

Asha Shikshan Sansthan (Asha Samajik Vidyalaya), Ballia
Site Visit - January 18th, 2007

I was visiting Mehdiganj in January 2007 and spoke to Vallabh bhai about making a visit to Asha Shikshan Sansthan supported by Asha Austin. Due to the remote area in which the school was located, Vallabh bhai said that I would need somebody to accompany me, and he offered to come along. It was decided that I would start from Mau for Ballia by car and I would meet Vallabh bhai at the Ballia railway station. The town/city of Ballia is the district headquarters and the school was located in Reoti village which was much further away. One thing I would like to mention is that the condition of the roads was very bad and a better option for others would be to take the train from Varanasi which stops near Reoti. From there it is a couple of kms. but I am sure some transport can be worked out. The train starts early in the morning (5 or 6 am) and gets to Reoti by 11 am. The return train is in the evening. Our visit to the school was totally unannounced.

The school is located right in the middle of the community, on a piece of land belonging to a member of the community. In fact the land belongs to the family of one of the teachers. The school is run under a shed-like structure which is a temporary arrangement. We are skeptical of building a permanent structure on land not belonging to the school. There is an effort to transfer the land to the school. The structure consists of poles supporting a tin roof. There are benches, desks for the children and some classes have children sitting on tarp or jute-bags. Many of the classes were being held in the open because it was more comfortable in the warmth of the sun-rays in the winter. The school has 150 children from classes 1 to 5 and 7. The reason there is no class 6, is that when the school started there were very few children in each grade and in one particular grade some of the children left and the others were accommodated in the next class. This happened a few years back and since then there has been a grade with no children.



School being run under the tin-shed and some classes in the open

Compared to last year 31 children joined the school and 10 children left the school. The children left the school because they joined another school or they moved to their maternal grand-mother's place. The children are not charged any fees and the school only admits children from economically backward families. All the teaching material from the school is stored in a teacher's house who lives right next to the school.

Meeting with the teachers:

One of the issues being faced at the project was teacher absenteeism and teacher substitution. The problem was that if a teacher was going to be absent for a long time, they would send another of their family member to teach at the school. The problem with such a system is that the family member is often inexperienced and it makes it harder for the children to adjust to a new teaching style for a short period and then they have to switch back when the teacher returns. For example a couple of the teachers were absent and instead their sister was at the school to teach.

In another example, one of the teachers was absent for 42 days from July to December 2006 and two other teachers were absent for more than 20 days. With some teachers taking so much time off, it was setting a bad example to the other teachers and they also felt that if some could get so many holidays, then they should also be able to take more holidays.

In an earlier meeting it had been decided that the total number of holidays in a year would be 20, apart from Sundays and other festivals. For the remaining academic year from January to June, the teachers would have 10 days of holidays. If they took more holidays, then they would have to suffer a pay cut.



Teachers at the school.



Photo of teachers with children and me.

Some of the teachers had concerns about the salaries and we had a discussion about the same. The junior teachers currently receive Rs.1200/month while the senior teachers receive Rs. 1600/month. The coordinator receives Rs 2200/month. In the next year the proposal is to increase the salaries to Rs. 1700, Rs. 2000 and Rs. 2500 respectively. Some of the teachers wanted to have equal pay for all the teachers, but Vallabh bhai explained to them that it would be unfair to the teachers who had been teaching for many years. Vallabh bhai asked the junior teachers if they would be fine if a new teacher was to join and be paid the same as them. They agreed that it would be a little unfair. Vallabh bhai instead suggested that over time the pay difference between the two could be reduced.

There was extra money left from the purchase of textbooks and the question was what was to be done with the extra money? One suggestion was to distribute the money among

the teachers but they soon realized that this could lead to a dangerous trend where the money instead on being spent on the children was being saved to be distributed among the teachers. They decided that the money would be spent on the school, to build a toilet or something else that would benefit the school. What I found interesting was that all teachers were involved in the decision making process, and decisions were arrived at, after an open discussion involving all.

Other updates/comments:

* The children of the school were preparing for the Republic Day function to be held at the school. They were going to sing the National Anthem along with other songs and perform some plays. They would be given a small gift like a notebook and a pen.

* The exposure trip for the children has not been finalized but it should happen sometime in March.

* Final exams are to be held in April.

* A medical camp was conducted for the children. Some photos were provided for the same and they will be put-up online very soon. The children were found to be suffering from some vitamin deficiencies.

* There is no toilet in the school and the children normally go home, which is a disturbance to the class and for the children.

* All children seemed to have their own stationery and books.

Other photos from the site visit can be accessed at:

<http://data.ashanet.org/datastore/data/Chapters/Austin/Projectpics/ASS/Jan07/index.html>