

Introduction

Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya (KSV) is located approximately 15 kms west of Dharwada, Karnataka. KSV provides music and academic education to 250 students currently. In addition to education, complete boarding is provided as well. Children, ages between 5 and 15, are from underprivileged families and communities and hail from villages within 25km radius of Kalkeri. Their mother tongue is Kannada, Lamani, Urdu, Marathi among others. The medium of instruction at the school is in Kannada language.

Day 1 - late evening activities

I reached the KSV campus close to 7:30PM on a Wednesday. The sun had set and the children were getting ready for their dinner in a large, open assembly hall. All the children were seated on mats on the floor with the girls on one side and boys on the other. The children knew their pre designated spots and were lined on the mats based on their classes, with 1st standard children first and so on. After a 5 minute meditation and silence, dinner was served, buffet style on either side of the assembly, for girls and boys. Serving was done by volunteers, wardens and the kitchen staff. Children rose in groups, lined up and got their food in an orderly fashion. Dinner was local vegetarian cuisine with rice, jowar roti, curry and vegetables.

I walked around and spoke with children of various ages. They were energetic, noisy and seemed like they loved being there with each other. They enthusiastically told me their names and where they were from or how many languages they spoke (Kannada, English, Lamani and French - one 7 year old claimed). Part of interacting with volunteers from all over the world, the children are constantly exposed to many languages and pick them up. They asked me my name and where I was from. As was noted in an earlier site report, the children were open and curious, asked questions and were not shy. They loved interacting with newcomers and telling them about themselves and knowing more about the visitor as well.

Based on preset schedules, 2 wardens were assigned to oversee dinner, make sure the children were not wasting food as they made their way for washing and putting away their plates. Interaction between wardens and children seemed open and easy going. Same holds true for their interactions with all other staff including with KSV director Adam.



The campus sits on 2 acres of land in Kalkeri village, between 2 lakes. Apart from the aforementioned large assembly hall, other buildings include a library, science lab, arts and crafts area, an administrative space upstairs, and admin office further down. On the other side of the assembly hall is a large kitchen area with about 4-5 women working on breakfast, lunch and dinner. The classrooms are all separate mud huts where both students and teachers sit on the floor. Boys and girls boarding facilities are located after the admin offices. I did not enter these areas during my stay at the campus due to lack of time. On the hilly side of the campus are various huts for guests. I stayed in a guest hut for the night, with a bathroom located outside, not too far away. The cots and bedding were basic and comfortable, with solar powered electricity in the room. Solar power is used for powering everything on campus from street lights to hot water.

After my dinner and a brief discussion on next day's activities with Adam, I retired to my room.

Day 2: early morning activities

Day 2 started early. Campus was bustling with sounds at 6am. I made my way to the assembly hall where 2 volunteers Stephan and Yugo were coaching children (both boys and girls divided into 2 co-ed groups) on exercise activities where 1 group competed against another. The volunteers came up with a combination of activities like running, hopping and so on for the

teams where 1 or more kids in each team participated. It was only 6 am but the energy levels were already up! Of course, a few kids sat out these activities. Praveen, a 7th grader was one of them. He said he had just hurt his ankle. But after some goading by his teammates and a volunteer, he decided to join his team and started participating. His ankle seemed to have healed.

Elsewhere, the kitchen was preparing breakfast, some children were still waking up and the wardens were bustling about. Some children were practicing music or dance (Kathak) while some children of higher grades (8th standard and above but especially 10th standard - due to board exams coming soon) were studying.



KSV follows activities based education techniques. They do not conduct exams for children until children reach 8th standard. Once in 8th, they are eased into learning the way of the Karnataka state board education system of exams and scores. No homework is assigned. Instead, children participate in various activities (chess, math, computer skills and so on), largely based on what skills volunteers bring to the table. Children, when not in classes, are managed by volunteers and wardens during off hours. Activities during the week are structured and pre planned from morning till night, with specific activities per day.

Thursday morning activities continued with meditation at 7AM (30 minutes this time) followed by Pulao breakfast in the assembly hall.

Music classes

Music lessons started soon thereafter. 1-4 standard receive the same instruction - vocal and instrumental basics. 5th standard and up get to choose vocal, tabla, violin, sitar, kathak, and pursue them. With Adam, I visited 5-6 classes of various grades, where children were learning various instruments and vocal. The classes included around 10-12 students with a teacher guiding them. Teachers were from local areas, from Dharwad and around, some of them with

several generations of musical heritage. Dharwad is known for its rich hindustani musical heritage where traditional gharanas teaching distinct notes and methods, developed within the unique bond between the guru and his disciple. KSV takes the egalitarian approach, where music is available for all who seek it, and at various levels. Many KSV alums have graduated with music degrees and are employed, teaching music in Dharwad and beyond currently.



Assembly and Lunch time

After roughly half school day of music, children are let out to take breaks and then assemble in the hall for national anthem. After a lunch of rice, curry, vegetables and roti, children are back in classes, this time learning academics.

Afternoon academics classes

Afternoon classes last a few hours where Kannada, English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies are taught. Curriculum follows Karnataka school board for higher classes.

I was able to observe just one class - 2nd standard, where Kannada was being taught. I could not spend more time in academics because of a time crunch.



Dental Checkup

On the day of my visit, a dental checkup was scheduled for all students. A doctor and several nurses and medical assistants, performed orderly check ups (one class at a time lined up at the office) and was completed during the day.

Interviews

1. Students: I spoke with several students of various ages. As noted before, they hail from villages within the 25km radius of Kalkeri. This was a conscious decision on KSV's part so that, in case of emergencies or parent - teacher meetings, the parents are not too far away if KSV needs to reach them. Children come from very difficult backgrounds but KSV allows them to open up and blossom by creating a positive atmosphere with music, activities and academics. Punishment and negative reinforcement are not allowed. On the day of my visit, Shabana was celebrating her 12th birthday. She was wished by all during lunch in the assembly hall by singing happy birthday, candy was distributed, and rumour had it that cake was going to be served in the evening.
2. Alumni: KSV has alumni studying and working near and far. Some have Bachelor's degree in music while others are pursuing education or engineering. I met one alumni, Gautham, who said that he was the first student to graduate from KSV. He was visiting from Uttar Pradesh. Having finished his Bachelors in Computer Science, he was at a crossroads about whether to pursue his masters or get a job. He had returned to KSV to seek advice from Agathe and Adam. When I asked him if he was interested in volunteering at KSV, he said that that was not his plan at the moment but wants to give back to KSV sometime in the future.

3. **Volunteers:** On the day of my visit, there was a viral flu going on, so most volunteers (and some teachers) were out sick. I could not speak with many on this account, as the few volunteers available were multitasking and busy all day. I spoke with Amethyst, the volunteer coordinator instead. Most volunteers are from France, Germany and Canada, with one volunteer, Sahil, from New Delhi. Sahil initially signed up to volunteer for 6 months but liked the work so much, he extended it further and has been with KSV for a year. I was told by Amethyst that this was a common theme across most volunteers, with them starting for a semester but extending upto 2-3 years. Amethyst also brought up the idea of attracting more diverse, including Indian American volunteers and had a question for Asha (which has been documented in the questions section below).
4. **Wardens:** Wardens come from surrounding areas as well and are primarily responsible for looking after the children, from waking them up in the morning, making sure they have completed all their morning tasks to, at the end of the day, ensuring that they have all gone to bed. In between, they handle overseeing breakfast, lunch and dinner, handling childrens queries, keeping the assembly halls clean among other things. Shruti, who comes from a village close by, had quit KSV when she got married. 6 months later she wanted to come back to KSV and KSV took her back immediately. She says that she loves working here and it has helped her learn and grow a lot. The atmosphere at KSV is open and respectful, according to Shruti.
5. **Kitchen staff:** I observed that about 4-5 kitchen staff work on preparing breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea and coffees (but the number of staff could be more). All are ladies and hail from nearby areas. Unfortunately I did not spend as much time with staff as I would have liked to, mostly because I did not want to get in the way of their busy day of tasks.



6. Teachers: On the day of my visit, teachers were short staffed, and hence a few classes were combined. All teachers live in Dharwad or nearby and commute to KSV everyday. I spoke with Ms. Vimla, a Kannada teacher, during lunch. She has been working with KSV for several years and has been very happy with the way children are taught here. She likes that it is not the usual rote techniques used in traditional schools in the region. Children learning through activities and interacting with teachers freely is far superior way of learning, according to her. Though not everyone she knows have bought into this way of learning, she says this is definitely a better system.

Bhima Rao teaches children in 1st standard - those who have just been admitted (children aged 5 years 10 months to 6 years 2 months). He is the first teacher that the children, who have just left their homes and parents, interface with in school. (Outside of school, they interface with wardens and volunteers primarily). With the combination of training received from TTF (The Teachers Foundation), and resolving unique challenges faced over the years with trial and error on his own, he has worked out the best ways to guide his young students. It can be very tough for children from diverse backgrounds and languages learning for the first time. For example a child speaking Lomani language at home will be completely lost in a school whose medium of instruction is Kannada. With a combination of visual aids and activities, as well as with the help of senior kids who speak the same language as the child, these challenges are overcome, and per Mr. Rao, within a few weeks, the child is comfortable enough in absorbing new languages like a sponge. According to him, most important skill a teacher needs is a lot of patience! And lots of patience he seems to have.

7. Admin staff: I spoke with Sudharm who is the head of the Department for Academics. He manages 14 teachers currently. Having left his IT job, he moved back to Dharwad area and joined KSV. He manages staff, training, teaching plans and related issues. He finds his work very fulfilling with a good work and life balance. When I asked him what challenges he faces, he mentioned teachers salary as the biggest challenge, and related to it, teacher retention. Government jobs pay 3-4 times the salary offered by KSV and hence finding new teachers as well as retaining good, well trained teachers is always a concern.

I spoke with sponsorship coordinator Sarah. Sarah manages outreach, communication and funding related to sponsorships. KSV has a sponsorship program where people can sponsor a child by sending a monthly sum. KSV is targeting 3 sponsors per child, to cover for unplanned expenses. Currently for the 250 students, there are roughly 350 sponsors. They want to more than double this number. Asha is the portal used for sponsorship request from the US. The relationship with Asha is working very well

according to Sarah. However, there are a couple of technical issues that need to be resolved. (Please see the questions section below for details).

8. Management: Last but not least, I spent 30 minutes with Adam and Agathe (Founder of KSV) discussing their impressions and if they had any questions and feedback for Asha. Their specific questions and feedback is documented in the questions section below. I brought up the question about whether they were planning on relocating the campus. They mentioned that this was currently on hold as there are too many paperwork issues with moving. The land the campus is on now is KSV's however, there are some disputes. So they are not sure if they should invest further here or move to a fresh new location. One of the things missing in the current campus is a large sports field for children to play. I asked about the budget and they were more than happy to send the information via email.

Questions/Issues raised during my visit:

1. ASHA website linking to sponsorship has issue: I believe there is a technical issue with this link not working seamlessly for those who wish to enroll for sponsorship. I was told that Bhavana helps them guide through this process (as a workaround) but KSV wants to know if this can be fixed on the website itself so the sponsors do not have to take the additional step of calling someone to sort through the issue
2. Have to get address of the sponsor separately - postal code: when a sponsor enrolls, KSV doesn't get the postal code. Can that be fixed without a workaround, so they get the complete address information directly?
3. Sponsorship sometimes begins 6-7 months after sponsorship request. Delay in sending letters: I believe Akshay had spoken with me about this when I had a call with you before my visit. Anyway, this is a major concern for KSV. So if someone enrolls as a sponsor, but it is just after ASHA's fund transfer schedule, KSV has to wait (max) 6-7 months to get the sponsorship info along with the funds, since ASHA only transfers funds twice a year. KSV would like to get started with the sponsors right away, with welcome letters etc. Not hearing from KSV may not be good for the sponsors either, especially if they enrolled and waiting for an acknowledgement and the sponsorship to begin. I spoke with them about wire transfer fees and so on. But I wanted to relay this to you as a concern they raised.

4. How to tap into Indian volunteers? Can ASHA help?: One of the things KSV is looking for is to diversify their volunteers. (most tend to be European/white). KSV believe that it would be great to have more Indian volunteers so the children get to see their own represented. KSV wanted to know if ASHA taps into the vast Indian American network for children of NRIs may be looking for opportunities like volunteering at places such as KSV abroad and 'reconnect with their roots'. Since I am new to ASHA, I was not able to answer what kind of access you may have for such a network where KSV and other projects and volunteering opps can be advertised.