

Site Visit Report

JAHER

By Harish Chawla

Dates of Visit: March 27th - 28th, 2004

After visiting Aviram in Lohardaga district, I headed to Hazaribagh to visit Jaher. I took a bus to Ranchi, and then to Hazaribagh, from where jeep service is available to Bagjobra, a kilometer away from Bodra and the Jaher project. The purpose of my visit was just to touch base with the project, as we had been out of communication for about 2 years. It was not expected to be a comprehensive site visit, due to time constraints on my part.

My visit was unannounced, as we had no easy means of keeping in touch. It was Saturday afternoon, and the Jaher school was over for the day, and Sunday is a holiday. Children who stay at the residential school were around, while the others had left. The children seemed to be playing outside under a tree. Upon inquiring about Jahermuni didi, I found out that she had gone to Pune to visit her sister for a few weeks. Two teachers, Ms. Indu and Mr. Ravinder also stay at the school, and I met with them at that point. Upon introducing myself, we discussed the school and the other activities of the village.

The purpose of my visit was to get in touch with Jaher again, but not as a formal site-visit. Thus, I was trying to understand what problems they may have, and how Asha can continue to support. Our chapter has sent funds through the Brothers of Gabriel, who refuse to continue routing the funds in the future.

As other site visits indicate, Jahermuni Alphonso belonged to the same organization, Brothers of Gabriel, but broke away some time ago. Brothers have been continuing to support part of the school funding, but with certain guidelines, and thus control over the school functioning. Also, they believe in providing initial support to a developmental program, and then expect the effort to sustain itself after a few years. Thus, the decision of the Brothers of Gabriel to part from the Jaher efforts.

The children come from seven neighbouring villages to the Bagjobra school, which holds classes from KG to grade 5.

KG has 50-60 children

Grade 1 has 15 children

Grade 2 has 18 children

Grade 3 has 18 children

Grade 4 has 21 children

Grade 5 has 22 children.

The school runs from 9.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., where seven subjects are taught. Santali is the language of instruction, though the children can speak hindi also.

Currently there are four teachers, Ms. Indu, Mr. Ravinder Hansda, Ms. Christine and Ms. Matilda Marandi. There was a senior teacher who got a job with a government school, thus left Jaher. Asha's funds were used for running the residential school, while the Brother's organization independently funded part of the teachers salaries.

I had a brief conversation with Indu and Ravinder regarding the status of the school and the other activities. Surprisingly they did not know much about the fisheries project. Further, they had a few valid concerns regarding the school, i.e.

- the roof leaked and needed constant repair,
- the classrooms became the place where the children slept at night,
- not enough books for the children, not sufficient vacation time,
- lack of water during the summer when the well dries
- no toys or equipment for the children to play with.

Ravinder took me to Matilda's house, another senior teacher, as she has been with Jaher for a few years. She gave some details regarding the relationship with the Brothers. For routing Asha's funds through the Brothers organization, Jaher had to raise Rs. 1400 per month through fees. They charged the children Rs. 5/10/15 /20 depending on what the parents could pay. This was difficult to collect though.

Currently Jaher has 5 rooms for classes that were built in 1999 by the villagers. The villagers help maintain the place every year, indicating a good relationship with the community. The village community does look up and participate with the Jaher activities.

Through the EGS (Jharkhand Shiksha Prayojana) program, the Govt. pays Rs. 1000 p.m. for two teachers who are registered with this program. Further, books and other material is expected to be provided. School books though have not been provided to the children, as they are not available in the market.

Matilda is pursuing further studies, M.A. and also had a solar lamp at her house. It was surprising to learn that none of the teachers were knowledgeable about the accounts and other activities of the organization.

Mr. Lazrus Soren, Lalji Manji and Charan Singh are some other people part of this organization. Lazrus is the second in command after didi. He also works for Jaher as a coordinator. Lalji and Charan are from neighbouring villages, and plan to initiate the fisheries project in their village pond.

Upon returning from Matilda's house, we paid a visit to Lalji's house, which is near the school. I had an extensive discussion with him regarding the plans of the fisheries. The pond is owned by the village, but some people have lost the land in this process. These villages are small, less than 40 nuclear families, and many related to each other. Lalji and Charan were both enthusiastic to start the fisheries project, and seemed dedicated to this effort. They have had some training in this regard earlier also.

The profits would be expected to be divided in five equal shares.

- The person they rent the net from takes a fifth.
- 5-6 people who lost the land divide a fifth amongst themselves
- invest a fifth for the following year
- invest a fifth in their tola (village)
- give a fifth to Jaher

Each pond is about 1 acre in area. Initial investment will be of about 4000-5000 fish seeds (4-5 kg), @ about Rs. 400 pkg. It is expected that they will be able to sell about 10-15 quintalls of fish from each pond after one year, and thus making a good profit.

This is what they had proposed, and I had suggested that if Asha funds the net, would they give 2/5ths of the profit to the school. It is a thought to discuss with Jahermuni didi and the other people involved.

The next morning I had met with Mr. Lazrus Soren, who does know much more about the activities of Jaher, and is close to Jahermuni didi. We visited the ponds, discussed the status and requirements of the well, and the future plans/possibilities for Jaher.

I had a brief conversation with the children, who seemed shy and quiet at first. The children graduate from the school after grade 5 and are admitted to the nearby high schools. The children from these schools seem to be doing pretty well in high school also, though some more information in this regard is needed.

Jaher has applied for FCRA, and is expected to get it done sometime this year. I did briefly visit the lawyer who is helping out in this regard.

Analysis / Suggestions

As in many villages, there are government schools in this and neighbouring villages also, but without any accountability. Teachers do not come regularly, and teaching is not of good quality. Thus, the parents and children prefer to come to the Jaher school. The school is specifically for the Santal community. Community participation is of great importance, as it also empowers the children in taking responsibility for the functioning of the school. The children cook and clean together, dividing responsibilities and following through.

Without electricity and water availability, the children who reside at the school do have difficulties. With some external support, a well was dug, but not deep enough to provide sufficient water. Funding limitations and the support did not provide the well to be deeper.

A concern is that the various different activities are disconnected with each other. Teachers did not know about the fishery projects or about the Womens Self Help groups. The working relationship between the teachers and Jahermuni didi needs to be understood better.

Jaher is involved in various activities in the neighbouring villages, and runs more than one school, I believe. Unsure how the school is running, but the teachers seem educated and confident, and are also enjoying the work. One of the elder girls who graduated from the Jaher school was speaking highly of Jaher. She seemed very confident and independent and goes to a neighbouring school now, and is doing very well there. The children who graduate from Jaher are able to fare much better than other children in their senior classes.

Jahermuni didi has some background in medicine and nursing, thus she also takes care of the health center for the school and village.

This is a multi-dimensional developmental effort, and has its set of problems/concerns. Working and leading efforts in the community in itself is a challenging task. Further, the relationship with all the samiti members did not seem to be ideal. There are significant issues regarding the working relationship between Jaher and the Brothers. Further, as the Brothers also fund the school expenses, they do exercise some control over the school and teachers. This also has made the working relationship with the teachers rather complicated. There seemed to be some lack of trust issue also.

On the other hand, Jaherumuni didi did seem to enjoy the trust of the community, and some other members of Jaher (Lazrus, Lalji, Charan). The community did feel strengthened by the presence and support of Jaher.

As we have always believed, this is definitely a complex project as there seem to be various forces in action. If we want to continue working with Jaher, closer coordination and relationship is required from our side. There are various concerns, but that is just natural in any social / community developmental effort. On the positive side, if the activities succeed, the villages will become more prosperous and better able to fend for themselves; the children will feel more empowered with better education as they face the challenges of the future; the women will feel more responsible for the developmental efforts within the community. Hopefully, this can be an impetus to further development of the neighbouring communities, and Asha can be a catalyst in this process.

I do believe that we should keep in continuous communication with Jaher and continue working with them. This organization has various activities, education, vocational training, health care and women's self help group, while keeping strong relations with the community. Further, realizing that Asha will not be able to fund Jaher forever, sustainability through the fishery projects, and seeking other resources seems of interest to them also.



Jharkhand Adivasi Health, Education and Rural Development Society (JAHER)



Jaher School grounds



Children from the Jaher residential school



Children with Indu ji on the left, and Charan on my left.



Lalji (left) and Lazrus next to one of the ponds