

Site visit to SVYM Viveka Scholar program

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Site visit venue: Deeksha 11th/12th College in SGPTA campus, South Bangalore.

(The Bangalore center for the Viveka scholar program)

Site visit performed on behalf of Asha Houston chapter

I was picked up by a well-wisher of SYVM and the Viveka Scholar program, Mr Vikram Rai (who runs a consultancy firm mainly dealing with non-profit groups) from Jayanagar which is about 5 kms from the center. The center has a pre-primary to high school and junior college run by SGPTA trust. Since the junior college wasn't coming along well, Viveka scholar program co-ordinators requested Dr Sridharan (who runs the Deeksha junior colleges in and around Bangalore) to run the science college and in turn SVYM would ensure there would be an enrolment of atleast 50 students every year. Deeksha has been running the college quiet well and have expanded to have other streams as well.

Once we reached the center I was introduced to Mr Nagaraj who is the Operations Head of 'Project 1947' program for SVYM. There Vikram, Mr Nagaraj and myself had a good long discussion on the program. Mr Nagaraj who was a banker by profession left his mainstream occupation with the intention to do something for society. He along with Mr Naresh Bala (who returned after being in the US for several years for the same reason) decided to run the major part of the education program for SVYM under the flagship project 'Prema Vidya'. You can find more information on their program at <http://premavidya.svym.org>.

The idea was work with both government and private schools at the high school level to ensure students don't drop out after high school and continue with their education. The idea is to give them strong fundamentals and provide them the necessary tutoring using technology. Till last year they worked mainly with schools in and around Bangalore and this year they have expanded the project to 250 schools in 5 districts (please have this list checked – Bangalore, Mysore, Hassan, Raichur and miss the last one) of Karnataka. There are around 1400+ schools in the state who have approached them to implement this in their schools, but the project partner (I think wisely) has decided to take it slowly and ensure quality is not compromised along the way. The focus has mainly been to ensure the students enrol in science graduation courses post high school since there is a mental block against the stream. The model being used by the project partner is very innovative and they seem to have a dedicated staff to implement this. It was a good learning experience for me to understand this aspect especially since I am working with another project in

a different set up and it was interesting to see how Project 1947 was able to overcome challenges. Since, the project proposal is not for this aspect of the project, I won't document the detailed discussions here, but recommend the proposing chapter to understand this aspect of the project as well, perhaps in a conference call with the project partner. You can also find lots of information in their website.

The Viveka scholar program is intended to mentor and counsel selected underprivileged but bright children in their future studies. The procedure for selecting the students is well documented and formalized in the project proposal. The Bangalore center has about 75 students this year and has almost an equal split between the boys and girls. Mr Nagaraj and the team seem to understand the students very well and they take utmost care to ensure these children do well. From the past records, many students have moved on to take engineering, but few of them have taken the medicine route as well. The project partners do keep the constant mentoring even after the children pass out from the junior college level. They have collaborated with different organizations and NGO's for this. For example, an organization which works mainly with girls has come forward to take care of mentoring the female students who have taken up engineering or medicine. It is definitely moving to hear the impact of this project on the lives of these children. The idea is help make this initiative into a movement.

After having a discussion of about an hour and half with Mr Nagaraj and Vikram, I then visited this year's class of the Viveka scholar program. All of them are in science this year. Most want to become engineers, but they were a few who wanted to take the unorthodox route. For e.g., one wanted to become a lecturer. The kids travel from different parts of the city some travel a good distance to get to the college. Under the program they are provided a bus pass. The college tuition expense is around Rs 34,000 but the total per student cost for the program comes to about Rs 50,000. I will leave the chapter to get a good understand on the expenses involved. I also met the principal of the Deeksha College and visited the different labs. The college seems to be well equipped in terms of infrastructure and seems to have good staffs. The project and Deeksha College staff seem to understand and complement each other pretty well which I think is essential to take the program ahead. No doubt that Mr Nagaraj and the entire staff of the Viveka scholar program have the dedication to drive this program well.

If you need any more information on the project, please feel free to contact me.

Recommendation:

1. The work being undertaken by the project partner is definitely noteworthy and Asha should be involved in such large scale community projects which focus on improving the quality of life of these children by equipping them with not only good education but also life-based skills and values. I would highly recommend that the proposing chapter have a conference call especially with Mr Nagaraj and understand the project. This will give a lot of confidence to the chapter about the project.

2. I haven't been able to go do the 'due diligence' with respect to the proposed budget. I hope the supporting chapter will be able to do discuss the budget items in details with the project partner
3. It will be best if the proposing chapter/ steward can arrange for future visits to the project. I think this is essential for strong long-term partnership.
4. The NGO being well known in Bangalore and Mysore may be able to leverage their network to raise corporate sponsorships/ individual donations. The chapter should consider being in the loop in this aspect so the chapter can see how best donor's funds can be utilized.

Disclaimer: This visit report has been based on the limited exposure of the site visitor interacting with the project partner, going through documents and websites.