

# Namaste from Karanjo



My trip to India this summer was the best decision I have ever made in my teenage years. As a youth ambassador to several charities and organizations that are actively working in India, I had heard about **Ekal Vidyalaya** and the wonderful work that they were doing in the rural tribal areas of India. Their presence in the rural villages sparked my interest, as I understood some of the challenges that India faced as a country. India may already be the world's third-largest economy on purchasing power parity, but it ranks only 60th out of 148 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index, indicating that there is greater potential waiting to be unlocked. Some of the challenges that India faces are:

- Education and skills
- Urbanization
- Health
- Gender
- Sanitation
- Water scarcity
- Transparency

Nonetheless, I decided to apply for an international travel grant at my school, St. Mark's School, Southborough MA to visit the Ekal projects in rural India. When I found out that I was awarded the grant, I was exhilarated. Many questions flooded my mind, and curiosity grew. It was probably the thrill of visiting new places that drove me to start planning the trip. I contacted Ms. Ranjani Saigal, Executive Director of Ekal USA and her encouragement to visit one-teacher schools and other Ekal projects accelerated the process.

I had the privilege to meet the CEO of Ekal India, Mr. Bajrang Bagra at my first stop in New Delhi, India. He gave me an overarching view of the Ekal culture and the spirit of volunteerism. Under his leadership he has taken financial transparency to the next level by monitoring and

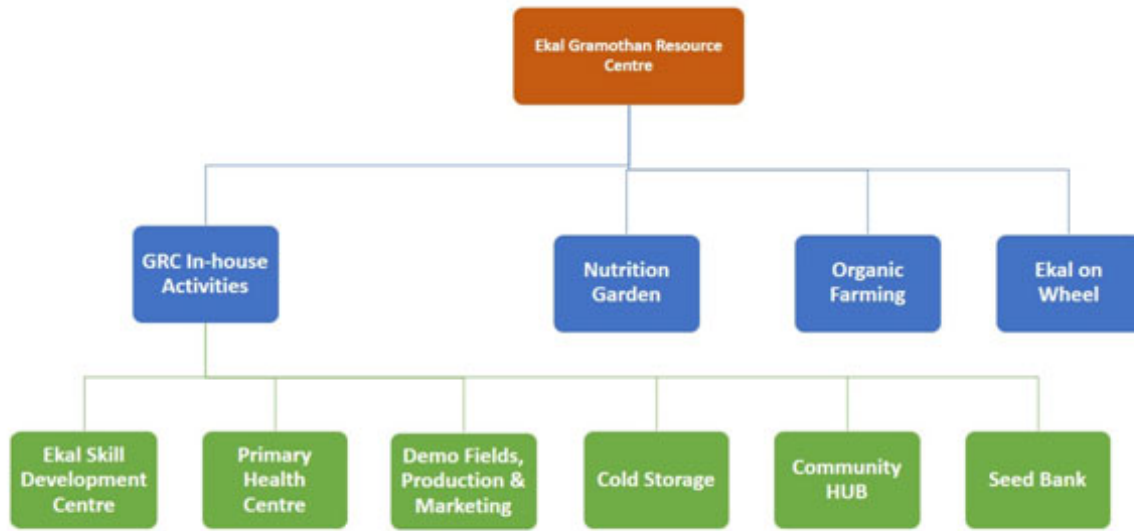
reporting the flow of funds from donors to the schools they have sponsored to the paisa. It takes a dedicated effort to do this for over 50,000 schools in India.

I flew to Ranchi, Jharkhand from New Delhi and visited the headquarters of **Ekal Gramothan Foundation**. I met Mr. Arun Khemka, President of the Foundation and Mr. Lalan Sharma, Program Director of the Foundation. I had the opportunity to address the Ekal volunteers from all over India who had gathered in Ranchi. Mr. Lalan was kind enough to show me all the schemes that the Foundation is promoting to uplift rural India socially and economically. One such scheme is **Poshan Vatika**, which ensures that the farmers not only produce good crops but feed themselves and their families' healthy balanced meals by growing fruits and vegetables in their backyards, which leads to the healthy development of their children and families.



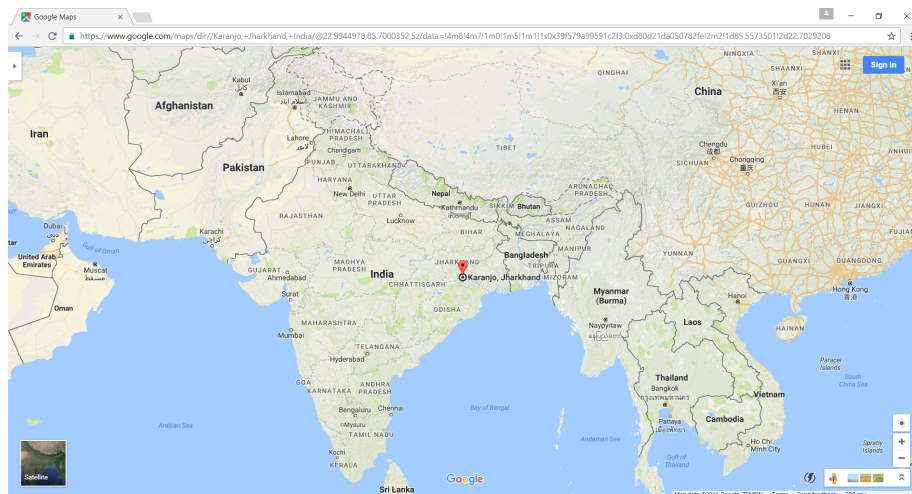
(Yusra speaking to the volunteers at Ekal Gramothan Foundation in Ranchi)

From Ranchi we drove to Karanjo, it was a three-hour drive to the remote village. Karanjo is one of the Ekal Gramothan Resource Centre (GRC) and is a model that is replicated across most rural areas in India. The main aim of these GRCs is to make the village community economically self-reliant and develop villages as the centre of economic activity. Volunteers at GRCs motivate and educate the villagers to adopt an eco-friendly life, train farmers on organic farming and high value crops, provide skill development training to the youth and women for better livelihood, husbandry and to promote agro-based local entrepreneurship.

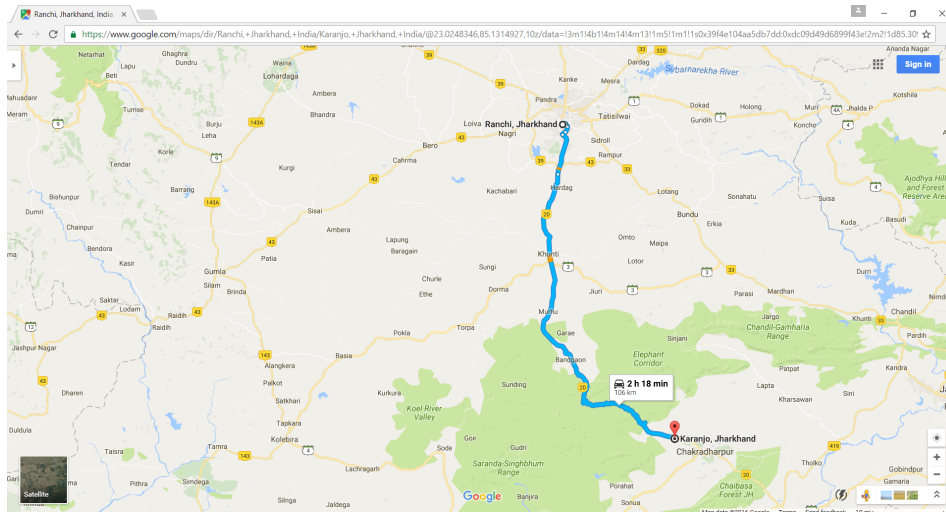


(Model of Ekal Gramothan Resource Centre)

The drive to Karanjo was beautiful. We crossed over the Saranda-Singhbhum mountain range to get to the other side of the valley. This valley is well known for elephant sightings as well as tigers that come to drink water from a pond 20 miles south of Karanjo. I was also told that the area is home to Naxalites who are always fighting the Indian government about their policies. They have been described by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as India's “greatest internal security threat.”



(Map showing Karanjo in the state of Jharkhand, predominantly a rural state in Eastern India)



(Route from Ranchi, Jharkhand to Karanjo, Jharkhand)

Karanjo was an unforgettable experience. I stayed there for 3 days and visited all the Ekal projects. One such project is **Ekal on Wheels** – a bus equipped with computers that travels to different villages to teach local farmers how to use the computer. I visited a village where the farmers and their children were taught digital literacy through the use of Word, Excel, Paint, etc. I haven't seen such enthusiasm to learn computers for a while now. While most of us are wasting time on Snapchat and Instagram, I could see how the youth in the villages are trying to learn computers to be relevant and help their parents in their farming business.



(Yusra in front of the 'Ekal on Wheels' bus that drives to different villages to teach Computers)





(Yusra inside the 'Ekal on Wheels' bus interacting with the students)

I visited a group of women at a tailoring training center, part of the Girls Empowerment Program. I spent sometime with them learning the art of cutting and sewing clothes. I even bought a sari blouse stitched by them for Rs. 200 (\$3). I was happy to see a sense of pride in these women.



(Yusra Syed at the Karanjo training center for Women)





(Yusra with the volunteers in Karanjo)



(Yusra riding a bicycle in Karanjo. Most women ride bicycles as a mode of transportation)



(Yusra Syed visiting a one teacher Ekal School)

The main focus of Ekal Vidyalaya is to run one-teacher schools all over India, in the remotest rural & tribal villages and take education to every child. The overriding philosophy of Ekal Vidyalaya Movement is to take a holistic approach of the social and economic development to tribal & rural India. With the participation of numerous trusts and non-profit organizations, this movement has become the largest grassroots level non-governmental education & development movement that operates in the remote villages of India. The Ekal movement aims to help eradicate illiteracy from rural and tribal India. After all, only education can eradicate poverty.

In February 2016, I attended the India Conference jointly organized by Harvard Business School and Harvard Kennedy School, where I learnt that the challenges and opportunities of this complexity and magnitude couldn't be solved by government ministries alone. They require a collaborative approach involving business, technology and political leaders, members of civil society and academia, youth groups and social entrepreneurs. In order to learn more I signed up for Micro and Macro Economics classes this year at St. Marks School. I hope to use my experience visiting different projects run by NGO's in India and my knowledge of economics to help close the gap and bring India to the forefront. This trip has been a life changing experience for me and has not only given me a clearer insight into my role as a volunteer, but also helped



me gain a sense of appreciation for my own culture and the work ethic of my parents to provide for me the life I live today.

After returning from India, I was invited to meet and share my experience with the Ekal USA team in New York on September 18, 2016. It was great to see the volunteers from Ekal India, Mr. Bajrang Bagra, Mr. Arun Khemka, and Mr. Lalan Sharma at the conference. I had met them and interviewed them just before my trip to Karano. They were curious to know my experience of staying in a remote village in India. I hope my presentation at the conference covered it. I also met the Ekal USA team led by the President, Vinod Jhunjunwala and the Chairman, Dr. Rakesh Shreedhar. Hopefully I have built some everlasting friendships in my quest to understand and serve the children in rural India. I would like to convey my thanks to Ms. Ranjani Saigal, Executive Director, Ekal, USA for all the help and mentoring during this trip.



(Yusra Syed speaking at the Ekal US conference in New York in September 2016)





(Yusra Syed speaking at the Ekal US conference in New York in September 2016)



**Ekal USA**

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#EKAL Ntl Conf. "Ekal villagers make most of opportunities presented. If there are no opportunities, they make one happen"-Yusra Syed, Student, St. Marks School

8:51 AM ET - 18 Sep 2016



(Yusra Syed with the Ekal family in New York, USA)