child (Sonamuni's daughter) – enrolled in a hostel-school in Bankura in Class 6

**2012:** 5 children enrolled in Class 5, 3 boys and 1 girl got in local govt school(s) and 1 more girl in a hostel-school elsewhere – 3 boys dropped out in Class 6: they were older than their peers and had difficulty adjusting with younger classmates, also felt shy for their own age

**2013:** 2 girls in Class 5 – one in Kolkata (the one who travelled with us) and one locally

**2014:** 5 children in Class 5 locally

The major reason for the dropouts turned out to be age-related adjustment problems.

However, according to Mohan, these children will drop out of any school whatsoever unless the school does home visits. Since Manj Awrah does that, they do not drop out. But no govt school will do that, so they will eventually drop out. So hostel is the only way to keep them in school.

Overall, for the next few years it will possibly be at most 5 kids per year graduating out and needing hostel. So the planning can be done that way. Also the 1<sup>st</sup> batch of 2011 will take Class 10 public exam in 2016. After that it needs to be seen if they are going to pursue Class 11-12. Now the new batch entering Class 5 in 2014 will take Class 10 public exam in 2019. So year-wise it may look like this:

2014: max 5 children

2015: max 5 children – since there won't be a new batch for Class 5

2016: max 10 children

2017: max 15 children

2018: max 20 children

**2019: max 20 children** – since the 2014 batch will be out and the resources can be utilized for a new batch

In reality, the actual numbers will be much less and will also depend on vacancy in the hostels. ***May be Asha can look for SAC or separate sponsorships for these children.***

**Curriculum:**

There is some work going on since 2012-13. But the teachers could not articulate what this curriculum is based on. Workshops had happened and something got jotted down. But they don't revisit them again. Part of the reason is the overall de-motivated spirit lingering all over Uthnau and lack of regular supervision. Given the overall situation, I felt that it is meaningless to discuss curriculum now.

**Overall situation: Why and how crisis:**

The main thrust of Uthnau has always been the movement against the stone quarrying and crushing industry. Around 2011 it gained success and managed to shut down all the quarries and crushers. Along with this success, few of the leaders of the movement gained a lot of power. 2 of them in particular essentially grew up in Uthnau. These people became quite corrupt and Uthnau took measures to separate them out from the movement and the larger Santhal community. Those of the leaders who remained in Garia are now opposing the activities of Uthnau. This in particular includes campaigning to the parents that don't send your children to Manj Awrah – they can't give certificates. Since some political party leaders are also involved, the parents often succumb to the pressure. They are also trying other things to prove Uthnau is powerless and cannot counter their moves. It is village politics and power-hunt for the de-throned leaders.

The other crucial mistake by Uthnau around that time (or may be a little earlier) was to completely withdraw from the ECE centers in different villages and hand them over to the community. That didn't work out and the ECE centers soon stopped functioning.

As a result of both, the staff in Uthnau shrank significantly and is only 6 people at present – Kunal, Mohan, Arun da + Baburchi, Sonamuni and Sadi – i.e. non-Santhal and Santhal 50-50. Among them Baburchi and Sonamuni have artistic personality and are very sensitive. They have taken the blow worst. There is a deep sense of shame at how these leaders turned out since they were nurtured within Uthnau. It is like a fight against your own kin. And of course there is the feeling of betrayal. As a result, both Baburchi and Sonamuni have become completely withdrawn and are disgusted with Garia village in general. That leaves only Sadi who is getting heavily mentored by Mohan and Arun da. Kunal himself is quite down and therefore didn't engage with them for some time. He was scared that his depression might deteriorate their mental state.

***To me this is probably a tougher battle compared to 2002 (when Kunal was jailed) because now the fight is within. That is made tougher by the deep sense of failure since Uthnau generated leaders who got corrupted so fast and are now campaigning against Uthnau.***

**Way forward:**

Kunal has involved Ghashiram again as a community organizer – but Ghashi is not in Uthnau payroll. As usual Kunal is also looking in to other ways to bring the Santhal community together and engage the youth in future campaigns. Many of the children who took part in the dramas in 2007 are now willing and ready to be volunteers.

Bapi and Arifa who had been involved with the theatre activities since 2007 are now involved on a regular basis. They were involved in the curriculum making process as well. ***It will be good if Bapi in particular can supervise the Manj Awrah teachers on a REGULAR basis.***

Palash, who is in Kishore Bharati – one of the potential hostel-schools, is thinking of exchange programs where teachers of each organization can visit and contribute to each other.

Arun da is getting involved in various farming related forums as well as consultancy type involvements. This is a better utilization of his expertise and the consultancies do generate revenue for Uthnau.

***What should Asha do?***

- 1. Understand Uthnau as a whole and look only into the part that is getting funded*
- 2. Look at the funded part in light of the overall picture*
- 3. Ensure funds reach ON TIME and do communicate the exact Rupees amount that will be sent – if possible*

***All the best to Uthnau – may you rise again like a phoenix!!***

Swati  
8 Jun 2014