

Detailed note on Mahesh's Kanpur work with children of migrant labor written by Mahesh on June 8, 2006.

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Greetings to fellow Asha volunteers.

I am Mahesh an Asha volunteer. For the last 11 yrs I have been associated with Asha and in this time I have only sent out a mail to Asha-wide once. This is the second time. The last time I wrote when Asha was going through a difficult time, again today such a time has come. This time, perhaps not Asha, but I am going through a difficult time, however, am still bracing myself.

That I have worked with Asha for so long and have worked between all the volunteers and have formed strong relationships of comradeship and trust that is helping me do so. For a few days not there has been some discussion about the work of MS³ on mails. In the center of the discussion I have also been mentioned.

I have been staying at MS³ for the last two months. I have been listening to everyone here so far. Since it has been decided that the topic will be discussed at the Asha conference I find it necessary to place all the facts before all my co-workers so we can have a constructive discussion at the conference. Manviya Siksha Sanskar Sansthan (MS³) (A center of Asha) started in 2000 when Asha USA volunteers contributed Rs. 4.5 Lakhs for the work of Asha Lucknow and Rs. 4.5 Lakhs for ongoing work in Kanpur towards children of migrant laborers. At that time Vijaya Didi was working with the migrant laborers children, however, she expressed her inability to accept these funds. In this time Sri Ganesh bagaria ji, Kumar ji and Chandrasekhar ji under the philosophy of Jeevan Vidya Darshan wanted to work with a few children. An industrialist T.N.Agarwal and Ganesh ji had started work under the banner of Manviya Parbandhan Sansthan and the work went on for 2 years. After this, due to issues between Ganesh Ji and T N Agarwal, Ganesh ji left the organization and was thinking of starting another organization.

This was the time we met Ganesh ji while traveling together to Jhansi along with Deepak ji, Sandeep Bhai and myself discussed the situation. We mentioned that we had set aside some funds specifically to work with migrant laborer children. It was decided between Asha and Ganeshi ji that Ganesh ji, Kumar ji and Chandrasekar ji will create a new organization to work with migrant laborer children on providing education through the Jeevan Vidya philosophy and also work on self-sufficiency at the center.

We also decided that we will focus only on migrant laborer children and only include them in the course.

The approach was that we will train the children of migrant laborers from "aria paali" over a period of three years on self-sufficiency and when the children return to their villages in three years they will be able to practice this in their life there and in that region slowly the migration will stop/slow down.

For two years the work continued, however, in the 3rd year the situation deteriorated all the children started leaving due to issues at the center. In 2003 Asha Kanpur volunteers between themselves decided that we will not run the center on the basis of Jeevan Vidya instead we will take Jeevan Vidya to the masses by conducting the Jeevan Vidya Shivirs. Along with this we will work on basic education and education of girls. However, in that year there was no program for the education of any children. In the beginning of the next year, 2004, Sandeep bhai presented a proposal to Ganesh ji that if you do not plan to work on education of children, perhaps, you should ask for other volunteers within Asha who may be in a position to run such a program at the center. Ganesh ji and his team asked for 2 years to get working between the children. In Dec of 2005, Deepak ji said that if any volunteer who like to come forward to Asha Kanpur and work then they are welcome. This year I have slowly been reducing my workload with Asha accounts and getting involved with working with the teachers of ASV (Asha Samajic Vidyalayas - all Asha schools in UP). Along with this work I also started thinking of a children appropriate syllabus for the region. For this there was also talk regarding the resource center for education. Reduce my involvement with accounts from March to May and I was keen to start working on the Asha Resource Center (ARC). I was thinking of utilizing the Kaithi center for this purpose. At this time due to Deepak's invitation and discussion with other volunteers like Sanjeev and Sirish about the resource center a thought came that we could use the Asha Kanpur infrastructure itself for the resource center and also work with on children's education there. At this time we also spoke to Vijaya Didi. She also wanted some people to help with her educational efforts so that her work is also refined. In feb I came to Kanpur. I was observing and understanding the work here and was not only looking into what are the ongoing activities, and was also thinking about what are the other activities possible. In around a week I observed that there is no educational activity for the children who are at the center. Neither was there any activity regarding the neighboring poor and underprivileged communities. In this time I also met Deepak ji and Ganesh ji. I explained to them that I had come to observe the activities and also my search for additional possible activities.

Following this I returned and discussed all my observations and thoughts with my fellow volunteers. In the beginning of April we all sat down and the decision we reached was that I should go to Kanpur and work alongside Vijaya Didi with the migrant workers children and also look into common issues faced by the community and start working on this. This will not only benefit the children who are at the center, but will also be beneficial to the community. Also since our fellow volunteers are unable to take up this work it will be good for them too since the center which has a commitment to work on migrant laborers children will also be served. I reached the Asah Kanpur center on 18 April 2006. From the next day I started going to the educational centers with Vijaya Didi to understand the work there.

About Brick Kilns:-

There are about 250 brick kilns in Kanpur. In each of the kilns there are between 60-70 families. The kilns are operational from October to mid-June. After this the kilns close down due to rains. There are primarily four kinds of work involved with the kilns

- a) **Cooking of the cakes (bricks):** In this work 90% of the people come from Bihar (Navada, Gaya, Nalanda and Jamuai District). The rest come from UP (Hamirpur, Azamgarh and Ballia District). Usually 10-20 families are from the same village. There is a contractor who brings them here and in July he gives these family advances (Rs.2000 for Bihar and Rs. 5000 to Rs.10000 for UP). In Oct which ever kin this contractor ties up with the families are dropped in these kilns. From Oct-May these people work with the owner of the kilns and receive money for food which is accounted for in their wages. The government has fixed an amount of Rs.220 as minimum wages for manufacture of a 1000 bricks. The contractor fixes a price between Rs. 150-175 with the owner. Of this people from Bihar receive around Rs. 110 and those from UP receive even up to Rs. 130. The rest is kept by the contractor as commission. The workers, however, are not told what the decision of wages was between the owner and the contractor. During the period of their stay each family manufactures between 1.5 lakhs to 2 lakhs bricks. The entire family works between 12-16 hrs each day to get to this state.
- b) **Washing of bricks:-** In this work the people carry the bricks and wash them in their homes(?). Again the contractor brings the people in and the people usually come from districts of Rajasthan and UP.
- c) **Polishing of the bricks:** In this work again the contractor is involved and people are brought from Chhatisgarh and UP (Sultanpur, Partapgarh, Kanpur dist.)
- d) **Burning of the coal for the bricks:** In this work too the contractor brings people from different dist of UP.

In all these activities children from 5 yrs onwards participate. The children work between 8 hrs to 14 hrs with their families. Vijaya Didi has been working for the education of children in these Kilns for about 20 yrs now. The children study for 7 months here. After this they go back to their villages and their education is broken there, again when they come back after 5 months they have forgotten everything and for this reason they never really finish schooling. For many years Didi was trying to keep some children with her and continue their studies in the 5 months. Didi mentioned that if we could take care of the children for this time and not only teach them literacy, but also some vocational skills then it is possible that the children will be able to find an alternate livelihood and not get exploited like this.

One day we went to Kalara Kind and to the education center there. There Mukesh Kumar, 12 yrs of age who studies there did not come. When we asked we found that he had not come for that month(?). When we went to the kin we found him completely covered with dust and looking like a ghost. He had been working in the kin since 5 a.m. and it was 2 in the afternoon then. He said that he has been busy at the kin and for that reason could not make it to the classes. He said that didi, please take us anywhere from here, I want to study and after my schooling want to get into some other field. We both felt that there are many other children in the same boat as him. We felt that if we helped one child we may not only be able to change his situation, but will be able to change the social and economic standing of his/he whole family. That day we decided

that we will take a few children with us in MS^3 and not only teach them literacy but also some vocational skills. After this we started discussions with the parents of Kalara, Gera, Pandey, Saran and Bhadwan Kilns centers.

From these Kilns the mother and father of 9 children agreed to let their children stay with us and learn with us. In this period whenever I met Deepak ji and spoke to him about what I plan to do he suggested that I should stay at MS^3 and start an evening center and along with the resource center also work with the children of the Kilns, but please prepare a bit before considering to help children stay and have activities here. I said that we will see what works out. I mentioned that please also consult with Ganesh ji and his group about my activities. Deepak ji mentioned that Ganesh ji says that all our work is on the basis of the philosophy (Jeevan Vidya) and the center is known for its philosophy. As long as the work ties in with the philosophy the work is acceptable. I said that at this point I do not think any of my work will send a negative message, but I do think that if you are in a community you should let the community decide what its needs are and what you can fulfill.

MS^3 in these two months: My view:

The center resides on around 1.5 acre (~ 43250 sq feet). There is an iron fence around it (?). This land is registered under the name of Asha. Apart from this there is around 2.5 acre of empty land where there is farming and diary work.

Construction: There are 4, 15x12 feet rooms with attached lavatory, bathroom, kitchen that are made of RCC (?). There is 1 room with attached lavatory and bath. There is also a large RCC hall of 25x20 feet. There is also a 15x15 feet khapare(?) dining hall. A 8x15 feet conference room. The kitchen is 15x10 feet and a 22x5 feet veranda.

MS^3 activities (that are attached to the center):

Dairy: At this time there are 2 cows and 2 calves. In this one cow gives 1 liter of milk each day.

Farming: In a small part of the land there is an organic vegetable garden, there is also onion that is farmed. Around 300 kg of onion was obtained. There is enough vegetable obtained from the garden that for one or two days in the week there is no need to buy vegetables for the center.

Education center: In a week on 2 days for 1 or 2 hrs a children's center is running in which once in a while 1 student who is the son of the merchant in the nearby bazaar does come by. From the nearby villages there are 2 people come to the center, 1 volunteer works in the center in construction and works like a contractor. From the 2 neighboring villages two youth Arvind and Jaynarayan come to the center and collect the milk, feed the cows and look after the farming. On Sunday's Ganesh ji, Arachan Ji and Kumar Ji along with a few people from the city who are connected through Jeevan Vidya come here. There are also 4-5 students from IIT who frequent here.

People who live/work in the center in full time capacity and their work:

1) Arvind: Lives in the Sandila village around 500 m from the center. Primary activity is feeding the cows and helps in the farming. He receives Rs.800 a month for his work.

2) Janynarayan: Is the resident of a close by gram panchayat. His father has been associated with this center from the very beginning. Actually, even before the center was conceived he was responsible for caretaking of the area. He buys milk at Rs.10/liter and goes to IIT and sells it there. After that he is at the center taking care of the farming and takes care of the center. He receives Rs. 1700 per month.

3) Mithun: He hails from a nearby market Mandhana. He is the primary caretaker of the center. Apart from this he is working on his studies and receives Rs. 2000/month.

4) Manju: She is the cook of the center and is responsible for the food in the morning and evening for people who stay at the center. She comes in at 10 a.m. and leaves at 5 p.m. and receives Rs. 800/month.

5) Bhawesh Asgar: He hails from Champaran dist of Bihar. He is associated with "Samajwadi parishad" (Socialist movement?), struggle (?). He has put in all his time and efforts towards changing the society as a whole. Apart from the study of Jeevan Vidya he is responsible for the organic growth of vegetables at the center. He has been staying at the center for 4 months and been working voluntarily.

After having spoken to Deepakji I tried speaking to Ganesh ji a couple of times about the possibility of keeping some of the children at the center. Ganesh ji mentioned that we should have the discussion only when Sandeep bhai was here and we can all have a discussion then. I spoke to Sandeep bhai and wanted to have a discussion quite early, however, Sandeep bhai was able to make time only on 21 may. During this time I visited the brick Kilns daily and speaking to the parents of the children and also trying to understand the different difficulties faced by the workers at the Kilns. I also tried to come up with solutions of issues that they were facing. Also in this time I had various discussions regarding the work of Vallabh ji and Sandeep bhai.

On 21 may Sandeep bhai, Ganesh ji, Deepak Bhai, Kumar ji, Arachana ji and I met at Ganeshji's residence. We discussed about my role and activities at the center. I spoke about my work and also about my idea of keeping some of the children of migrant labors at the center and working with them on education and vocational skills. This would help the children over time get out of the exploitation and stand on their own feet.

Ganesh ji, Kumar ji and Archan ji felt that I should continue all other activities as is, but I should pursue this work only after some time. We are not prepared now, 1 or 2 yrs later I should start the work. Over this time the people at the center would become comfortable with Mahesh and only after this any such work should be started.

We felt that since I had sincerely decided to take up this work and only required a small area of the center. In this area we will be able to accommodate the children. Even after about 4 hrs of discussion we could not reach a consensus. At this point I put it forward that I was unable to understand exactly what the difficulty with accommodating the children at the center was. I expressed my willingness to work on the effort and that of the parents to send their children. I also mentioned that if we had no concrete reason not to allow the children to stay it would be unfair to the parents. Without reaching any consensus we closed the meeting. We agreed that we should think about it and discuss further. From the Kilns the families leave at the end of June. Unfortunately, this time they

started leaving between 30 may to 5th june itself. I spoke to all the people at the center and we decided that we will get the children to us by 5th June. Along with this on each issues we should speak to the parents before leaving, so that when they return they will be able to focus on their children's education. The parents of the children who were going to stay with us also visited the center to see where their children were going to stay.

The children asked everyday when we will all stay together. I told them from 5th. I told Kumar ji that the children need to stay with us from 5th and in this context we should continue our discussion with Ganesh ji and the team. After 2 days I had a discussion with Ganesh ji and Arachan ji. I kept my ideas before them that the children only had till 5th June to stay with their parents since they will be leaving and we should discuss whatever the issues are so there is no inconvenience for the center and we could all use this opportunity to do this well.

I mentioned that if the children live among all of you they will only become better human beings. Again like the last time the point was brought forward that I should not start it now first let us develop a comfort level towards you. Presently, there will be many inconveniences. Even over the course of the 3 hrs discussion I could not understand exactly what the inconvenience was. Arachan ji said that at this time please take back the program you have in mind and just stay with us for 1 or 2 yrs and then we will do this together. I was stating that I had developed a trust with the parents of these children over the months and if we are just to deny them for no specific reason then it would not be fair to the parents and the children. The difficulties that come up if the children stay here, we will together work on resolving them.

However, he found this unacceptable and the meeting ended. After this at night I met Kumar ji and had a discussion with him and put forward that I am unable to understand what the issues of the children staying there was. He said that till I do not undergo the Jeevan Vidya shivir I will not be considered a part of the cult(?). We want that you become a member of the cult and then you can start the program. I asked him what it means for a person to be a member of the JV cult and how you would test a person to know that now you are a member and can start your work. I asked if it is not a continuous process that can be accommodated even as our activities continue and why the children should wait. He said that they were unconvinced that I could handle the program and if something goes wrong with the program who would be responsible. I said that I would be responsible.

He said that in this whole country knows this center as the center of all Jeevan Vidya activities. If something goes wrong here then the message will ripple to the whole of India. I told him that I would not be alone and a lady volunteer Sadhana ji who has been working in the Navgarh area for over 8 yrs would also help. He said that it is not possible for a woman to stay at the center. Many men will start visiting the center and the name of the center would be destroyed. If she comes here then I will never step into the center and come what may I will not let her come here. I told him that he should not be talking like this. During this time I had a discussion with another person related to Jeevan Vidya, Guuda Bhai along with Kumar ji and this issue was discussed. From his side he put

forward a proposal that he thinks that we have had enough discussion and given the circumstances he thought that a "batwara"(splitting of property?) is the best solution. Whatever funds came from Asha should be returned and a separate center should be created away from this place where such work can be conducted. We will help you in your work externally.

In this time discussion started on this topic on emails too and it was decided that discussion should happen at the conference. In this time questions were asked about as to what I am doing at the center, only going to the brick Kilns. Kumar ji also said that I am paying the children Rs. 500 each to create a problem for the center. These kind of base statements started being made.

I felt it seems there are many hurdles to good work in society. someone making such charges should consider such remarks seriously first. Such things were being said by people who want to give wisdom to the world, build a society on human relationships and mutual trust. Has the ideology founded of personal relationships become so weak that it has to depend on propaganda to prove itself superior? On June 4, 2006 we talked to Vallbh ji, sandeep bhai, arundhati didi, Deepak ji and colleagues and we felt that after such words have been said its better to separate ourselves from there. Asha conference should decide direction of MS3 work and next steps be decided after that. Children ask me everyday bhaiya when are we moving to our place? I am not able to give them a reply. Two children went back to bihar. I regret the fact that I could not keep them with me. Two other children are waiting for me to come and pick them in their village in Hamirpur. Lavkjush and Sagar, two children from Bihard have been left with us by their parents at this time, they are staying in Jagriti office along with me. Some children are waiting for us at the Kalara and Pandey brick kilns and we have told them that we will be able to shelter them after 12 June. On June 5, Deepak ji proposed that we meet to discuss this decision and to reach some consensus among all parties. I said they are repeatedly asking me to stay here and work on relationship with them first. They asked me to spend time with the 5 people working at the center full time. On June 5 we met and discussed from 6:30 pm to 2 am and attendees were myself, Deepak bhai, Ganesh ji, Archna ji, Kumar ji, Pawan, shyam, Arvind Jaynarayan bhai, Mithun bhai and Bhawesh ji. I asked them to tell me what is the problem that children stay at the center and will this difficulty not arise after one year? Ganesh ji, archna ji, kumar ji presented these arguments. You folks did not involve us in your decision making and we have felt insulted because of that. You are not inclined to understand jeevan vidya philosophy. Till you understand the jeevan vidya philosophy your staying here will cause difficulties Till the results of our jeevan vidya work are not visible, no joint work is possible. You are giving importance to programs, whereas we give priority to knowledge, then relationships, and then programs based on jeevan vidya. Archan ji said that we will hold a camp for villagers in August and we will have school for children and education programs for girls. it is unnatural to keep 12 year old children without heir parents around.

- We understand Asha to be Deepak bhai and sandeep bhai

- We be given one more year to work on such programs

- we are committed to children of migrant labor but we are not yet ready for them, once we are ready we will do something then. All the residents of the center said that they had

no problems with Mahesh ji Main point from Ganesh ji, archna ji and kumar ji was that if Mahesh was to live with them for a year he will understand jeevan vidya approach. only then he will be allowed to work from there. I asked if i will be allowed to work from there if even after one year I do not understand jeevan vidya philosophy. They said no. I said I understand that there are difficulties in starting. One is that you are not able to trust that I will not work in opposition and second is that you think I do not understand jeevan vidya philosophy and am opposed to it. I think the second is their main opposition as they think that i will oppose their work in my ignorance of their approach. Vijaya did also discussed with Ganesh ji and tried to convince him that what is the problem with Mahesh working from there? But even then there was no solution reached. This discussion also ended without a conclusion. It was clear to me that they are saying that if I want to work from MS3 center, then I have to work according to their standards or else I will not be allowed to work from there now, in one year or even in 10 years unless I become 'wise' enough to their liking. We (Mahesh and others) will continue to work with the children. I want all the issues to be discussed openly at the Asha conference. This discussion is also important so that in future, the ideology of the people at a center should be clear so someone who wishes to work does not face similar mental pressures situation as I am facing. Not everyone is as strong as I am.

Some questions in my mind:

- The center which was built on donation of many people for education, social and economic development of children of migrant labor is not available for them and a place, there is no place for them to live, and a place for rent is being searched for the same children. The trust of all the people who donated for this center is being broken. Is this just and appropriate?
- Till now anyone who wanted to work for development for the community in Asha, everyone will cooperate in their effort but here this tradition is being broken. Perhaps these colleagues should make it clear that they do not believe in this cooperative tradition of Asha. Someone working in the community generally has the right to decide what work needs to be done, but this is not happening here. In Asha person working in the field has the prerogative to decide on the priorities, why is that not followed here People currently working here [at MS3 center] are working with a privileged Abhijatya (affluent) class. They are not working with the common people. Many groups such as Theosophical society, Art of living, Vipasna etc are already doing such ideology work with the middle and affluent class. Asha is for people who are socially and economically underprivileged. This center should also be expected to work with the underprivileged people contrary to what is happening there currently. This center is located between many villages but has no relationship with any one from these villages.

Asha is founded on relationships, trust and commitment. even though an Asha center exists for Asha use, why is it necessary to convince the people at this center [jeevan Vidya team] who did not have any connection with Asha before they started this work? Did the jeevan vidya team convince all the colleagues of Asha community before they started their work, then why this double standard?. I expect all the Asha colleagues to discuss on these issues openly if I have misunderstood Asha philosophy or if the questions I have raised are not appropriate. I am of the opinion that transparency is very

important in Asha, not only in issues of funds but also in issues of work. This discussion is important so that everyone is aware of all these issues, to take us towards meaningful work, and to make us come out of our shell and see the outside world.

Note: I am writing this report in hurry for lack of time and if I have left something out please do talk to me. Thanks for reading such a long report.

With regards,

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