

Site visit by Melli Annamalai, Asha Boston

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I visited VTCL (Viveka Tribal School for Learning) after a gap of almost 3 years (because of COVID).

During the COVID lockdown the teachers had worked hard to try to reach as many tribal *haadis* (hamlets) as possible with community learning centers. They had been able to reach about a third of the students, and help them engage in some form of learning.

After the COVID lockdowns ended admissions have hit a record 526, and this is very encouraging.

Asha Boston has been associated with this school for a long time, so we have seen the school evolve. Over a generation, the tribal parents' aspirations have also changed, they are keen that their children get a good education that will help them get a job. Praveen, now in charge of all of education at SVYM, has been putting a lot of thought into what the tribal school should be. I have also had many discussions with him on this.

- His fundamental thought is the school should be a place “where the tribal children can realize their aspirations,” rather than focus only on being a school where children study up to class X. I really like this, and I think the time is right for setting a goal like this. When the school began 30 years ago there were very few options for tribal children, and the school had to focus on basic education. But some things have changed now.
- The government has some upper primary schools (classes 1 to 8) in the area for tribal children (the *tribal ashram* schools). SVYM has been working with some of these schools also, through the TLC (resource center for teachers at VTCL, funded in the past by an Oracle grant). Teachers at two of the ashram schools in particular have really blossomed with that intervention. Over time Praveen's plan is to phase out the lower classes at VTCL and focus on the high school, with the ashram schools feeding into this high school. I think that is a very good approach.
- We have discussed many times that the tribal students should be supported in developing the abilities that come to them naturally because of their culture. Sports and Arts are two of them. Some of their art work, even as children, is extraordinary. They continually excel in sports at taluk and district level tournaments. VTCL is taking steps to focus on these two areas.
 - Sports: A major area on the school grounds has been cleared to make way for playing fields and a running track. I could see several children use the facilities when I visited. Also constructed now is a state-of-the-art gym.
 - Art: A former student has been hired as an art teacher. A good teacher will really help the children blossom as artists.
 - These initiatives have required some significant renovations. Some of the classes were conducted in temporary structures when I visited, and I visited some of these classrooms. The renovations are being done using eco-friendly material with tribal labor (so the community has some employment from this)

- The focus on training in electrical and carpentry and other work has progressed well. This had been initially funded by Asha Boston. Tribal children have taken to this well, and these workshop areas are well-equipped.

I spent some time interacting with class IX students, which is always fun. I am always struck by one thing – they always ask “Why do you live in America? Do you not like it here?” I never get this question from non-tribal children.

Here are some pictures: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/2oXz4Js9borx6YBa7>

DB Kuppe Plans

The DB Kuppe panchayat (the most remote panchayat in the taluk) government schools have had severe problems with teacher attendance. Primary schools go entire years without teachers. There are plans now to create a project that will use facilitators from Mysore (perhaps from SVYM teacher training programs) and from the local communities (many of them tribal) to create and train teaching staff for these schools.