

Gyan Sewa Bharathi Sansthan (GSBS)

Site Visit Report by Manoj Kumar

(Translated from Hindi by Priya V. from Asha Canada)

People Introductions

(i) Sushil Kumar Jha

He is the Secretary of GSBS. He is around 60 yrs old, fair-skinned and slim-built. During my conversation with him I perceived in him a well developed sense for social issues. He is a person with real humanitarian views. He was involved in social movements for a long time and is still active to a certain extent.

(ii) Kalika Nand Jha

He is the elder brother of Sushil Kumar Jha, and is around 65 years old. He believes that people with lower social status (i.e. under-privileged) should be given assistance.

(iii) Shekhar Kumar Jha

I was told he is 28 yrs old. I didn't meet him personally since he was in Delhi on work. He is the son of Sushil Kumar Jha.

Getting there

I left my place in Samasthipur Mahey on 15/05/2008 to go to Darbhanga. Then from Darbhanga to Nirmali Block, by changing trains to the Chhori line in Sakri, reaching there at 10 o'clock on 16/05/2008. Then from Nirmali Block I reached Kamalpur village, where the school is located, at 1 o'clock by motorcycle.

Mahey to Darbhanga --> 45 km

Darbhanga to Nirmali --> 75 km

Nirmali to Kamalpur --> 30 km

Geographic conditions

Supaul is the most under-developed district of Bihar state. Within Supaul district Nirmali Block is particularly under-developed. The main reason for this lack of development is the presence of the Koshi River. This river is known worldwide as 'Bihar's grief'. The water from this river drowns all of Bihar. It influences 5 crore (50 million) people to at least some extent. It comes down from Nepal and gushes with water when it passes through the fertile plains of Bihar. It helps make the agricultural land more fertile however it does not give farmers the opportunity to plant their crops. Nirmali Block is a totally flood-stricken area. No village in this area is safe from flooding and they are all affected every year. These floods cause extensive harm to property and people. Nirmali Block, Kamalpur, Dagmara, Kanauli and other villages are all entirely affected by these floods. All the village land remains flooded for 6 months of the year.

Social Conditions

Nirmali Block is almost entirely populated by scheduled classes and 'lower' castes (Dalits); the number of 'higher' caste people (Brahmins and Rajputs) is very low. There is also a large population of other minorities (Muslims) in this Block. All lower classes, dalits and minorities are victims of discrimination because the caste system is at the foundation of Bihar's society. I was told that 12 education centers were running in the east as part the Indian government's Universal Elementary Education program (UEE; a.k.a "Education for all"), however it seems none of these centers are operating properly at the moment. The places where the lower and under-developed classes have no schools, they received subsidies as incentives through the UEE program. These centers (schools) were running in areas of Murhar, Chamaar, Kahaar and Paashi tribes.

Economic conditions

There are no factories or any small-scale cottage industry through which majority of the people in this region could have jobs and earn a living. Farming work is the only source of income in this region. Higher caste people own fertile, cultivatable land however the lower classes (Dalits) do not have such land. And even if they do

have some shared land, they have to earn a living from a fraction of a crop. Several women work as laborers in brick kilns and in the fields, while also raising children. Their children are unfortunately forced into child labor, working alongside their mothers at brick kilns and in the fields. Women make a daily wage of Rs.50 (\$1.25), men make Rs. 60/day (\$1.50) and children get a mere Rs.25/day (\$0.60), and only after they work extremely hard. These people don't even get a 100 days' worth of what they are entitled to as per Indian govt.'s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Thus even NREGA is ineffective over here.

Literacy

The literacy rate amongst women and children is fairly low (women 20%, children 25%). The reason for the low literacy rate among women and children of Dalit and minority classes is that not every community has a school. For some the nearest school is quite far to get to because it is situated in one of the main villages of the region and there are none in a neighboring village. There are no private schools either as the parents of these children are not in a position to pay the required fees.

Infrastructure (roads, electricity and transportation)

There are no national highways or paved roads in this district. There is no electricity in any part of this district. Because of these deficiencies the people of this area suffer a lot of difficulties. (I remember a proverb -- "where there is no pole or power-lines, call it Bihar" - that is the definition of electricity). Transportation is a big problem and only very few places have bus service. There is a small train service, but there are no convenient connections from here to other parts of the country. Apart from the train, one has to travel by foot within this area.

Self-help groups (SHGs)

I was told that Gyan Sewa Bharati Sansthan (GSBS) runs 60 SHGs, however on this occasion they only showed me the records for 10 SHGs. The state of these SHGs does not look good. None of the SHGs have received any training from GSBS. None of them received any govt. help and many of the SHG's savings have been withdrawn from the bank and accounts have been closed. Only 10-12 SHG remain and they have not been able to start up any programs or initiatives.

Evaluation of status of UEE (Universal Elementary Education a.k.a "Education for All")

I was told that 12 education centers were being run under the govt.'s UEE initiative, in rural municipalities of Haripur, Kamalpur, Dagmara, Kanauli etc. This program ran for only one year and there seemed to have never been any proper rapport between the children and teachers in these centers. The centers ran well only on paper. In reality only 2 of them ran for a certain period of time. There were only two teachers – Shailendra Mohan Jha (Kamalpur Municipality, Haripur Community) and Ghulam Mustafa (Kamalpur Municipality, Kamath Community). Apart from this, I was not shown any other center being operational.

Govt. Schools

Govt. schools run only in main rural municipalities. There are Dalit ("untouchables") communities of around 600-700 people within the municipal region but there are no schools for them. Even the govt. school in the main municipality is not exactly in good condition. The distance from the Dalit community to the govt. school is approx. 1.5 to 2 kms and the Dalit children do not attend this school. Furthermore, they are forced to become child laborers because of their parent's economic situation. However the main reason [for not attending govt. school] is still the distance between them and the school.

Status of the Non-formal education (NFE) centers

I had wanted to go to Dagmara Municipality (Nirmali Block) to find out where the NFE center is running and to meet the children and parents to get some information from them about the centers. However they did not bring me there, they just told me that such a center is running in Dagmara. Thus I cannot provide any detailed information about Dagmara.

Later we went to Kamalpur where GSBS have their main office. I visited three NFE centers in this municipality by foot – in Brahmasthan, Haripur and Kamat communities. There are totally five teachers in the three centers. I

only met with two of these teachers and was not able to meet with the others because they were women and were not at ease to meet me and talk to me due to “pardah” customs and caste barriers. All the three centers were found to be more or less non-functional. It seemed as if the UEE center may have been running in the NFE center at Haripur. However this center appears closed for some time now. This is the place where I met some children and their parents who spoke to me freely. At the other centers I could not find much activity. Here as soon as I arrived I met ten children who were playing near their homes. They shared with me verbally some things they had learnt from their teacher. So, apart from these three centers I was not shown any other place. Other municipalities were 5 to 8 kms from here and I had wanted to visit them but was not able to due to bad weather conditions (rain storms). Despite the fact that I repeatedly expressed interest in seeing the other centers, I was not shown anything else, so I will not be able to present a firsthand report on any of them.

Conclusion and Evaluation

This is a flood-stricken area therefore all govt. initiatives are useless here. Due to rampant corruption the poorest classes of people suffer from problems throughout their lives. And the new generation of children currently faces many problems. If the parents are encouraged and supported then there could be some improvement in the future prospects of their children. If the center can do some work here with Asha's support and if some attention was paid to the children, then they could change their presently dark future to a brighter one. I believe that if they intend to make real improvements then they must take on this struggle. They must make this work a priority and first of all bring the children to the center. The center should be given just a small amount of initial funding to get started because they are currently very disorganized and only with a small start-up will they move forward and become more progressive. The organization completely lacks strategic and critical thinking as in they lack resourcefulness to carry on their social work in the absence of govt. and non-governmental support. This is the reason why all the NFE centers are presently closed and non-functional; [They are not resourceful enough] or else they could have definitely continued their work in some form or another; perhaps even a private school of sorts; they could have adapted their work strategy to maintain their ideology and direction; the work would not have shut down completely. Being professional-minded prepares one for the “no funds, no work” situation. One needs to have some formula to go from being reliable to being reliant. Only then can one be successful in social development work, or else every effort will remain fruitless. In any case despite all their problems and challenges we should actively help them. However the budget section of the proposal needs to be revised. Given that their work is still basic and disorganized, they do not need such a large budget. If support is to be given to this organization according to Asha's principles, then we must let them determine the direction of their own work.

Site-visit by Manoj Kumar

Mahey village, Vaya-Mangalgad, Samasthipur District, Bihar 848208

Tel. 9931956501

E-mail. manoj81_asha@yahoo.com