Field Report

Bhagvati Sarla Paliwal Education Society, Jattari, UP

Dec 22, 2022
I arrived in Jattari a few minutes past noon from Delhi via taxi. I left the taxi at the main road and took a short walk towards the main entrance of Bhagvati Sarla Paliwal Inter College, referred to as the school hereon in, as I called Rakesh Madam over the phone informing her of my arrival. I was greeted by the principal, Rakesh Madam, referred interchangeably as Ms Rakesh or Rakesh Madam, flanked by Manish Kumar the enterprising mid-aged school orderly, Ajay Kumar Chauhan in-charge of primary education and teacher training, and Ashok Kugshal [sic] who is responsible for math and science for middle & senior secondary classes. We exchanged quick pleasantries and made our way to the principal’s office which is a large room conveniently located at the head of the open hallway of the old school building. I sat opposite the principal, Ms. Rakesh, admiring the awards and trophies on display, almost all of which were attributed to NCC. We were joined shortly after by Ajay and Ashok for the parley that lasted for over three hours.

Bhagvati Sarla Paliwal school, or ‘inter college’ as a senior secondary schools are commonly called in the area, was established in 1986 by Mr. TK Paliwal with assistance and support from Late Bhagvati Paliwal and Late Sara Paliwal, in an effort to promote and offer quality education for girls in the community. The school is governed by the the eponymous education society that is helmed by Vijay, members of Paliwal family, &c. Surprisingly, nobody from the school operational staff, including the principal, is a member of the board although the school is the only educational institution operated by the society. The school operations are governed by the [school] management committee chaired by Madhu Ji from Delhi and has Ms. Rakesh along with key members of teaching staff as members. Ms. Rakesh joined 1997, initially as a teacher who after acquiring training, established and commanded the NCC (National Cadet Corps) in the school. The NCC at the school was surprisingly disbanded with promotion of Rakesh madam to the position of the principal. The school has inexplicably struggled to identify a suitable teacher who would be willing to acquire the necessary training to
commandeer the NCC corps in the school, while simultaneously making a conscious shift in investment towards academics. I must note at this point that NCC is a tremendously institution and participation in NCC provides invaluable exposure and opportunities, including lateral preferential entry into law enforcement, military and paramilitary services. At this point I realize that the dialogue about NCC that originated from the inquiry about the memorabilia was becoming extraneous at the expense of Ajay and Ashok, who have now joined us in the principal’s office.

The school premises is a large open courtyard surrounded by buildings housing classrooms and administrative units. The north and south side buildings are new, reconstructed with support from a variety of charities, The Round Table, Delhi, being the major supporter. While the central courtyard arguably serves as a playground a part of which is temporarily serves as a bicycle stand, it seems almost entirely devoid of any sign of sports. The southern side half fronting the primary school wing has a few
dilapidated play structures some of which are being relocated. The school is attended by 330 students (marginally up from 315 students last years), and serves girl students from roughly 15km radius in and around Jattari township. The enrollment is significantly lower than 900 when in-person attendance was suspended due to Coronavirus pandemic. While drop in attendance is a near universal post-pandemic phenomenon, the drop in this school is significantly attributed to suspension of transportation services, and has evidently affected primary school enrollments. (At this point it should be noted that the school admittedly doesn’t suffer from lack of attendance and reports ideal attendance records of enrolled students.) Loss of transport services has led to younger children move to other, probably more proximal schools, in the community. The school had four minibus that offered a subsidized transportation services prorated at Rs. 500/month. However, the school struggled to collect the transport fee. While some families paid their dues, a large number either refused to pay or sought repeated deference of payments citing financial troubles. The mounting losses overtime, however, led to suspension and eventual shutdown of transport services. The families who were paying for the services have moved to alternate arrangements, paying private auto rickshaw to ferry their ward while others shifted to other schools. The school now retains only one minibus which is used for excursion trips. The other three were sold to recover losses and avoid ongoing maintenance expense. Jattari has a substantially large low income households, and Rs 500/month transportation is often quite steep. Curiously the monthly transportation bill comes substantially higher than than Rs 5100/year and Rs 7200/year tuition fee for primary and secondary classes respectively. Lack of transport has affected the attendance of primary grade children who have moved to other schools closer to their dwellings. I inquired if there was ever a consideration to further subsidize the transportation fee for poor households, but, the financial details and budget planning in-general was unknown. It seems the financial planning, budgetary concerns are managed exclusively by the governing board which
as noted earlier, has no representation of the school teaching or administrative staff. At this moment, Manoj mercifully interrupted our conversation allowing for a much needed break, as well as an opportunity to broaden our conversation.

Ajay Kumar Chauhan, referred to as Ajay hereon in, hails from Bulandshaher, U.P. Ajay joined the school in 2016 with an objective improving teaching quality, introducing pedagogical improvements, and invigorating interest amongst students and teachers of the primary school. Ajay has experience working in Rajasthan for two years on primary teacher training, pedagogy and learning methods before joining the School. Ajay seems enthusiastic about his work, and claims improvement in teaching quality which reflected in steady increase in enrollment (and attendance) prior to the pandemic.

Ashok Kugshal, referred to as Ashok hereon in, joined the school after a long tenure of 19-20 years as a math teacher, including a math coaching with a for-profit organization called “Ganit Gurus.” Ashok desired to use his skills for social work and in that spirit joined PPIC (Pardada Pardadi Inter College) a partner organization of BSPES. Ashok eventually joined the school as a full-time teacher focussed on Math and sciences for middle and high school (secondary and senior secondary classes). Ashok moved to Jattari while leaving his family back in Delhi, and visits them over weekends. Ashok is passionate about making Math fun for children and is working to improve the quality of math and science teaching in the school. He’s enthusiastic about the Physics,

(Left to right) Ashok, Rakesh Madam, and Ajay outside the auditorium entrance.
Chemistry, and a more recent Geography laboratories in the school and excited about the prospect of an upcoming “Math Lab” in the school. At this point I observe the lack of Language Arts representation in the room, and I was informed that Rameshwari Sharma, who imparts the languages, history and arts is occupied with conducted classes and will join us in some time. The prevailing obsessive emphasis on math and sciences, however, was palpable in the room. Ashok made a passionate case for need to analytical thinking and importance of Math for children in higher classes since it offers better career prospects relative to “Arts.”

The discussion from here was focused on broad issues about the school and its relationship with the community at large. The school is currently affiliated to UP Board which offers both Hindi and English as learning and testing languages. The School is on a journey to fully adopting English as a primary language for learning (and testing), and cautiously optimistic about 2022-23 being the year where 34 senior-secondary students will for the first time use English language for their standard examination. There is, however, a sincere concern that remains about the quality and processes of UP Board - assessments and markings of exams conducted in English have historically been questionable. UP Board exams are often conducted and assessed by teachers not fully versed in English and result in poor results for students. English language is a emotive topic across the country and western UP is certainly not immune to the phenomenon. The entire journey from Delhi to Jattari was littered with signboards and cheap
advertising of “English medium public schools,” including a large colorful wall art of a “NOW OPEN Orient Convent School” written in Hindi a just a few blocks away from the School. Parents strongly favor “English medium” schools or their wards, and since English is often the only medium in high education, this preference seems reasonable. The school is also in the process of moving its affiliation to CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) from UP Board. The process of meeting the required standards, securing approvals, however seems arduous (and expensive), and will culminate with a NOC from UP Board which at best is still a few years away. The desire to move to CBSE affiliation seems to be motivated by steadily declining quality of UP Board, complicated and often confusing standards and curriculum, which for instance allows Math as an optional subject from grade-8 onwards in-lieu of home-science while simultaneously allowing sciences as subject of study at secondary/senior-secondary (high-school) grades. Although both of them share the NCERT and NSF as standards, CBSE affiliation is attractive because of its brand popularity, especially as a means to enforce the schools credentials as a English medium school as well as better governance and consistency of standards. It is in this endeavor that the new buildings are constructed with prescribed standards in mind.

The school has 30 teachers for 330 enrolled students. About 40% of the teachers are the school alumni and are well recognized for their skills and teaching quality, largely attributed to the training that they have received. The salary however varies significantly between the teaching staff. The alumni is typically paid much less while undergoing training in converse to the full-time, qualified teachers which are admittedly hard to recruit and retain. The alumni teacher typically work at the school for 3-5 years, and leave the school either to marry and start a family or for better opportunities elsewhere. I must note that the School was founded to address endemic apathy towards girl education and anemic attendance in the school. The problem once plaguing this jat dominated region has since subsided substantially though, and reports
high enrollment/attendance and historic low drop-off rates amongst girl children. [cite] The young adults after clearing senior secondary (read high school) face substantial resistance against continuing education, exacerbated by lack of higher education opportunities locally, and dearth of career counseling or advisory services. Rakesh madam narrated stories of talented girl students who completed college, acquired professional training but had to decline job offers due to resistance from family, specifically the male members of the family, and community pressure. Prevalence of “Home Science” as a subject in secondary and senior secondary levels therefore seems like a connivance rather than an opportunity for the girls.

We were close to the end of school hours as we took a walk around the campus. Ms. Rakesh, Ajay and Ashok along with Manish gave me a tour of the newly constructed buildings covered behind a facade of while metal grill - a ugly but necessary measure to counter the monkey menace. The buildings are all interconnected as we meandered through the laboratories, classrooms, and a newly constructed auditorium with terrible acoustics, which Ashok plans to address through extensive use of curtains and “sound proofing techniques”. The New buildings are constructed with support from Round Table India, while the Geography laboratory was supported by a direct contribution of an individual donor in memory of a family member. The school bell rang out as we made our way into the central courtyard, and children almost immediately made a beeline to exit the metal grill reinforced classrooms. We took a brief walk into the primary school wing, and I made a curious inquiry if there was a library in the school that children have access to. We walked back through the hallway of the primary school building, past a classroom full of 12th grade students attending after-school math class, into a large “Library” room stacked with unkempt books. Libraries are generally overlooked in the schools and as we made our way back to the courtyard I advised to reimagine the Library space, something that is open, inviting place to
encourages reading and exploration, rather than an appendage to store reading material.

I was greeted in the courtyard by Sh. TK Paliwal who was informed of my presence at the school and was graciously dropped by. We chatted briefly in the courtyard before Manish asked us to break for lunch. I realize that it is well past lunch hour, the school is almost empty except for the students in after-school classes, and a moderate sized group of students waiting for their transport - The auto rickshaws typically make multiple rounds, primary school children are ferried before the higher grades get their turn.

We made our way back to the main building walked to the end of the hallway that houses guest rooms. Ms. Rakesh, Ajay, and Ashok joined me for a simple yet delicious meal while we continued our discussion about the school. The plan to switch to CBSE CBSE curriculum seemed was high on the agenda, along with the the issues of retention of quality teachers, and a critical need for career counseling and community outreach addressing issues of young graduates. I requested the school to consider restarting NCC corps in the school - an idea that Rakesh madam is visibly passionate about. We concluded our chat walked back towards to the principal’s room where I grudgingly made an entry into the visitors book upon instance of Rakesh madam. The dusk was approaching fading the apricity of an already cold day. After spending nearly four hours at the school, I took my leave from Rakesh madam, Ajay, Ashok, Manish, and Mr. Paliwal, who was stationed in the courtyard sipping a hot cup of tea.

- Amit Sharma (encl. pictures from the field visit)
Rakesh Madam leading us to the Chemistry and HomeScience laboratories.

Displays and models in the Physics Lab

Children exiting the school

Library
Sh. TK Paliwal in the school courtyard at the time I was leaving the School

Main courtyard of the School