Arpana is a charitable and spiritual-based organization, which has set up health and development programs to benefit the disadvantaged. Main areas of focus include health, education and empowering rural women to secure rights and livelihoods. I had the opportunity to visit the office and ashram in Karnal, Haryana …

After a three-hour very foggy drive from Delhi I reached Karnal, Haryana. Upon reaching I was warmly greeted by Arunaji, her husband and Anne Robinson who oversees the projects. The ashram provides a communal feel and a hospital is also located on-site which provides a good standard of health care to those in this area. After having breakfast and meeting some of the staff we headed to two different rural villages.

At the first village volunteers along with an Arpana site coordinator were performing a musical act to highlight the issue of gender parity and female feticide. These women travel through different villages educating women on such issues and I was fortunate to be able to see this in person. Women sat huddled together, with heads covered and veils lowered on the floor in a school courtyard enjoying the act as the other women performed.

**Video of the play** here [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ5htOz6NcE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ5htOz6NcE)

Women educating villagers on gender parity through a play
Once the act was complete the women asked the villagers to stand in unison and make a public pact that they would not discriminate against girls or young women and ensure they are given equal access to opportunities. It was such an empowering experience to be able to view this in person!

Next on the day’s agenda was visiting another village where members of the women’s self-help groups were being given training on how to do accounting and book-keeping. Arpana’s focus is on making the women in these groups self-sufficient not only economically but also by providing skills sets so that may thrive and support and provide for their families and themselves. Each small group was given an exercise to do and they then had to present their outcomes to the larger group. For my benefit they did this also and then I had a chance to interact with the women and ask them questions.
Video of women in another village singing during a book-keeping training
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPa5utM8EdQ

I learnt more about why they joined the groups, what differences had occurred in their lives and the mentality of men and other villagers and what their future dreams were for themselves and their families. To be on the ground in this way was truly a life-changing experience.

Accounts prepared by the self-help groups

The women were empowered, confident and proud of what they had achieved and had been able to do for themselves their families and the villages in which they live. Some had purchased animals to breed or produce and sell milk from, others had invested in small businesses such as carpet making and others yet had invested in their children’s education. Many lead the groups without much assistance from Arpana’s main team and the next goal is to improve governance and have the women play even bigger roles in the management and civic duties of the villages in which they reside.

One welcome result of the women’s self-help groups that IDRF has been supporting was the third leg of my day’s agenda. We stopped by a small business – a cooperative of some of the women’s self-help groups on the area. They have started a business making and selling dairy products. I had the chance to sample fresh paneer, lassi, and watch the women making milk cake for retail; sales. This allows for an added revenue stream and the women are entrepreneurial in the way that they are growing this business collective. They were so proud of what they had accomplished and it all started by joining and participating in a women’s self-help group!
Women entrepreneurs in the off-shoot collective

I can say I have definitely found another family in the Arpana fold. I would highly recommend anyone to visit them and see the projects and work being done first hand. It is very invigorating and inspiring!