I am Rajaraman Krishnan (email address: rajaram@solnet.in), a volunteer of Asha Chennai. Asha Silicon Valley is considering supporting Sankalp Ek Prayas, an NGO doing work near Bhilai in the Durg district of Chhattisgarh. In particular their new initiative e-Merge for the work that they are planning to do with the government schools was being considered for support by SV. The site visit report was prepared with inputs from Ranjani Kumar a volunteer of SV

Click here to see the photos from this trip.

I visited the project on 27th and 28th of August along with Ranjani and her uncle S. Hariharan, (who actively participated in OFSS’s (Oracle Financial Services Software Ltd) CSR initiatives for many years and now supports numerous education initiatives in Ladakh, Mumbai, Chennai and Tirunelveli). We all flew into Raipur airport on 27th around 1:00 pm and then drove over to our hotel at Bhilai. It was very pleasant to see the green Chhattisgarh.

At around 3:00 pm. Saileshwar Sahu and Amjad Ali from Sankalp came to pick us up from Hotel Amit Park International in Bhilai. Mr Sahu is a part of Sankalp’s administration team and works closely with the founder Mr Parimal Sinha. During the course of this trip, Mr Sahu escorted us as we visited the different villages in the district of Durg.

During our trip we drove through many lush green paddy and wheat fields. Coming from a water-starved Chennai, it was a joy to see the water filled ponds in every village. The houses in the villages did not seem badly off. Most of the villages we visited had pucca houses. But the state of the roads were significantly worse than what I was used to seeing in rural Tamilnadu. Mr Sileshwar Sahu indicated that these villages were fully electrified only as recently as 3 years ago. Also we noticed a number of tall water storage towers, which were built to tap and store rain water.

**Welcome Function at Morid**

We were first taken to Sankalp’s support centre at Morid. Parimal Sinha the main person running the NGO couldn’t be with us as he had recently suffered from a heart attack. But pretty much all the other coordinators and teachers were there to meet us. I was quite surprised to see 80 teachers waiting there for us. I was expecting Sankalp to be a lot smaller.

In the function, some of the teachers welcomed us and explained about Sankalp and what they intend to achieve with their education centres as well as their eMerge programme. A few girls sang a couple of prayers and welcome songs. The proceedings were entirely in Hindi. I could only follow the portions that were translated for me by Ranjani or Hariharan. Before we reached the Morid centre they had given each of us a folder with most of the information required about Sankalp. This folder also included information on the teachers and their qualifications. Thanks to that, I could understand from reading that. I asked a few questions to the teachers (which were translated by Ranjani). Here are something I learnt.
• Most of the teachers have a Bachelors and some 28 of them have a Master’s degree (from the details provided by them). But except for two, none of the other teachers have a degree in DTed or BEd degrees.
• Some 25% of the teachers have some computer experience.
• Most teachers do not commute for work i.e. They are mostly local to the village in which their centre is located. Mr Parimal had previously indicated to Ranjani that it’s easier and cost effective to hire locally. He also felt Sankalp was giving employment to a lot of local women who have a strong willingness to give back to their communities.
• Almost all teachers were women. About half the teachers are married and probably 2/3rds of that have children. A lot of teachers seemed to indicate that they would look at teaching as a long term career option and would continue teaching after they got married and have kids.

We wanted a more informal interaction with the teachers. So we just asked for teachers who have been with Sankalp for more than 2 years. We had a small talk with them in the lawn outside the support center. During this time we were asking them about the profile of the children coming to the centres, how they work at the schools (the few of them who have been going to schools already), how they do the level setting test with the children, how they use computers, what kind of training have they received etc. Here are some more things we learnt.

• The children coming to the centres are mostly children going to the government schools. Some children going to private schools also come.
• Most of the children do not have the necessary basic skills for the class level. This is what they focus on in the centre. In the school they focus on this as well as the curriculum and the contents on their computers.
• They currently only have two laptops and two projectors. So they are not really able to completely execute the plans for the eMerge programme. They have been using the laptop and projector between different schools on a rotational basis but they expressed that it’s not easy to carry this from school to school and village to village. However learning aids and activity kits provided by Pratham Foundation and Eklavya NGO are currently being used as a part of the eMerge initiative to teach basic level maths.
• As a part of the eMerge intervention, children are assessed and categorized into 5 levels. Currently a majority of students seem to be in level 0 and 1.
• Between 2 and 4 teachers go to a school. They go only for between 1 and 3 hours depending on the school. They go to the same school every day for this many hours. The schools gives them various classes. They conduct activities to improve their basic skills. Note schools normally work for 5-6 hours a day.
• They have received some training from Pratham on how to conduct their assessment as well as some of the approaches Pratham uses to impart remedial education.
• Their knowledge of how to use computers for teaching and broadly approaches to teaching was limited.
As we were leaving, they also told us that they have not received their salaries for 4 or 5 months now and would be very grateful for Asha support. Both the teachers and the children seem to like/trust Sankalp. This is why the teachers are continuing to work even if they were not paid for months.

Visit to the Centres

Then they took us to three more centres that they are running. We went to the centres at Dundera, Batang and Nardhi. At Dundera about 100 children from 1st to 8th std were there. After some general chat with them I did the sum 400 + 3000 on the board and got the answer 7000 and asked the children if I was correct. They were mostly saying that I was correct. It was only after a bit that one 6th or 7th std kid came up and said the numbers were not written in the correct position. He did the sum correctly on the board.

I also asked an open ended question 3 x ___ = ___ x 7. They were able to get the solutions after some prompting. The students initially seemed to be shy but after a bit opened up. A lot of kids said they wanted to be doctors when they grow up.

I also showed them a small science experiment. I poured water from a bottle into a small tumbler. The water stops flowing out when the mouth of the bottle is covered by the water. I asked them how this happened. Once again after a bit one kid explained that air cannot go into the bottle now. On the whole the children are a little weak.

At Dundera there was also a computer lab in the back of the building. The lab had 4 computers and they were working. Couple of children were working on each computer on Microsoft word. The children (in classes 3-5) were able to type their names in MS Word. I asked them to show how to change the font colour. They were able to do that. I then asked them other ways of selecting the text. They were not very sure.

Then we moved to the centre at Batang. Here again there were about 100 children from classes 1 to 10. They usually operate from two buildings. But because of our visit they had all been brought to the same building. Here again I took up some open ended questions like __ x __ x __ = 40,000. With the older kids around some were able to get the answers and also get solutions when I placed restrictions like all the numbers should be two digit numbers. They also understood that if you double one of the numbers, another should be halved to get the same product. The children were also able to give the name of the chief minister of Chhattisgarh, President of India etc. On the whole the children seemed a little better than Dundera.

We finally went to Nardhi. Once again there were about 100 children from 1 to 10 stds. It was getting rather late. So we couldn't spend a lot of time there. We asked them to explain why there are 365 days in a year. One of the kids said that is the time it takes for Sun to go around the Earth. But she was able to explain
that it actually took 365.25 days and that is why you have leap year etc. They couldn't get to the correct answer.

It was already about 7:30 pm. We wound up and returned to our hotel.

Next Day

We had requested that we once again meet with the teachers for some informal discussions before going to the schools. We went to the centre at Purena. About 20 teachers who were visiting the schools were there in the centre. We asked the teachers to walk us through what they do in the school. We understood in a little more detail about how they conduct their lessons. They explained to us the kind of activities they will conduct for children who are still not at basic level of learning for their classes.

Some of the teachers in that group have been collecting various educational resources from the Internet, in particular videos from Youtube for teaching various Maths and English concepts. They were planning to use these for their eMerge work. I showed them some of the other resources we use like Starfall. They were keen to learn about these as well. I also taught them some early activities for children who are still learning counting. Counting without touching the object, counting claps, counting your steps, estimating the steps etc. This was well received by the teachers.

Visit to the Government Schools

Then we visited the government middle school at Purena. This was a somewhat big school with about 220 children. They said they were the biggest middle school in the block. Sankalp teachers were handling class 5 when we went there. They were showing some video by Infobells to the children. We talked to the 5th std Maths teachers as well as others. They found the teachers from Sankalp to be very useful. They weren’t getting support from any other organization. Also since they have faced shortage of teachers in the schools, intervention by Sankalp’s teachers was found to be helpful.

I looked at the Chhattisgarh textbooks. They were similar to the ones in Tamil Nadu. The lessons had QR codes with associated contents relevant for the lesson. There were lots of exercises for the children as well as activities for the teachers to conduct in classes. The QR codes in the textbooks have been added just this year. They also use the Diksha website for the contents.

When I asked them if they had any kits to teach Maths, they said they had received some kit this year. This has been supplied to all the government schools in Chhattisgarh by Sampark Foundation. The kits had some standard Maths tools like Dienes blocks, Mann Cards etc. but of fairly low quality. More importantly they were completely new and unused! The teachers have not been given any training on using that and it seemed to be gathering dust.
We also went by and met the teachers in the middle school section of the school in their staff room. They remembered the Sankalp teachers from their student days and they had all studied at this same school. They explained why they were not able to send the children for more than an hour or two to the Sankalp teachers – i.e. because of the pressure to complete the syllabus.

We then went to the primary school at Batang. The school had a nice compound. The buildings were well painted, and there were nice trees in it. On the whole the school looked good. Here again they took us to class 5. We asked them to teach something using the laptop and projector the way they would usually. The Sankalp teacher taught a lesson on Subtraction. The video explained how to do subtraction and our teacher also explained it some more.

I decided to try something on the children. I did the usual 300 + 4000 and got 7000. They took a little while and after some prompting one of the students found what was wrong and was able to do it properly. I then asked the children to write down two numbers and add them. I gave them 2076 and 3103. The idea is to see how well they understand place value and if they are able to write the numbers properly. About half the class got that right. This is in line with an average school in TN.

We then went and had a chat with the HM and other teachers from the school. The school had a strength of about 110 with just 3 teachers. Presence of the Sankalp teachers was useful. They are able to handle their classes better. They would be happy if there was a teacher full time. They also had the kit from Sampark. This school (and to a lesser extent the one in Purena) was also facing pressure from children going to private schools. They haven’t resorted to having enrollment campaigns and poster boards etc. to attract children to the school (like they do in TN). The village of Batang seems to be quite well to do. The CM is from the neighboring village. The villagers have donated a swing, slide etc., painted the buildings etc. The HM took us around the school and showed us the classroom, toilet, cooking room etc. The children started having their midday meals when we were there. They were having Dhal-Chaval with Aloo subji. It looked reasonably good!

Once the children had finished their food, the Sankalp teachers called the 5th std kids and showed us one of the outdoor activities they conduct to better teach basic math and counting. The children go around in a circle while the teachers sing a song. When the teachers stops singing, the children have to group themselves in the number that is called out. Those who are not able to be part of a group of that size will go out. The kids seemed to be engaged while playing this game.

**Conclusion**
After these school visits, they dropped us off at the Raipur airport. On the whole it was a very enjoyable and educational trip for me.

Sankalp is a struggling NGO but keen to do good work in their area. The organization and the teachers are keen to learn technology, pedagogy etc. to make themselves effective. The schooling system in Chhattisgarh seems to be at the same level as in TN. The schools are functioning well (decent infrastructure, learning material and resources, teachers working and assigned classes, and access to decent food/ water) but with serious issues with quality of education imparted. External support like from Sankalp can help them in that.