

## Patna Collective

The Gandhi Foundation in 2006 had started to fund a group in Bihar, India to set up a social welfare work program for the urban slum dweller community. The group calling itself The Patna Collective had ambitious aims in terms of bringing together all the communities that live in the urban slums to allow them to discover commonalities and thereby engage in productive work. The Gandhi Foundation volunteered to help the organization as it considered their aims to be important Gandhian goals. Initially, the Gandhi Foundation sent a small sum of money to help start the work. In 2007, The Prem Rawat Foundation gave a generous donation of £10,000 to the Gandhi Foundation for humanitarian work and £7,500 of this was sent to the Patna Collective.

Before going in to the details of the work of the Patna Collective it may be helpful and insightful to understand the living conditions of the slum dwellers.

- The average *family* income is Rs.45-50 about US\$ 1/day
- The average family size is about 7-8 people. Which means they live on US\$ 0.15/day/person



An average family of 7 people living on US\$ 1/day

- So most families eat one meal a day including the children you see in the photographs.

- Most families also have to take out loans on extremely high interest rates from local money lenders and are then NEVER able to get out of the debt trap. No savings, ever. Loans are sometimes needed either for marriages, funerals or simply for food. In some cases the people take loans to try to start new businesses but of course the business is hampered by the large amount of repayment required.

- The families cannot afford private education for their children and government schools don't function in the area and so most of the children that attend the Patna Collective school have no other form of education. Also by the time children reach a certain age (about 7-8

for boys and 6-7 for girls) they are pulled out of school, even if they do attend, and compelled to help with work (daily wage labour for boys and help in the housework for girls).

- No hospitals exist in the area and no sanitation facilities which therefore increase the likelihood of children diseases.



Public washing facility

- There is also limited arrangement for running / drinking water. The Patna Collective wants to help with this issue.
- Toilet and shower facilities are public and women find it very difficult to use these as they cannot shower in public places and so usually need to wash/toilet very early in the morning or not at all for the day.
- The youth are mostly unemployed and completely alienated

The Patna Collective has decided to utilise its resources for education and culture as entry points to its ultimate ambitions and the following programmes/ interventions have been the starting point:

- Children's Informal Educational and Cultural Centre
- Adult Education Programme
- Public Library
- Workshops and Cultural Programmes

### Children's Informal Educational and Cultural Centre

The basic idea of this centre is not to replace public schools but



Some of the pupils

rather to *supplement* them.

Education has to be a responsibility of the government and no private initiatives, however well



Learning Paper Craft

intentioned, can be adequate in this regard. What we have tried to create is a context where we can initiate a process of dialogue with the parents and children around education

and culture.

This would, we hope, be helpful in deconstructing government policies and pedagogies employed and in nurturing *pressure*



The teacher & helpers

*groups* that would compel



A Fun Dance

the school administration to be more efficient. Hence, our centre works with children after school hours and employs a pedagogy which is dialogic and enriching. The focus is not only on text-based instruction but on a learning process which is activity-oriented, engaging, creative and critical. The children are encouraged to learn through role playing, action games, craft work, theatre and storytelling. They are also instructed in hygiene and sanitation. For these purposes they are learning to make effective use of the centre's library which is rich in children's story books. In the coming months we also intend to introduce audio-visual medium at the centre.



Children outside the school; no shoes on anyone

The school is run by a **Programme Coordinator, Uday Pratap Singh** and two collective members, **Mohammad Nasir** and **Mohammad Tauheed** who work fulltime with the collective. One has only to see the joy and confidence on the faces of children to gauge the wonders this centre is doing for them. Though reluctant in the beginning the parents have now begun to see our point of view and are actively encouraging the programme wholeheartedly. The centre now instructs about **35 students** in the **age-group of 5-14** from **3pm to 6pm daily excluding Sundays**. One of the main themes that the school focuses on is personal hygiene and cleanliness and the teachers make a point to keep the centre very clean as well.

They try and lead by example.

### Adult Education Programme

This programme has been designed for **working adults** who have been denied an opportunity to be educated due to their socio-economic situation. The idea is to at least help them to achieve a literacy level where they could read newspapers, do elementary arithmetic and avail of government schemes. Since they work in the daytime their classes are held in the late evenings (7 pm-10 pm). At the moment this programme caters to **15 students**.

### Public Library

We have also setup a library at the centre which has about 500 books at the moment covering a host of topics. The library also subscribes a number of newspapers, journals and magazines. It has been a runaway success as a number of young students (both boys and girls) have started to visit the library regularly in the evenings. The library opens from **5pm to 8pm** in the evening.



Library now full of books

### Workshops and Cultural Programmes

As we mentioned earlier one of our key aspirations is to mobilise people to form pressure-groups where they could effectively

interact with government to sincerely implement the developmental programmes (education, health, housing, food, water, electricity etc.) intended to benefit them.

However in this process the divisions of religion and caste



Learning about Dr. Ambedkar



Pupils from the school performing;



Audience at the Mela



One of the Founders of Patna Collective speaking at the Apna Mela

have proved a steady obstacle. Before the people begin to mobilise on developmental issues they must at least start to dialogue and talk with each other. However, that has proved to be a big challenge for us so far.

In this context, we organised a people's fair ('Apna Mela') on the eve of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birthday (13<sup>th</sup> of April) in the 'dom tola' (the pocket inhabited by Dalit Hindus). In this fair we invited people from all four blocks. The fair was well attended and despite reservations from many a substantial number of young people turned up from all the blocks. This is an encouraging sign as the priorities of youth seem to be divergent from that of the older populations. The unique feature of the fair was its cultural programmes where cultural performers from all the religious and caste groups participated.

### Future Expansion Plans

In the last five months of relentless fieldwork the team has been able to break the ice between the various communities and they have shown of late a willingness to engage and dialogue with each other on issues that affect them all. In the coming months we would like to build on these strong signs of nascent solidarity just surfacing and try to mobilise them around some key development issues. We think it's the right time now to launch the **community wallpaper** which would apart from creating awareness also be effective in community mobilisation. We also intend to organise a few **workshops** now concentrating on developmental issues (employment, education, health, public distribution system), people's issues (Right to Information, environment, etc.) and on some burning social issues (communalism, casteism, gender, etc.). The issue of **livelihood** still remains paramount. Since the existing skill-base of the

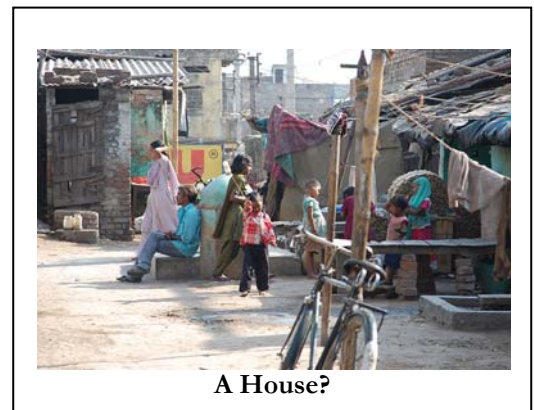
community is largely traditional and dated we intend to design some programmes where the youth could be supported by the collective to re-skill themselves in more marketable and job-oriented traits (computer hardware, AC/TV/Refrigerator-repair, Motor mechanic to name a few). We are in touch with some organisations that can support us in this process on a subsidised basis. We are following up and hopefully the first batch of beneficiaries would begin to join these courses the coming month.

The living conditions that these children have to endure is

heart breaking but their resilience shines through and the small financial contribution of the Gandhi Foundation of £7,500 which



Front Garden?



A House?



Another view

from The Prem Rawat Foundation, for humanitarian work, has made a tremendous difference to the lives of these children. I have visited the school and the homes (1 brick wall, two sides of straw and a plastic polythene



Spirit Un-dimmed

sheet covering as roof and front entrance) in which these children live and am absolutely convinced that the teachers at the school and The Patna Collective members are doing the most valuable of services for this community. The Patna Collective members do not take any salaries from our contribution. The contribution is used only for paying for running of the expense of the school and any social programmes.

***For donation to this project please send your cheque payable to “The Gandhi Foundation (Patna Collective)” and post to 28 Bronwen Court Grove End Road, London NW8 9HH.***

Omar Hayat, Trustee  
**Gandhi Foundation**