**Site visit report of MICDA school, VS Puram. Dec 14, 2015 Sunil Laxman**

Project website: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=111>

Note: The school had been closed between 2011-2013, due to many problems faced by the founder Dr.Subbaramaiah. The school had been reopened by him this year despite many difficulties.

Condition of the founder: Dr.Subbaramaiah had to face many health difficulties himself (as well as for his wife), each requiring extensive hospitalizations over two years, and huge medical expenses. Recently, due to his recurring stress-induced diabetes, and an undetected infection, he had to undergo surgery leading to the amputation/loss of two toes. He is currently healing, but this will severely reduce his mobility permanently, and leave constant pain. But he is an extremely determined and dedicated individual, and continues to strive to support the school, at great personal cost (both financial and physical). Due to delays/lack of funding from Asha, the founder had to mortgage personal resources to keep the school running, and pay salaries.

**School report:**

The school is ~5-6 km off the Puttur-Chitoor highway, but remains as remote as it was when I first visited it over 12 years ago. The road access to the school/village settlement is still a narrow, one-lane road, surrounded by fields, mango plantations, some forest land. However, as I had mentioned in a report 5 years ago, there has been some unauthorized soil-removal by the brick mafia. This continues in this area, causing much damage to good land (see pictures).

**School condition:** The school building remains in excellent condition. It is a remarkable building, built to last a long time. There is absolutely no school building in the greater area that compares, with good, clean class rooms, blackboards, fan/light (when power shows up occasionally), and a large play area. The toilets (separate for boys and girls) are in excellent working condition, and kept clean daily. This is a rarity in the entire area, even hard to find in the nearby towns, so remains remarkable for this remote settlement.

**Major problem:** The lack of a compound wall has hurt the school badly. Cattle and goats keep invading the premises, and are impossible to chase away. Especially the past 2 years when it was closed, there were many misuses of the premises by people from neighboring areas (who would break in at night and drink alcohol there). There have been many break-ins, with the stealing of lights/tubes. All the sports equipment (football, cricket bat, volleyball, tennis balls) have been stolen in the break-ins. Also some cupboards have been damaged (see pictures). Therefore, the kids now have absolutely no play equipment. Several children asked me for a volleyball when asked what they wanted. This is in very sad contrast to my previous visits, where there were evening football/cricket games (which I have participated in). The library is in very sorry condition, since most of the books (from 10-15 years ago) are in tatters, or gone completely. The lab is still in excellent condition, though not in use right now, since there is no 9-10 grade (see below).

**Staff:** There is one headmaster who teaches, along with two other teachers. They collectively teach classes 1-7. There is one caretaker/watchman, who is severely needed since there have been so many break-ins. One cook makes the rice/sambhar/rasam and occasional egg for the students in the school kitchen (see picture). There is one all-purpose coordinator/accountant, who does most of the running around to get supplies, fix things etc. The teacher salaries are only Rs. 8000, with less for the watchman, cook and caretaker. It is a tough living.

**Current student strength:** There are ~57 students in total in the school now, from classes 1-7. Till around 2011, there was a typical strength of ~110-120 students (classes 1-10), from all the surrounding hamlets. Due to it being closed for 2 years, many of the students migrated either back to the fields, or to two government schools 3-4 km away. The govt schools are abysmal, and students there rarely have functional classes, or learn how to read/write even in 10th grade. It must be noted that in the past, students from the MICDA school have done exceptionally well, including several district level rank holders. Once this school reopened this year, many students started coming back. However, students in higher classes (8-10) who were in govt schools and wanted to come back here were threatened with dire consequences in those schools, so continue to languish there. There has been a very good response in the smaller classes (the classes 1-5 have larger student strengths), with the kids showing up in strength. This will only go up again, and if continued, the school will have 75+ kids in 2 years.

**Student demographics and condition:** Most students in the school are tribal, and most of the rest scheduled caste. The largely remain first generation school goers, with the village literacy rate low. Their families are exceptionally poor. Most children have only one proper meal a day, which is the lunch served in the school. When asked, many kids said that the thing they liked most in the school was the rice and sambhar. They also have very poor clothing. Since the school could not afford to give uniforms this year, some kids have old ones (from 2-3 years ago). Footwear is usually rarely seen in the villages here, all kids are barefoot, but seem happy without shoes.

MICDA school in the past years has several dozen students who have passed out in the preceding years. Some of those even went to college (including on govt scholarships). Almost all left the village after school. Sadly, none have ever come back to the school or given back in any way.

**Classroom condition, and student learning:** I interacted as much as possible with children from all classes. Classes 1, 2, asked simple questions (name etc), and wrote alphabets, numbers on the board. Most kids could recognize these without too much difficulty. Classes 3, 4, we went through some simple math exercises on the blackboard (addition and subtraction), writing their names in Telugu. Spent more time with classes 5-7. Here kids were asked to do multiplication and division exercises, as well as read from their textbooks (Telugu, English). Also, asked them general social science questions (who is the chief minister, which state do they live in, what is India’s capital, what is the district they live in).

Many children in all classes were able to do math quite well, most far better than what you see in government schools in the area or cities. All 5-6 grade kids could do multiplication fairly well. A couple of them were really excellent. They were also fairly well informed about basic social science questions. Some kids were very well informed, given that there are no newspapers that reach the villages, and most of them don’t have TV, or proper electricity connection in their villages. Reading, even in Telugu was poor, although writing was far better (and handwriting uniformly excellent in grades 5-7). Comprehension from reading was also poor. English (expectedly) remains quite alien to them.

**Overall recommendation:** If Asha can continue to support this school, it must. There is nothing close to this in quality in the region. There is sincere effort and commitment. The premises are excellent, clean, sanitary, and well maintained. Continuing to provide a mid-day meal is strongly recommended, since it is pretty much the only proper meal most kids eat. The children are obviously malnourished, and small. The teacher salary is meagre, especially since they all have to travel by 2 buses daily, from Puttur town (where they stay). Also the accountant/caretaker salary is abysmal, since he has to spend quite a bit running around, going to town to get stuff etc. It should be supported at this level at the least. These are the minimum to keep the school going.

In addition, the school will be greatly helped if a permanent compound wall can be built. The temporary ones erected from the past are all gone, and will not last very long here anyway. But this is a large expense. The school furniture (chairs etc) are mostly broken and unusable, they are all over 10-15 years old now. But they are managing without much furniture. As mentioned earlier, all the play equipment have been stolen. More stationary will help. The students cannot afford textbooks. Most of the textbooks are hand-me-downs, and nearing their extinction date. There also aren’t many books (simple kid-friendly books) left in the library. These are things that should be planned for in the future. One option is to try to find local support for some of these things, potentially involving the Bangalore or Hyderabad chapters.

Longer-term, some serious discussion needs to be had on how the school can partly sustain itself, and continue to operate. Its value for the location is extremely high. I will explore all possible local options for these above points.