

Visit to Asha Fellow Vallabhacharya Pandey
Asha Varanasi, Nov 18 - 19, 2010
- A visit report by Sirish, volunteer Asha DC

I arrived at Vallabh bhai's home early morning on Nov 18. Two local residents arrived to meet Vallabh in the morning itself. One was a parent of children at local middle (or junior high) school who, working with many other parents and under guidance of Vallabh bhai, had taken action on the inebriated state of the school principal on regular basis while in school premises. The principal had often been found lying in a drunk state at the school in past months. A group of parents had caught him red-handed on the previous morning (Nov 17), carried his cot to a room, locked the principal in the room and called the District Assistant Basic Siksha Adhikari (ABSA) who immediately dispatched a medical team to investigate. The medical team tested for blood alcohol level and took the principal with them for further medical testing. The principal was suspended on the spot and removed from the principal position of the middle school.

Today, they had come for follow-up on this case with Vallabh bhai and also to talk about mid-day meal situation in the area primary school under newly elected pradhan (head of a cluster of villages). One person also needed to follow-up on an incomplete road construction to his house. This person was now filing RTI application to ask for the amount of funds allocated to build the road and if the road should have been completed in the previous disbursement itself.

At 11:00 AM we left for the weekly Right to Information camp near municipal courts at Gol Ghar organized by Vallabh's team under his direction on every Thursday. Team members present were Ajay Patel (coordinator Aasra), Rajkumar, Nageshwar Prasad Sinha (a retired advocate) and Hariprasad. This camp is part of the 'Right to Information Campaign UP' activity organized by Vallabh and his team in Varanasi.

The history of involvement of Mr. Sinha is quite interesting. He had arrived at the very first RTI camp arranged by Vallabh more than two years ago and benefited immensely from RTI Campaign's guidance and follow-up on his case. He fought the City Development Authority for months to get a refund of Rs. 25,000 that had been excessively charged by the development authority for construction of his house. Mr Sinha filed an RTI application working with the RTI Campaign group but the housing development authority could not show the calculation based on which they had demanded additional Rs 25,000. His case was a success story and at the time he received his refund, the city had to refund hundreds of other citizens who had been excessively charged and acknowledged their accounting error. Since then Mr. Sinha has become a regular volunteer at the camp.

At the camp, I talked to three people who arrived to request information or follow-up on their case. Mr. Miraz Ahmad needed help with his passport application which has been pending for 1.5 years. He has now received a response after he filed an RTI application that his passport issuance is pending address verification. Mr. Ahmad is now submitting address proof.

Another person needed help with releasing his provident fund. Another gentleman on a bicycle saw the camp banner and stopped me on the roadside and asked how this camp can help. I asked him to see the people inside. His land had been captured by some land mafia. He had filed a RTI

application but city magistrate did not respond. He then contacted the District Commissioner who ordered the city magistrate to respond but there has been no response from the magistrate. He was seeking guidance on next step.

While at the camp together, the team members also informally discussed major local issues such as 1) upcoming Mahamaya Yojna implemented by the Chief Minister Mayawati, 2) panchayat election results and its follow-up and 3) mid-day meal being contracted out to NGOs instead of being cooked locally by persons appointed by Gram Panchayat. An organization Mahila Samakhya has the contract for few of the villages where Asha works. It was obvious that local groups such as Aasra and many activists seek regular guidance from Vallabh on carrying out their education, RTI, NREGA and other grassroots democracy campaigns.

The camp infrastructure was almost nil. There is a banner hanging at the entrance of the market informing passersby of the weekly RTI camp. Camp team members sat near the covered entrance of the market at a raised platform without formal table and chairs and helped camp attendees there. Vallabh's team pulled a couple of chairs from the shops as needed. The moral support from the market shopkeepers (including a small travel agency and a small pharmacist) who have given space to the RTI Campaign team seemed very strong. The team members were able to occasionally use the tables and benches in the shops for their work and shop keepers also provided them tea and snacks. Vallabh's team had received offer to hold the weekly RTI Camp at a luxury hotel but the team does not feel that any of their users will dare to even enter such a luxury hotel. The hotel is also located too far from the municipal courts where most of the people with grievances show up.

After the camp, Vallabh was invited to speak at a meeting organized by a newly formed organization Kashi Jansoochna Foundation. This group is founded by retired Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), Mr. O.P. Kejriwal. The meeting was held at Motilal Kushwaha parisar mahasabha and the meeting was organized by Mr. Dhananjay. At this meeting, Vallabh was asked to share a congratulatory message ('shubhkamna sandesh') from 'RTI Campaign' for foundation's new magazine. He was also asked to give details of case study of Varanasi district official website that was established after RTI Campaign asked for the information be published *suo moto* by the district government under Section 4(1)b of RTI act. Website has become outdated again due to negligence of officials. Vallabh spoke with tremendous knowledge of all local relevant and current topics.

Mr. Dhananjay has benefited from Vallabh's RTI Campaign team in the recent past. In 2005 a Benares Hindi University (BHU) student, Yogesh Rai got injured at annual sports event and was not attended to for 4 hours at the university hospital. He died at night. Dhananjay had just finished his B.Ed from BHU and was an M.Ed applicant there when he filed RTI application in '09. University was ordered to provide the details by CIC Mr. O.P. Kejriwal but paid Rs 25000 fine for not supplying information but has never shared details of how the hospital doctors were negligent. A fact finding team appointed by the university also found the university and hospital negligent. Dhananjay was denied admission to M.Ed. apparently due to his activism in a case embarrassing to the university.

Next day, on the morning of Nov 19, Vallabh was invited to address six newly elected village pradhans in the neighboring block of Araji lines where Aasra group is actively reforming education and governance. Ajay Patel asked Vallabh to address the topic of how pradhans can get support from state officials as local pradhans are facing pressure from others in village that they cannot work here.

Vallabh addressed following topic:

- There are some good officials at state level that will support the efforts of pradhans who are trying to work in public interest.
- Pradhans should not take charge without checking all accounts of pradhan that governed for previous five years as if a particular project has been shown to be implemented, the new pradhan cannot seek funds for the same project. RTI on previous 5 years so you know what has been done on paper. Get audit for what was done.
- New pradhans need not react in a negative way to villages that opposed them in the elections. You are now head of all the Sabha (a cluster of about 5 to 10 villages in general), and you must work for everyone.
- Come up with creative uses of NREGA act and use that program to build infrastructure in the villages. He gave the example of how a village built fence around the farms using NREGA funds.
- A state level NREGA helpline exists to help everyone and can help resolve on any NREGA related problems faced at village or block level.