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Life at Biratpur Health Centre

In August 2008, a breach in the eastern Kosi embankment in Nepal released more than 3.7 million litres of water into Northern Bihar. Hundreds of villages were flooded in one of the worst humanitarian disasters the area has ever seen. Three million people were affected. SEEDS, in partnership with MERCY Malaysia and Doctors for You (DFY), reached out to the residents of Madhepura district, one of the worst hit, with static and mobile health clinics. In 2009, the Biratpur Health Centre (BHC) was set up in Sonbarsa block, Saharsa. In a district that has an extremely high number of malnourished children and communicable diseases, there had only been one (and that too non-functional) health centre in the entire block. This health centre served over 25 surrounding villages within a 5-km radius. It provided basic health facilities, hoping to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates and promote hygiene and health education.

Over the four years of its running, Biratpur Health Centre became the nerve center of the community. It moved from being just a 'health centre' to reaching out proactively. Weekly community awareness programmes were conducted on topics ranging from family planning to immunisation. Basic disaster awareness was conducted in schools. Finally, since many pregnant women cannot even afford the minimum healthcare facilities, community representatives were taught to be 'Trained Birthing Attendants'. Voices is a collection of memories from those who have been associated with the Centre – from staff to patients. In these distinct perspectives lies an insight into life at and around BHC.



I wouldn't say that there is one big problem that I faced. But every emergency and patient coming up to the dispensary is a challenge in itself!

-Dr. Kartik Prasad Singh, Doctor, BHC

lives in
safe
hands

For over three years, from 2010 until the clinic's closing in 2013, Dr. Kartik Prasad Singh played a key role in the Biratpur Health Centre. Educated in Ranchi, this father of four had worked in many government hospitals before BHC.

A typical day began at 9:00 am. With anywhere between 100-150 patients seen on a daily basis, many already waited in queue. Despite the volume, Dr. Prasad never faltered, treating each case as a new challenge. He also runs a private clinic in Biratpur, where he spent 2-3 hours every afternoon.

Visiting on the centre's final day, the patient flow was expected to be less intense. But to his surprise, the old, young, women and children alike had



lined up to see him! In fact, the queue never reduced, as every treated patient was replaced by another one.

His most challenging yet memorable case? In 2010, Sushil Kumar, a 10 year old boy from Ghazipatta village, Saharsa, Bihar developed an intestinal obstruction. There was a total malfunction of the intestinal system, making it very difficult for a young child to live with that kind of condition. He was first taken to a private district hospital, but despite the treatments and precautions his health continued to deteriorate. That's when people advised his father, Ravindra Das, to take him to the Biratpur Health Centre.

Studying his medical history, Dr. Prasad diagnosed that the treatment was a little inappropriate, causing increasing constipation. Under strict medical supervision, Sushil was kept on a fast with a glucose drip for three days. Slowly, he began to recover and his intestinal system functions returned to normal.

"I enjoy the challenge of taking up emergency cases."

Like with Sushil's case, Dr. Prasad feels that this ability to treat critical situations and make a real difference in someone's life is a great gift, especially in a remote area like Biratpur.



I chose to go to BHC as it was close to my house. The BHC staff took special care of me, even picking me up in a car to take me to the centre that evening.

-Kanchan Devi, Saharsa, Bihar

Kanchan Devi is a native of Saharsa, born, brought up and married within the village. A housewife with three children, the responsibility of taking care of her family and her in-laws falls primarily on her. Though her husband visits the family quite often, he is based in Mumbai where he works for a company.

Around the time of the Kosi floods, Kanchan Devi began her third pregnancy. The area was experiencing a major water contamination crisis, but she found ways to keep herself safe. She located a private dispensary and regular check-ups became a routine. Located at quite a distance, the expenses were high both in terms of medicines and commuting, but she managed with the full support of her family.

...a **new** life



Kanchan Devi stands with a photograph showing the nurse holding her newborn child Aayushi. In fact, she is even wearing the same sari as in the delivery photograph.



Eight days after BHC was established, 9-month pregnant Kanchan Devi went into labour. It was evening and time was of the essence. Her contractions were too close together to take her to their regular dispensary and Biratpur Health Centre was the closest option. The BHC staff were extra helpful, even bringing her to the centre in their private car.

Yet, it was indeed a testing time on both sides. Totally remote, with no power supply most of the time, the staff was still ironing out the functioning of the centre. As it so happened, there was no

electricity that evening as well. Managing with a single generator, the doctor and nurse took Kanchan through her labour. Aayushi was born, hale and hearty, at 7:30 that evening; an extremely successful end to a significant challenge.

Over the last four years, Kanchan Devi's family have become regulars at BHC. A flood of memories ensue every time they meet; especially the little girl who was BHC's first delivery! "There are so many memories attached to BHC. But once it closes, we will need to go to Saharsa hospital for any treatment."



During the time of the floods, I created 40-50 bamboo shelters in order to earn money.
-Sibusada, Saharsa, Bihar



a life of multiple paths

45-year-old Sibusada is much more than a local farmer. His skills extend to being a bamboo artist (dabiya karigar), a labourer and a fisherman. In fact, creative evidence of his various professions is a prominent feature around his house; particularly the innovative bamboo fish traps and nets. He juggles these multiple paths wisely to support his family of eight. While most people were struggling to overcome hardships after the floods, for example; Sibusada used his bamboo artistry skills to rebuild not just his home, but a new life for his family.

Sibusada's wife Phudiya Devi shares this multi-tasking ability. A former farmer, she is now a tailor. Before the floods occurred, she travelled to Punjab with her husband and invested the time and money to learn tailoring; working as a maid in her instructor's house. Now equipped with a sewing machine, she can earn Rs. 5 -10 per piece of clothing.

Demand from nearby villages is sufficient to ensure a steady stream of work.

"I am happy that we both know many things that help us feed our children. In fact, if people were interested, I would like to teach them these things...but they don't come!"

The family's interaction with BHC first began due to water borne diseases. In 2008, the flood water had severely contaminated water supply. With the lack of cleanliness and toilets, the risk only grew. Sibusada, like many other villagers, actually had to use boats to travel anywhere since the area was inundated. It was during this time that he was infected through dirty water. He began having

stomach cramps and vomiting constantly.

In 2009, spreading word of mouth brought news of BHC into his community. A first boat ride to the Centre ensued and Sibusada has been following their prescriptions for stomach ache ever since. Today, he leads a happy life with his family and continues to work as a farmer, labourer and fisherman. Unfortunately, his stomach infection has not been completely cured; continuing to pop up from time to time during his work. Where will I go next time once the Centre shuts down, he wonders.

"Sonbarsha would be the next preferred place after BHC to get my medicines."



Due to my epileptic fits, I burnt my hands and legs. I didn't even realise what had happened. It's very painful!

-Ruby Devi, Saharsa, Bihar

a pillar of
strength
in her Life

Sitting quietly, completely covered in her saree and clutching the end of her paloo, Ruby Devi's ordeal was reflected in her posture. Even more painfully obvious was the fact that she was sitting completely alone. 18 years old and already a mother of two, Ruby lives with husband and parents-in-law in Biratpur village. She suffers from severe epilepsy. Going into an epileptic fit while she was cooking, Ruby unconsciously let her hands and legs go into the fire for several minutes. By the time she regained consciousness and realised what had happened, it was too late. The extreme pain from severe burns had begun.



Already shunned by her family due to her epilepsy, Ruby faced this ordeal alone; her rough muddy feet evidence of the barefoot 5-km walk from home.

So severe were the burns that the nurse administering the emergency treatment actually had to wear a disposable operating apron. As she finished her first aid and returned home, it left one lingering thought. For such patients, the Biratpur Health Centre really was a pillar of strength in their lives!





Whenever I get sick or face any health problem, I come here for treatment.
-Pooja Kumari, Saharsa, Bihar

Life in a child's games

10-year-old Pooja Kumari lives in Ghazipatta village, Saharsa. This aspiring writer and teacher is in 4th standard at Biratpur Middle School. Her happy family of six includes her farmer father, housewife mother, two brothers and a sister; not to forget the three domestic cows, three goats and white pigeons!

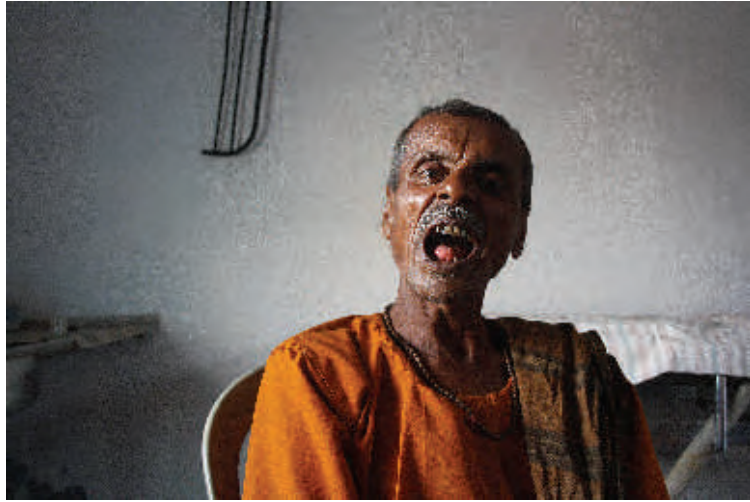
Pooja Kumari and her family were regulars at BHC since 2009 and got all their treatments done here. Pooja had been in eight times, mainly for minor treatments of fever and injuries. In fact, it was her favourite sport – kabaddi – that brought her into BHC for the first time. “I was playing kabaddi with Khushboo, Julie and Kanchan when I fell down and hurt my ankle badly. It was then, in 2010, that I came to BHC for the first time.”



On her last visit, her stomach had been bothering her for some time. She had ignored it at first, but when her irritation grew worse and worse, she finally visited BHC. There she found that she had worms in her stomach!

“There isn't any other place like BHC,” she said as she left with a cure for her stomach infection. “I will have to go to Biratpur Government Hospital in the future, but it is not functioning well.”





I had a dermatological problem where I used to itch a lot. It increased after the 2008 floods. However, after taking medicines from BHC, the condition has improved.

-Upinder Yadav, Saharsa, Bihar



Living a long Life

55-year-old Upinder Yadav is a local farmer from Ghazipatta village, Saharsa. He has lived in this area for most of his life and spends the majority of his time in the fields looking after the crops. Both his daughters are married and live with their husbands. Yet, with a wife, two sons and daughter-in-laws and three grandchildren at home, there are still many mouths to feed. Unfortunately though, Upinder's ups and downs with his health over the last few years have made him a very faithful BHC patient.

As he smiles and reminisces, his decayed teeth show all the signs of excessive tobacco consumption.

It all began when he encountered a dermatological problem several years ago. He used to feel irritation all over his skin, itching continuously over his entire body and even leading to bleeding. The contaminated water after the 2008 floods only made things worse.

The skin trouble grew so harsh that he couldn't sleep for nights on end and his whole body was left with scratches and blood!

In 2009, Upinder learned about BHC from the surrounding community. It's worth a shot, he thought to himself and came in to get checked. With better treatment and good medicines from BHC, Upinder's skin problem healed and he has never faced any serious issues with it again.

Less than a year later, Upinder developed an inflectional injury on the corner of his thigh. He immediately came to BHC for a checkup where an initial three-day dose of medicine was prescribed. But then the injury became infected. An operation had

to be performed and fortnightly checkups were required to dress the wound. Once again, he recovered fully.

However, his medical trials and tribulations are endless. Upinder had now been suffering from cervical back pain for almost a year and there was no improvement in the pain as yet. He was still on the medication prescribed by the doctor and expected it would take more time for the treatment to take effect.

Jovial despite his troubles, Upinder Yadav reflected on the changes he has experienced. "Many changes have taken place in all these years," he said, "especially for health. Medicines today are much better than what they were earlier!"



“ My time in BHC has been very good. I haven't decided what I will do in the future.

-Aruna Devi, Head nurse, BHC

65-year-old Aruna Devi was the only nurse in Biratpur Health Centre and had been there since its inception. She had over 36 years of experience at The District Hospital in Khagariya and Saharsa District. In her time at BHC, Aruna – an A Grade nurse - handled all kinds of cases. From extreme burns to traumatic road accidents, breast abscess to urine retention and an entire variety of birth cases, Aruna had handled it all. In fact, she had been part of most of the critical treatment situations including Hepatitis and HIV-infected children. However, as a rule at BHC, no nurse was allowed to handle any emergency cases without the doctor.

the Hospital's
Lifelines



43-year-old Sheil Kumari, a midwife in BHC, had also assisted in the birth. Sheil, who lives in Saharsa with her mother and two children, is another founding staff member of BHC.

Once a month, medicine stocks would be received directly from the agency. There was a budget of Rs. 35,000 for medicines and Rs. 5,000 for lab maintenance.

Aruna's most memorable experience? A smile spreads over her face as she talks about Kanchan Devi and her child Aayushi. The first delivery at BHC, it was a very challenging emergency case for the entire staff. Aayushi's birth occurred just eight days after BHC was established and that night there was no power supply. Despite all the tribulations, the case was handled with full care and the sole generator was powered up to light the way.





Lives joined in 'shock'

While Aayushi's birth was a cherished memory, their most unusual and 'shocking' case saw people literally joined together due to high voltage electric shock.

It was in 2010, when the Biratpur College building still housed BHC. Meanwhile, in Biratpur village, the Lok Sabha elections were underway. The Singh family - Lattu Singh (Father, 70), with wife Shanti Devi, son Santosh and daughter-in-law Shabnam - were going about their daily routine work. Accidentally, a naked electric wire came loose from an electric pole, making contact with the

hand pump right next to Lattu Singh's house. As Shabnam approached to collect water, she was struck by the high voltage current. Realising her daughter-in-law was in danger, Shanti Devi tried to pull her back, but instead fell into the death trap herself. Within seconds of their reaction, Lattu and his son came running towards the victims, but only managed to get themselves attached as well.

Drowned out by the loudspeakers, no one else realised that the family was in trouble for some time. When their screams were

finally heard, the villagers found the family stuck together. Slowly and with force, they were separated from the hand pump. Everyone was conscious, but the two women especially were in a critical state. The family was rushed to BHC in the election party vehicles. Treatment aside, BHC also managed to provide extra oxygen cylinders with the support of the election members.



Sheil Kumari displaying a photograph where she is holding new born Aayushi. A memorable moment preserved in a photograph.





I was scared. I had lost three children earlier. But thanks to the doctors, everything went well.

-Sunita Devi, Saharsa, Bihar

After multiple
Disappointments
...a new
lease on Life

Born on the 5th of July, 2009, little Ankush Raj is BHC's second successful birth story. For 35-year-old Sunita Devi recalling his birth brings back a mix of nervousness and boundless joy. A resident of Biratpur since her marriage, Sunita Devi lives with her husband, parents-in-law and two children. With a decent amount of land of their own, the family is fairly well-off and live in their own house. Fortunately, their house lies within the 5km radius of BHC which made it very convenient.

However, it was before the 2008 floods and BHC's establishment that Sunita Devi was expecting her first baby. She was admitted to Madhepura Private Hospital where she gave birth to a boy. Unfortunately she lost her child after



36 hours of delivery. The doctors considered it as a still birth and could see no other medical reason for it. A year later, she lost her second baby the same way! The family was completely shattered. In 2008, she delivered her first healthy baby in Madhepura Hospital. Yet fate had something else in store. When they decided to have a second child, the family lost a baby for the third time.

During her 5th pregnancy, Sunita Devi and her husband came to know about from the local villagers. Conveniently located, it became a place of celebration as her second child was born. Having spent nearly Rs. 2 lakhs on his wife's treatments in the

past, the entire family was most grateful for the convenient and affordable BHC treatment. Ankush Raj, born on 5th of July, 2009, made his place in the hearts not just of the family, but the BHC staff.

"Whenever I see the child," Ankush's father comments, "I can't help but smile and feel happy."

Laden with flowers, the mango plant in their garden seems to echo the sentiment. A gift to the family from BHC staff after Ankush's healthy birth, this sign of good life has continued to bloom!

