

Site Visit Report

Saha Nivasa, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

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Due to the Sankranti festival, schools had been closed during much of my visit to India. As a result I could only do a 1-day visit since I was returning the following day.

Some background: Although Saha Nivasa as an organization is involved in a lot of activities for the betterment of the overall community, Asha Boston supports the supplemental education center related expenses at 15 primary schools and 10 high schools in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh. When they first started this work in 1999, the focus was on instilling the value of education amongst the parents so as to improve retention rates of the children in the government schools, and to improve the quality of education in the government schools by ensuring teacher attendance and partnering with these teachers to improve student outcomes. This is an area generally of Dalit and Bahujan communities, mostly agricultural laborers, migrant workers, etc., who needed to be convinced to allow the children to remain in the schools even as they migrated temporarily for seasonal work.

A point of success is that this is not much of a concern today! In general, most parents want their children in school, even considering private schools when schools are not accessible or not meeting their needs. Access to English learning has been perceived as a need as graduated students either experienced difficulty in their college education, or were overlooked in the job market. This led to petitioning the state government a few years ago to introduce English medium of education in the government schools.

A 2nd point of success is that pass rates at the statewide 10th standard results amongst the schools supported by Saha Nivasa is noticeably better than the rest of the state. Every few years when they feel a particular school is doing well based on educational outcomes, Saha Nivasa drops that school and takes on a different school. The idea is to get the whole area self sufficient with the onus on the government school staff to own the educational outcomes of the children they serve. In general, teachers in government schools have a better salary than private school teachers, and therefore, these positions are quite competitive. All the more reason that the folks at Saha Nivasa believe the government schools must deliver!

We started our visit at Mr. Chennaiah Poguri and Suria Rajini's house. Suria Rajini is the director of the supplemental education support centers. They mentioned some of the challenges they have been dealing with:

- Although English medium is still ongoing in the schools, the current government seems to be indicating this will be reversed! This seems to be as a result of political cronyism, which Saha Nivasa is keeping an eye on to ensure the children of this community would continue to have access to English medium classes.
- The RTE (Right To Education) program has not been working very well – there has been rampant discrimination against the kids who come in through the RTE program – these kids are put in a different section, and this section doesn't get adequate attention. The special coaching that is offered for the competitive exams like NEET, CEET, etc., are not offered to the RTE kids. Mr. Chennaiah's opinion was that the government felt since private industry and corporations were investing in education, the government also doing so was a waste and therefore not needed.
- On December 18th, the Government of India had also stopped the MGNREGA program via an amendment. This has disrupted lives due to the lack of job guarantees that the MGNREGA provided. Remains to be seen if this would start impacting student attendance and retention – a challenge they had overcome!

After briefly meeting some of the staff members of Saha Nivasa, we started our visit to the schools. We first visited the high school and then the adjacent primary school at Mahadeva Mangalam, in G.D.Nellore.



This is a fairly recent school adopted by Saha Nivasa. This is a very interior village. Nobody goes to private schools. This being the 1st day after the Sankranti break, the attendance was lower than normal, and the energy was more relaxed and social. The kids had just finished

lunch and were either playing or socializing. A girls kabaddi match was going on which was very spirited and engaging. Muthu, the sports teacher, had played kho-kho at the

national level. He was a great advocate of sports as a means of growth opportunity, and overall betterment. He said 8 of his students had gone on to Government jobs based on their sports qualifications. He clearly had a good connection with the students, was enthusiastic, had an easy rapport with, and seemed trusted by the students. We met a few of the Sahanivasa teachers, from the local village / town. Previously, a computer had been given to this school with the intention of improving the students familiarity and comfort with technology, to broaden their knowledge and use. Mr.

Chennaiah observed that located in the office as it was, it wasn't really being put to good use. The current headmaster was very receptive to this sort of feedback, and assured us it would be used effectively.

This is something we must follow-up on to verify equipment is in fact being used as intended.

Muthu, the sports teacher then pitched to us that while the government does provide for obvious sports equipment, like balls, volleyball nets, etc., but there is also a need for other equipment like mats, which would not even be considered. He

requested that we consider a donation for the same. Mr. Chennaiah recommended that he show commitment amongst the students and the town by first raising some of the funds locally, and then Saha Nivasa would consider addressing the request. The sports teacher, as well as the headmaster agreed to do so. Another thing to keep an eye on.



We stopped briefly at the primary school. Grades 1-2 were in one building, with kids from the local village. Grades 3-5 were combined with students from another village where those kids come in an auto. The kids looked happy, and were very enthusiastic and eager to engage and socialize with us.

From here we proceeded to Thugundram School in G.D.Nellore. As we approached, we saw a bunch of the kids were engaged in fixing the drain pipe - engineering in action!



considered a “Model School” - better building, toilets, playground facilities. In G.D.Nellore, out of ~100 schools, only 17 are “Model Schools”. This year, they had 1 teacher for each grade, whereas previously, they had had 2 teachers between the 5 elementary grades! Even so, the primary school had no library as such. The high school here first opened in 1959! This seems a better established school. Currently, there are about 315 students in the high school. School hours are typically 9am - 4pm. Sahanivasa teachers offer support from 8-9am before school, and from 4-5pm after school. The govt school teachers typically focus on the curriculum and lessons. The current headmaster used to be a student at this school! The headmaster had a certain pride and ownership about the school and the student outcomes. He acknowledged that help from the Sahanivasa teachers has been crucial in ensuring the students are able to keep up with the material in the school. The Sahanivasa teachers are typically from the same village / community, so the kids have an easier rapport with them. The headmaster also shared some teaching aids they had procured for the school, Interactive Flat Panels (IFP). 6 of the classrooms were equipped with this. These are large interactive whiteboards that allows for immersive learning experiences easily. One of the teachers did a brief demo.



The teachers need to be trained to be able to exploit this effectively. These seem to have been procured via government funding. The headmaster was just very proud of this and hopeful that this would benefit the students. This was in response to my question about computer exposure for the students. Unlike the other school we had visited earlier, this school did not have an opportunity for student exposure to computers. The benefit from the IFPs seem orthogonal to computer education, particularly as kids are finishing high school. Our previous discussions with kids who had passed their 10th standard and moved on to college had indicated that these kids felt the lack of computer education keenly and put them at a disadvantage in college. This is an area that Sahanivasa will follow up with the school. The school does have a vibrant library with over 5000 books. They also have a library teacher, and an hour allocated every week for each of the classes, a library period! Unfortunately I was not able to check this out as the school had already closed by then, and all the other classes and staff had left / were leaving.

As the school day was wrapping up, we too finished our visit here. We had originally intended visiting another set of schools that I have visited multiple times before. But Mr. Chennaiah sensed the time crunch and had requested those teachers to come to this school. As we have done in the past, we finished the visit by meeting with all the Sahanivasa teachers.



The teachers are mostly women, and they believe this is good since they feel women have more patience! But most of them have been students in these schools before and have availed of this help before. So to some extent, there is an element of wanting to give back. Many of the teachers I had met on previous visits were excited to see me, which was rather sweet. A few of them still did try to talk to me about increasing their pay, always a hard topic for me! And as usual, we finished the visit with some pictures, with some of the teachers wanting to take selfies with me - sure made me feel like a celebrity!