

URJA-Energy



Annual Letter

2024

The Second Decade Begins

The New Normal

2023 began with the team meeting on the 2nd of January.

A Monday and our regular meeting day. It is also a moment of exchanging family news and reconnecting every week.

2023 brought us once again substantial support from our valued donors. Valued simply because they believe in our efforts and people. In the last 10 years of our existence, we have had supporters from far and wide. There are those who support us monthly and those who give up large amounts of their speakers' remunerations to us, for the cause. This is very heartwarming and of course hugely motivating!

At our 10th anniversary I would definitely like to mention my husband who has never questioned the purpose of URJA and seen me through some very dark moments.

Why a Newsletter?

I have a very close relationship with most of our well wishers and throughout the year at certain moments they all get to hear of our projects. This is a moment I get to make things personal and see a side of URJA that we feel should not interfere with the serious business of making a difference.

The People, The Team



Gagan Chaturvedi - our team leader

Gagan lives in Gorakhpur and commutes to us in Siswa Bazar. He has two daughters and the best compliment he ever gave me or the satisfaction of knowing that we have made a difference came from him after he saw me take a lead in a ceremony - "Madam, now I am not worried. I have two daughters but after seeing you I do not need sons".

(For those who know India, in fact still in many developed parts of the world, a son is a symbol of having arrived, to put it mildly!)

Arun Mishra - our project leader

Arun has one son and lives in Kushinagar. The commute is so terrible that he spends 6 of his 7 nights at the Centre. A very calm and unflappable person and a gentle soul. No task is too much and no task is difficult. He has learnt/taught himself how to work with Excel and to be at ease with a computer.

Dedication is his alias!



Shama - our angel on the run!

She combines her health clinic duties of registering patients, raising awareness, with stepping in when needed at the sewing school.

She is also a mean cook!

Rachna & Rijwana - our two teachers of the Silai (sewing) school

Two smiling ladies who have grown in self-confidence and self-worth. Still need to learn to speak up to me, but have taken on the challenge that, perhaps, in 2024, I will at a certain point, not have to pay them salaries! They aim to have enough students to cover their salaries and some change!



It is amazing to see that 4 years ago, they would not have dared to dream of being independent women, taking loans to get their siblings married and having the confidence to pay it back. This is definitely change!

2023 - Year with the most visitors from abroad

Starting with **Tara Seekins** who was in India from San Francisco on a Fullbright mission visited with us.

The pictures say it all!



Sanah Thakur visited us from Doha to pilot her very exciting programme called **Brain Science** (a Sanation project) at a local school in Siswa Bazar.

More on that below



Jean Pascal van Ypersele visited us a second time and brought a friend along, Mr Surya Sethi.

Enthusiastic as usual, he did the rounds of all our fields and just spent time being with us.



We were very honoured to be chosen by **Pia Choksi** to spend her sabbatical moments with us. She has been a huge asset in helping us make all our reports, tables, maps, etc.

Nandita Choksi, Pia's mother, not only raised funds to cover all expenses but also joined Pia at the Centre and saw a different part of her country hailing from Mumbai!

Our humble and basic amenities notwithstanding they managed to survive the bitter cold of Siswa Bazar.

Projects sustained and undertaken

Brain Science

The pilot project has ended at Mulvery school and the results are nothing unexpected. Both parties would like to continue. We also have now extended the project to another school in the area. More on that when we begin!

I will use Sanah's words here to concisely tell about the project as it is really her baby:

"This year, I worked with URJA foundation to pilot the first extra curricular activity club based on understanding the brain and neuroscience. I have spent the last few years using my experience working with teenagers and teaching psychology, to develop activities and resources for 10-12 year old students. Most international schools and well funded schools are not always open to new additions to their State and National curriculums. The systems are in place and it's not easy to introduce something different.

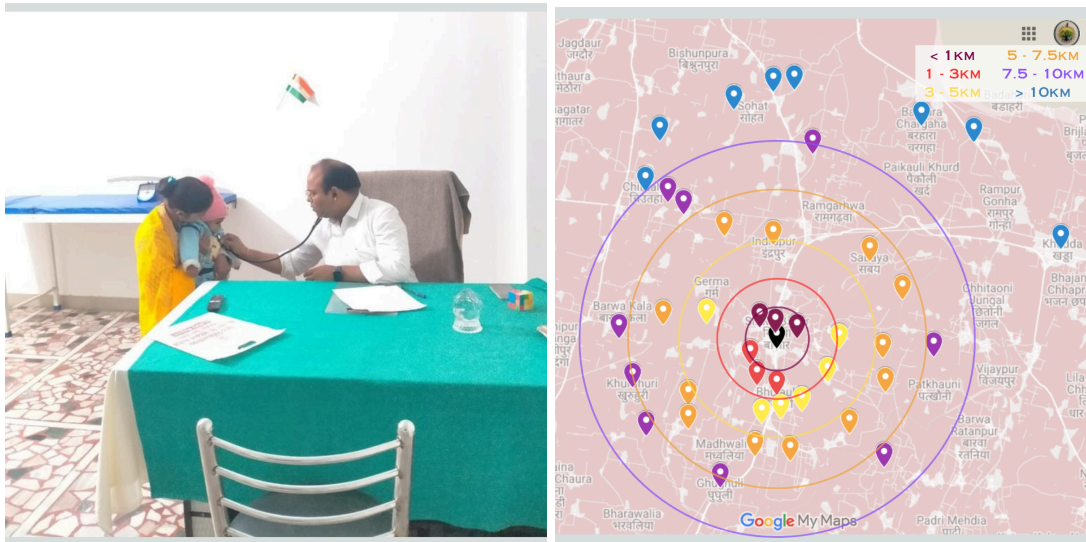
Thanks to Mrs. Raka Singh, I was able to pilot the brain science club with a school that welcomed this project. As someone who only realised my brain was the most important part of my lived experience at 21, I knew how essential it was for students to know how their brain works so they could learn and understand themselves better."

The pilot programme was run at Mulvery Convent School in Siswa Bazar, Uttar Pradesh, by Mrs. Satya, Mrs. Afsa and Mr. Suraj. They were supported by the team of teachers at Mulvery Convent School as well as the principal, Mrs. Shubra who welcomed this programme without any hesitation.

Health

Paediatrician Dr. Sushil Kumar has patiently persevered with us. It is still a challenge to get patients, but incentives like free consultations, from this year onwards, thanks to sponsoring by

Pfeda Synthetics. The table shows you distances that some have to travel to get medical attention!



Silai Sewing School

Instead of giving you numbers I thought a table shall show you the catchment area of URJA in its effort to empower women!

With the sponsorship of **Techno Design**, we can now enrol students for free and even provide the best one with a sewing machine!



Agriculture

Agriculture is the most satisfying product but the least profitable for a farmer. However nothing gives more pleasure than to see green fields tended in a responsible way. We have been helped all along the way by Mr Basant, an expert on seeds. He is not a traditionalist and well suited to our way of thinking. After all, our motto has always been to leapfrog technology!

We also experimented with Mustard oil this season and this first press oil smells as pungent as any mustard you might eat. The winter wheat is doing well and already sold!

Testimonials

Coming to URJA and Siswa

"I came to Siswa after having spent two days in New Delhi, speaking to a board of top hoteliers and businessmen in the country, who were the least interested in what I had to say, because it was not going to make money. Disgruntled, I had arrived at Siswa to a place where every individual, man or woman, took me seriously. And this was only because, Raka had spent every year, taking URJA seriously."

- Sanah Thakur

"Embarking on a sabbatical in India afforded me the invaluable opportunity to engage in meaningful volunteer work with various NGOs. My short term involvement in URJA's activities included more than one trip to the diverse state of Uttar Pradesh and allowed me to forge connections with people from different backgrounds, fostering a sense of shared humanity."

- Pia Choksi

Working with URJA and its team

"The real achievement at URJA was the fact that everyone running and contributing to it had empowered themselves to run an organisation they were proud of; that has been challenged, questioned, rejected and even threatened at times by the community. Yet their resilience, often reawakened by Raka, was what kept URJA alive and striving."

- Sanah Thakur

"Through this sabbatical, I not only contributed to URJA's efforts but also gained a profound sense of fulfilment and purpose. Thank you seems inadequate and yet no other words can cover my most sincere sentiments to Raka aunty, the team and all the people I have met along the way. I wish URJA Energy nothing but the very best in realising its purpose of improving the lives of those in Siswa Bazar."

- Pia Choksi