Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha (BTS) Path Bhavan

The Sundarban area consists of forest lying in the vast delta on the Bay of Bengal. Geographically challenged, it remains one of the most underdeveloped parts of India and occasional flooding made it even more challenging for development. Both State and Central Governments’ indifferent attitudes have kept the people there isolated from the main land as well as mainstream of the society. Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha (BTS) is a non-profit organization started in 1978 in village of Baikunthapur of Kultali district of Sundarbans in West Bengal. The name suggests that it was an attempt by some of the rare educated of that region to organize the youth force to try to change things for good. BTS has achieved a lot in education, health-care, women’s empowerment and agriculture, making a huge impact on the community.

**The School**

Asha Cornell has been funding BTS for their school, Path Bhavan, since 2001.The school children range in age from preparatory to Grade VI and number around 250. Most of these children come from six villages around the school and their parents are generally farmers, fishermen ordaily-wage labors. The school currently has eleven teachers, all local people. Path Bhavan follows the State Government-regulated education curriculum, and also provides daily mid-day meals to the students as well as a chance to engage in “joyful learning” to make the school hours more interesting. They introduced certified computer literacy program for students and youth of the locality. Electricity is yet to reach Baikunthapur, so BTS uses diesel operated power-generator and solar cells, funded by Asha’s Work an Hour (WAH) program to run the computers. The school provides hygienic materials to its students and has proper latrines to make the students getting habituated with it. Most students join the local Government High Schools after graduating from BTS and quite a few of them did exceptionally well in the board examinations and carried on with higher education.

**Joyful Learning**

As mentioned earlier, this is a special program implemented by BTS to encourage student admission as well as to teach students to work and learn in groups. Students gather at the ground of Path Bhavan after their usual class schedule and the teachers then help them form different groups. Each of these groups then performs dance, music, yoga, etc. in front of rest of the students. I have been present there twice and it was a delightful experience each time. The enthusiasm of the students was vivid. This method of learning became very popular and other schools, including the local Government schools, invited BTS teachers and students to perform some of the acts. After watching and discussing with BTS board-members, some of them have decided to start this program in their schools as well. The joyful learning program also gives confidence to students of Path Bhavan to participate in zonal competitions where they interact and compete with students from very different backgrounds, both academically and economically.

**Immediate Plan of Action**

BTS was selected for WAH 2011 and their budget for that included a tube-well for drinking water within school compound. The current one is used by a larger community and so getting so much water from there is a big problem. It also includes extension of solar panels to power more computers, furniture for certain class rooms, and the like. One bigger goal of BTS is to extend the building in order to accommodate more students, but as this initiative requires a lot of investment, both BTS and Asha Cornell are looking for potential donors.

**The Ultimate Goal**

BTS wants to produce an educated generation of children that will help the rest of the community as a whole and link them to the main stream of the society. Formal education is just one of the many forms of training that one gets to acquire knowledge and to better deal with one’s life. Thus, BTS also provides workshops for farmers to educate them about using the right fertilizers to make their land more efficient in producing crops. A large group of farmers of the area are using self-produced bio-fertilizers with the help of BTS, and now they are educating other farmers about the process.BTS produces rice and vegetables using bio-fertilizers to make their mid-day meal program partially self-sustainable. Their community hospital successfully delivered 79 babies in the last couple of months of 2011 and they have a doctor to run a regular outdoor chamber for patients. Between my last two visits in Januaries of 2010 and 2012, two years have passed by and the only Government activity visible was some electricity-poles introduced here and there, a process they were supposed to finish years back. In the same two years, BTS has fulfilled almost all their plan of actions as described earlier facing a lot of inevitable and unwanted obstacles. Therefore, they remain one of the finest of examples of how a sincere effort of some can change the lives of many.



****

