

Site Visit: Padmashree Society

Location: Village Bachhapatna (Near Jatni), Orissa

Date: Dec 27, 2005

Visitor: Satya Narayan Mishra

I had already talked with Mr Ho Chi Minh Shashtri before I reached the Padmashree Society. I reached the location about 12:00 pm on my scooter. Bachhapatna is a fairly developed village with many pucca houses (there are, of course, lots of small kuchcha houses). The main roads are paved. There is no piped water, however. Most of upper caste people in the village are fairly well to do. However, a lot of the villagers are lower caste and poor.

Mr Shashtri had returned early from an excursion during the Christmas holidays to facilitate my visit. When I arrived, I was received with bouquet of flowers by the members of several Women's Self-Help Groups (SHG's) that the society facilitates. The SHGs operate in more interior villages in the area. The women in the SHG's are very poor. Many of them have been deserted by their husbands. The SHGs provide them with opportunity to generate a meager income and do some savings. They lend among themselves when anyone needs access to some funds. They all said that Mr Shashtri has been a great help to them. They all (in fact everyone in and around the village) call him Bhaina (Elder Brother). They also requested me to help them. I told them that I was helpless in the matter.

Then Mr Shashtri gave me an account of his background and the various activities of the Padmashree Society.

He is the son of a well known Homeopathic doctor and a communist activist of the region. His elder brother is a doctor and lives elsewhere. He and his mother live at the Bachhapatna residence. He used to be employed as an engineer. But owing to a dispute with his supervisor, he resigned. Then he started a candle making workshop at his village with a few other people. This was fairly successful. Then he decided to spend his time and effort to help the people around him. To this end he started Padmashree Society along with the people that had started the candle-making project with him.

Padmashree Society operates in part of the land adjoining his house. The land is owned by his mother and Padmashree Society pays some rent on it. He has been very resourceful in creating an office out of a cowshed with minimal expense and rest of the buildings are low cost too. His office contains an old table, a computer (with internet connection) and a phone. It also houses a library. Some of the staff of the society sit outside his office. There are two other rooms, a teaching room and a day care center for old people. Recently he arranged for piped water as there were complaints from the upper caste people over the lower caste people touching their water. The campus has a lot of potted plants.

Then I saw a demonstration of the preschool center. The children greeted me with a garland of flowers and prostrating at my feet. I tried to dissuade them, but they had obviously been well-trained. Most of the children looked quite poor and could do with some grooming. Then the teacher, who appeared quite competent, gave a demonstration of what they do. They had simple toys made of local materials to teach the children about size and shape, about counting, colors, etc. For example, they were taught to match the Oriya numerals with a drawing containing same number of objects. They were taught to match a patch of color with the outline drawings that they would belong to. The children seemed to be pretty interested in this.

I did not visit the day care center for the elderly. Soon it was lunch time and all the children had lunch. There was some dispute among the mothers that their children did not get enough food which Mr Shashtri quickly resolved. Then Mr Shashtri told me about his future plans. He is going to start a mobile service center for the elderly poor that could not make it to his day care center. He also wants to use his experience at making low-cost teaching aids to make these available to larger number of children throughout Orissa.

Then we talked about Asha's objectives and the kind of projects we undertake. I told him that we look for projects that are providing basic education and told him about the four current Asha Colorado projects as examples. Then he showed me some of the audited financial reports and receipt books. The audited reports I had seen before. The receipt books showed nothing out of the ordinary, except may be that the land for the society is leased from his mother.

I met some of the members of Padmanshree society. The president Ms Sreedevi is a soft spoken middle-aged woman. I asked her how did the society get started. She said that initially it started as a way of generating income. Later the charitable aspects were added on. I also met another member Hemant Das, if I remember correctly, who is physically handicapped and not very well off.

I also met some of the beneficiaries of Mr Shashtri's help. One person had a heart attack, but the local doctor, seeing that he was poor, gave him some antacid. Mr Shashtri, took that person to the Bhubaneswar hospital (which was about an hour away) immediately and paid for his initial treatment. This person, when he met me, showed his medicines and asked if it was the right medicine. Then there was a woman who was sold off in Uttar Pradesh as a prostitute by an impostor husband. She somehow made it back to the village with her daughter. Mr Shashtru has let her build a house next to his (I am not sure who owns the land, Mr Shashtri or the govt.). He also has protected her from the villagers' ire.

I left the society around 6:00pm and headed back for Bhubaneswar. Mr Shashtri saw me off as far as Jatni. He said that although the budget he has submitted for Asha is small in comparison to his other activities, he is banking on approval more as a means of moral support than as material support. He thinks that being an Asha project would somehow validate his efforts as being a success.

Satya

P.S.: If there are any inaccuracies or omissions, they are due to my negligence of taking notes at the time of the visit. Also, my time in Bachhrapatna was mostly spent at the society in Mr Shashtri's presence. We did not discuss the vocational training center that Mr Shashtri runs for women.

I also talked to Dr A K Mishra, who had visited the place a few days earlier. He did not say that he was on an errand from Asha (a ruse I think I should have employed to get more frank opinions.) He told me that he (Dr Mishra) had talked to some of the villagers who said that Mr Shashtri was helping them. Other villagers were not so happy, presumably not being beneficiaries themselves or not being satisfied with Mr Shashtri's generosity. Dr Mishra was of the opinion that the society is doing good work.