

Visit to Viveka Tribal Center for Learning (VTCL)

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Date: July 27, 2017

Last year VTCL had lost more than 50% of its funding because of the government's abrupt withdrawal just before the school year began. With great effort they had managed to raise part of that amount (Asha-Boston/MIT also contributed to a one-time grant to help fill the gap), and also instituted some changes in VTCL. One of the changes was requesting students to pay 10% of the cost as fees (this is about Rs. 2500 per year per student).

This has led to 70-80 children leaving VTCL and joining the government run ashram schools instead. Even this amount was a hardship for some students; the ashram schools are free. Also the current collector for social welfare (the tribal ashram schools administration is under the social welfare department) has taken some serious efforts to enroll children in the government schools. In the long run, if the ashram schools improve, this is a good thing. We will have to see how the situation evolves in the next year or two. VTCL is also working with the ashram schools through the Oracle grant for the TLC (teacher learning center). The TLC organizes workshops and teacher training programs for the ashram school teachers, so VTCL will be able to continue working with these children though in a more remote manner.

After months of intense lobbying of the government, the government has re-instated a significant part of the funding. VTCL plans to continue with the 10% fees per student. It appears that the school funding is in a more stable situation this year.

The other initiative to reduce costs was to combine VTCL with VTTRC (this is the DEd college on the same campus, funded by Asha San Diego). DEd students now play a bigger role in the primary and upper primary classes, reducing the costs for teachers and also getting hands-on practical experience. All this is in place now and working well.

I looked in on a library class in progress. The librarian Mr. Ravi is highly motivated and interested in helping children read. He has attended many training programs related to libraries. In the class I visited students from three different classes were reading quietly. Students belonging to a class were grouped together and could ask each other questions if needed. The popular books were Tulika books (funded by Asha-Boston/MIT), Pratham books, and National Book Trust (NBT) books. I know the Tulika books are well illustrated and very attractive, I was happy to see that the Pratham and NBT books also seemed well illustrated. NBT books are subsidized by the government and we should make use of them in all our projects.



Library class

I also visited a class II classroom where the children were working with legos. With great pride they showed me what they were building. They were not in the least bit shy, and with a lot of confidence demanded my attention to their piece. As always I wondered – children are so confident and articulate when they are young. But what happens in the education system that makes them shy and reserved as they grow older? Why do they lose the confidence they have as young children? The tribal children in particular (compared to children in other schools) confidently interact with adults, till the system teaches them to be submissive and quiet. I discussed this with Mr. Kumar, who has been with the school for a long time. Apart from standard issues when children enter adolescence we didn't arrive at any answer. (I squarely blame the nature of the Indian education system, and how its content is totally removed from the child's surroundings. In spite of VTCL's efforts the system doesn't nurture the innate confidence and intelligence, it does the opposite.)



VTCL students in class II



I spent quite some understanding the recent emphasis on agriculture. For a few years now VTCL has been trying various vocational activities as part of high school, to make it easier for graduates to find a job or identify a course they would enjoy. Carpentry and metal work are two such courses. That helped some students take up diploma ITI courses in Mysore, but its success has been somewhat limited. Recently VTCL has become more serious about Agriculture, and they feel there is more traction with this.





When the tribals were displaced from the forest (in the 70s and 80s) they were given some plots of land. SVYM had fought for the tribals in some cases to ensure they got the land. But the tribals rarely used the land themselves. They would lease the land to non-tribal farmers for Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000 a year, and then themselves work on those farms as laborers. The SVYM folks helplessly watched this situation. In the last 2-3 years they have begun seeing some VTCL graduates start to farm the land themselves. The tribals always like to come back home, rather than living in Mysore or Bangalore. After years of working as laborers they have begun to feel they can farm the land themselves. Also, the new collector is being strict about this, and is putting policies in place to ensure the tribals farm the land rather than lease it. Finally, this is a long term effect of VTCL. The graduates feel empowered enough to go ahead and start farming the land themselves, feel that they can succeed in this mainstream activity. This has been a source of great pride and joy among VTCL staff (as Mr. Kumar said, “we keep looking at marks and pass rates, but this is success too.”) Multiple factors have come together, and VTCL has played an important part. In alignment with this they have decided to emphasize more the agriculture related vocational activities at VTCL. Learning from local knowledge and a visiting ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) scientist they have created farms for vegetables and other crops. The students tend to the farms as part of their vocational classes. The idea is that what they learn will help if/when they tend to their own fields as adults.

There is an emphasis on other income generation activities as well. A small ragi flour production factory employs 13 women (paying about Rs. 150 a day) in a tribal village. They share ownership of the factory and create sprouted ragi flour, ragi snacks, ragi products for children, and so on. I bought a snack packet, it was delicious. SVYM has had some success selling in Mysore grocery stores, financially they are breaking even now. The day I visited two women, Manjula and Ragini, were working there. It turned out that they are among the early graduates of VTCL. They had stopped after class VIII, got married, worked as laborers, and were now working at the factory – instead of working for someone else for meager wages they were now part owners of an initiative. After years of concern around employment opportunities for graduates of VTCL, it was good to see some of them working here, and some of them farming. Another initiative is creating furniture from material gathered in the forest (wish I could have brought some furniture back with me).



Manjula and Ragini at the Ragi flour production center



Building furniture, another income generation activity

As discussed in earlier reports, some of the VTCL graduates went on to study DEd at VTTRC and have become teachers and come back as guest teachers to the ashram schools. On my next visit I hope to interact with them and see how they are doing.

I also discussed at some length various types of art the children can create that we can use in greeting cards, bags and other objects that we plan to sell in the United States.

I was also fortunate to briefly stop at the local sports day with many schools participating. The VTCL girls came first in everything except Kabadi (note that Kabadi has referees, so can be more subjective). The VTCL boys also did very well.



Some members of the VTCL sports team