

KGBV SITE VISIT

Sitapur District on July 3, 2007 – by Vinod Prashad

(See accompanying photos as well)

Context of KGBV

The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) is a nation-wide scheme being pursued by the Central Government in partnership with the State Governments. With the objective of building over 1,500 schools across the country, the KGBV initiative focuses largely on 5th grade drop-out girls and puts them through a rigorous 3-year residential program. Through this scheme, the government hopes to provide enough impetus to enable the girls to develop sufficient skills to put them through high-school (and beyond) after re-entering the mainstream education system.

More specifically in the State of UP, the KGBV is targeting 100+ schools of which about 18 are being constructed in partnership with Mahila Samakhya (MS), while the others are being managed by SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). MS is a NGO (although funded and staffed by the Central Government) that is broadly focused on empowering women – both socially and economically – and primary education is one of its critical focus areas

The specific objective of my site visit was to better understand how MS is managing its KGBV schools.

[This is just a brief introduction. There are many other documents that provide detailed descriptions of KGBV]

Overview of Visit

I actually conducted this site visit as part of an overall road trip across Northern India (Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, UP, and Uttaranchal). Thus fortunately I was able to put this visit in the broader context of what I observed across Northern India.

On July 2, I visited the headquarter offices of MS in Lucknow and spent a few hours with Dr. Rashmi Sinha and Mehar Singh discussing the overall effort as well as how Asha can partner with MS (more on that later in the report).

Only July 3, I left early morning and drove to Sitapur, a district north of Lucknow. We meet up with Saaphia in the district office of MS who then took us for a site visit to Rajpura village (roughly about 30-40 km away from the district office). We spent a few hours in the village learning more about MS and how it operates at the local village level. I think this context was absolutely critical to understand how MS works and its ability have a strong, lasting impact across its districts.

After having spent much of the morning and early afternoon in Rajpur village, we then proceeded to the KGBV residential school in Mishrik. We spent a few hours there interacting with the staff and students.

Please keep in mind that the purpose of this visit was not to evaluate (or gather more information for) a specific proposal. My objective was to just get a feel for MS as an organization and the work they do – so that we can consider potential partnership opportunities.

Sitapur District – Background

Sitapur is located in the state of UP, just north of Lucknow. It has a population of about 3.6 MM people which are dispersed across its ~1,000 villages (Sitapur has about 5-6 blocks each of which has 150-200 villages). Sitapur's female literacy rate is 35% which compares to UP female literacy rate of 43% and an all-India female literacy rate of 54%. The male literacy rate of Sitapur is 61% (cf, male UP: 70%, male India: 76%). Sitapur's sex ratio (women per 1,000 men) is 862 compared to 898 for UP and 933 for India (note: all figures as per 2001 census).

Visit to Rajpura Village

Our first stop in the morning was to Rajpura village. The purpose of this visit was to simply understand how MS functions in the rural areas. Rajpura village must have a population of roughly about a 1,000. The population falls into four castes (2 considered "lower, and 2 considered "upper"). Most of the residents of the village, especially the lower caste ones, are day laborers. The village has no electricity, and a well and a hand-pump are the major sources of water.

The backbone of the MS are the Sangha women. Essentially these are local women from the different villages who form a "federation", i.e. a local unit that meets regularly to discuss issues and problems. They typically meet at some type of a village plaza, usually under a tree near the house of one of the members. The meetings take place on a weekly basis. The discussions here can range from issues pertaining to domestic violence to differences with the local administration.

MS sees these "Sanghas" as a means to build the confidence of the local women, allowing them to take charge of their lives. It's an extremely collaborative way for the women to work through some of their major challenges from their daily lives. Often during these discussions, the women shout slogans of solidarity as well as sing confidence-building songs.

I must say that I've never seen anything like this before! I was pleasantly surprised at the confidence levels of the women! Many of them cannot read nor write (although some have recently learned), but the confidence with which they could articulate issues and talk about some of their successes was just surreal!

I interacted extensively with the Sangha women, first simply observing their meeting and then later having direct conversations with them. Here are some examples of things they highlighted as their recent successes:

- Forcing a local police station to register and FIR (First Incident Report) on a dowry death case (after the police initially refused to register it)
- Compelling the local district administration to pay higher wages to women employed as per a Central Government scheme (after the administration was paying them at an outdated lower wage rate)

Another major accomplishment of the Sangha women is the running of Nari Adalats (i.e., women's courts). Comprised of Sangha women, these courts essentially help arbitrate disputes (e.g. domestic disputes) before they actually reach the official judiciary.

It is these Sangha women who are active at the local village level that provide the necessary recruiting support to admit girls into the KGBV program. In fact, first hand, I saw one of the Sangha women encouraging her daughter to catch a ride with us to the KGBV school (our next stop).

Having observed this, there is no doubt in my mind that convincing parents of the girls will ever be a detriment to the KGBV initiative (at least not in the MS-run schools).

Visit to the KGBV School in Mishrik

Mishrik is the town in Sitapur district where the KGBV school is located (in the rented building). We spent a total of 3-4 hours in the schools, interacting with both staff and students. It was actually the first week of classes and we observed 7th grade in session.

From what I saw – I was again thoroughly impressed! The learning was extremely collaborative and team-based (as opposed to being individually-centered and rote-based). The focus was truly on developing skills that the girls would be able to leverage throughout their lives. In one of the classes we visited, the girls were completing an exercise where they were identifying words (related to nature) from local newspapers and then composing a story using those words (which they read to us).

There is also a strong focus on extra-curricular activities – we, for example, saw their weekly (or perhaps it was monthly) newspaper. The girls also have an hour carved out in their daily schedule where they pursue hobbies, such as reading the newspaper, drawing, sewing, and rope-jumping.

The overall atmosphere was extremely conducive to personal and academic growth – the facilities were clean, the staff was personable, and the food served was great (we had lunch there)! There's also focus on health and the girls go through a monthly check-up.

As an aside, we also visited the MS Shikshalaya which is actually an 8-month crash course for education from grades 1-5 (and it often serves as prep for KGBV).

In both the Shikshalaya and the KGBV school, the enthusiasm and confidence level of the girls was extremely impressive.

Discussion with MS and Dr. Rashmi

I had extremely fruitful discussions with Dr. Rashmi, Mehar, and other MS staff the day prior to the visit. From these discussions I quickly gathered that Dr. Rashmi and her team's commitment to this cause is impeccable. While we spent some time discussing the workings of MS and the logistics of our visit, the bulk of our time was centered on potential areas of partnership between Asha and MS.

- Extension of KGBV's till 12th grade. Right now there's a question mark around what will happen after 8th grade.
- Greater support around the sciences/technical arena, e.g. a lab, computers, better science equipment
- Development of a more comprehensive database that tracks the performance of the girls (even beyond their time at KGBV)
- Supporting the creation of a community radio (at least a "test" case)

Conclusion - My Perspective

Although I'm no expert in the non-profit/NGO sector and this was actually my first Asha site visit, I do have some background in evaluating organizations and initiatives/projects. I must say that I'm thoroughly impressed by everything I saw. While I do recognize that some of things may have been marked up for the visit and I do believe that there is room for improvement, there are some unique things about this initiative that stand out:

- The holistic context in which MS approaches the issue of primary education and its already-tested approach of leveraging its Sangha network
- The buy-in from the local community, i.e. the parents, who through MS's efforts see clear value in education their daughters and are willing to take the KGBV risk
- The partnership with the government, ensuring scalability across the entire country

There is no doubt in my mind that we must move fast in cementing a strong, ongoing relationship between Asha For Education and MS on the KGBV initiative.