

Site Visit Report
Aviram Literacy Mission

By Harish Chawla

Dates of Visit: March 23rd - 27th, 2004

This is a report of my visit to Aviram Literacy School. The Asha Boston chapter has been partnering and supporting this project since 2002. There was an initial site visit by Joydeep, and another visit was requested with the annual review and progress report. Joydeep provided his perspective about his visit, and things to look out for.

For a brief analysis if you do not want to read the full report:

The evening schools are important to help bring change in the village. Children and elders alike have been able to realize the necessity of education, and Aviram is playing a key role in this regard. The focus of the private school and evening school though remain literacy, which is different to education. Literacy on its own does not ensure empowerment, we need to go beyond that. Allow the children to think independently, and be confident. Make them part of the society, teaching them their rights and responsibilities. Have open discussions on different topics, which will be of interest to the children. Talks about history, culture, languages, govt. etc. maybe of interest to all. Basically, there are many activities that can be undertaken to help the children grow and learn out of the book.

The stark difference in the quality of the Aviram private school and evening schools was saddening. Unsure of the cause, but this needs to be corrected. There are a few possibilities where the chapter can contribute -- training teachers, finding better teachers, smaller class sizes, more teaching material, libraries, excursion trips, share leanings between the day/evening school teachers etc. Indrajit needs to play an important role in this regard. Just having the evening schools running is not sufficient, we need to ensure improvement in quality also.

This is an interesting project with some issues and concerns, but with a group of determined and considerate people. We can work closely with them and share our learning to improve the quality of the project gradually. Further, the people associated with Aviram are from the same Kuru Block and of the same tribe, thus an effort of the community itself. I do suggest Asha Boston's continuing support and involvement for this project, which will be beneficial for the development.

Full Report

Taking the Rajdhani from New Delhi to Ranchi takes about 17 hours, though is a comfortable journey. Mr. Indrajit Bharti had come to pick me up from the Ranchi railway station in a rented vehicle, and we drove to Lohardaga, located some 55 kms. from Ranchi.

It was Wednesday morning when I reached Lohardaga, and I was planning on staying with them till Saturday morning. The objective of the visit was to discuss the progress of the project, visit the evening schools, talk to the teachers and children to get a better idea of the happenings of the school and learn about the different activities of Aviram.

Aviram Literacy Mission began in the mid-90's (1995), as an organization to provide education to the village children. A private school was started for some 100 children till grade 5, as the quality of the government schools seemed to be lacking. Realizing the importance and the need of education, Indrajit proposed setting up evening tuition centers for the village children who go to the different government schools. Six villages were identified, and teachers from the same or neighboring villages were found to teach the evening schools 6 days a week from 6-9 p.m. Without electricity, lanterns are used for the classes. Asha Boston is involved with the evening tuition centers, funding the needed requirements. This visit was for me to better understand the activities of the project also.

Indrajit and his family is well respected in Lohardaga, and well known by the tribal population and neighboring villages in Kuru district. Actually, the sitting MP also frequents their house. Indrajit also has met with the CM of Jharkhand on multiple occasions already. In brief, he is well connected in the village and the community. His family is of the Kuruk tribe, residing in the Maradih village. After completing his studies, he could have opted for a government service in Ranchi, nevertheless, decided to work for the progress of the village. Thus, began Aviram Literacy Mission.

Aviram is involved in multiple activities.

- 1) Day School - A day school is run for about 100 children till grade 5. There are 6 lady teachers for the day school, and it was interesting that one of them is a muslim lady. The state curriculum is followed, though it seems the process of imparting education is of better quality. Sanskrit, Geography, History, Math, English, Art, Hindi and Poetry are the subjects taught. This is a hindi medium school, though the tribal language is Kuruk. The school runs for 5 hours.
These teachers seemed more caring, concerned and interested in the teaching and other school activities. There was a sense of responsibility and willingness amongst the teachers, though some were more confident than others.
- 2) Evening Schools - Aviram has 6 evening schools or tuition centers for the village children. These are at different villages, each center has about 60-80 children from 5 years - 14 years of age. The evening schools are held in a room rented from the village, using lanterns. There were different charts, posters and pictures on the walls. A different subject is

taught each day to the children in the class. Groups of children of the same grade are given some task, while other groups are attended to by the teacher. At times, the whole class also participates in learning together.

Vasudev teaches at Jido, where some 75 children come to study in the evenings. Vasudev is metric pass, and has been with Aviram for 2 years. He is also involved with other activities of Aviram, helping out at the office, and doing additional chores.

Krishana teaches at Dorotoli village, where some 60 children were present.

Phuldev teaches at Hurhad since Oct. 2002. 65 children attend his evening class. Phuldev is metric pass.

Jageshwar teaches at Hudu village, where some 65 children attend the evening class. He is Inter Pass. Besides teaching here, Jageshwar practices allopathic medicine for people and animals.

Taramani (the only lady teacher) is Metric Fail. Her class has 44 children from ages of 5-13. She teaches at the Merley village with help from her husband. She has been associated with the school since end of 2002.

Kartik Bhagat teaches at Urumuru since end of 2002 also. He also has a farm of his own where he works at during the day.

Virendra is another person involved with the educational aspects of Aviram. He was away during the week I visited, thus was unable to talk to him. He seemed to be the supervisor and a significant person part of the Aviram team.

- 3) Fisheries Project – Laxman oversees the fisheries projects. They buy fish, inject the chemicals for reproduction, and then sell the fish seeds to other fisheries. The family owns one pond, and the profits of this go into running the private day school. A few additional ponds are used for fisheries by the villagers. Training and assistance is provided by Laxman to the villagers. Fisheries do seem to have potential in this area.
- 4) Agricultural Farming – Bharti family owns a sizeable piece of land and grow different produce all year round. Water harvesting measures are also taken in this regard, though in a very limited scope. This is also an income generation scheme to sustain the private day school and the other organizational activities.
- 5) Women's Self Help Group – The women of the Jido village have recently formed a group, and are interested to start a fisheries project. Aviram is helping out in this effort, and encouraging the cooperative take shape. Other villages may also see similar women's groups.

Interaction with Children & Teachers

I visited two evening school each day, i.e. spending about an hour at each school. The children were gathered with excitement, though most of them were shy. I took a few moments to introduce myself, and then try to initiate conversation with some children, which was initially difficult. With the help of the teachers, the children had prepared some songs and dances to perform. Thereon, we asked other children to share some poetry that they learn in school. The teachers and Indrajit asked them to recite the numbers and multiplication tables, alphabets etc.

I tried to ask the children about their study plans, sports, and future plans, and many responded with enthusiasm. Some wanted to be doctors, some engineers and some teachers. Each village had a few children who stood out because of their confidence or extreme shyness. The elder children were able to answer the questions, but did not feel comfortable in keeping the conversation going. They are definitely shy, and unsure what to say. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the children came to the school regularly, and enjoyed learning in the evening school.

Since the evening schools began in 2002, more children have been registered in the government schools through the efforts of Aviram. They make it a point to ensure that all children go to the day school, and thereon help the children in the evenings.

One of the evening schools did have a few muslim children, while all other villages were predominantly of the Kuruk tribe.

I had a discussion with all teachers of the day school and evening school to better understand their activities and efforts. Firstly, all seemed interested in the teaching efforts, and were satisfied in working for a good cause. The teachers of the private school are better educated, and seemed more confident and inquisitive. The teachers of the evening school were rather quiet and shy, and hesitant. Further, I could sense a difference in teaching quality between the two schools. This was concerning, why would the evening schools not find better teachers?

It is a good thing that the teachers are from the village, as it helps maintain stability, and closer interaction with the children and the families. The mothers were quite satisfied with the evening education activities, and were thanking Aviram and Asha. But, the quality of teaching is not that great. Teaching is not an art anyone can pick up easily, further the large class sizes add additional complications. Nevertheless, there was interest and dedication. Maybe we can work with the teachers and help improve the quality of education of the evening schools.

Visit to Govt. Schools

There are a few government schools in the neighboring villages. All the schools though seem to have the same problems, lack of teachers, infrastructure and enthusiasm. There was some construction going on in a couple of schools, adding more rooms, toilet facilities etc. Overall, I was quite disappointed with the lack of effort of the teachers. Though realizing their limitations, the teachers were more satisfied complaining than to attempt their best within the limitations.

Classes were not clean, there did not seem to be much discipline, books were distributed during the day, and taken back at the end of the school day (fearing the children will be careless with them). There was not much effort to improve the teaching quality. No benches for the younger children. Overall, it was quite unsatisfactory, though not shocking. All teachers were ready to list the problems, but none were willing to take responsibility.

Visit to a Madarassa

Most villages are tribal Kuruk villages, though there are some muslim villages. Some of these muslim village children do not go to day schools, but instead spend their time at the madrassas. I visited a madrassa, and spoke extensively with the few elders there. I wanted to understand why they prefer to teach their children in the religious schools, instead of government schools. Unfortunately, I did not get any clear answers, but rather their assertions that teachings in the madrassas was better, leading to complete development of the child. Though I disagreed, there is not much more I could do. I did tell them about Asha, and did offer to help starting an evening school for the children in their village with their guidance, but that did not seem to interest them much.

Visit to the farms, fisheries, duck rearing & pig breeding

I did visit three different ponds where fisheries work was in progress under the guidance of Aviram. Indrajit and Aviram have provided the needed resources and training to a few villagers, allowing them to focus some of their attention on fisheries.

Similarly, they got duck eggs imported from outside the state, and have them hatched from a chicken hen. This responsibility is also handed over to a few villagers. Supposedly, duck eggs fetch a better price.

Due to good rainfall, the price of the produce has come down significantly, where vegetables are being sold for Rs 1 per kg. This is not only due to the middle-men Ajit had mentioned earlier, but the market forces in action. In trying to take the vegetables to Calcutta or Delhi, the additional transportation expenses does not allow significant profit. On the other hand, if these vegetables can be stored for a season, they will fetch a good price off-season, i.e. selling vegetables in the winter. This requires cold storage or other medium. A long term thought. Laxman takes care of these activities, and visits the ponds, farms, ducks on a regular basis.

I should have discussed water harvesting in some detail, though did realize they could use some help in this activity. Many farmlands go dry due to lack of water.

Analysis & Suggestions

My visit was productive, in getting a comprehensive picture of the activities of Aviram. Staying for a few days ensured that the visit was not rushed.

Firstly, Indrajit is the head of the organization, and has a few people working for him. Each person, though has his responsibilities or focus area defined. Laxman, Krishna and Virendra are the people introduced as part of the Aviram team. Definitely due to respect for Indrajit and his family, and because of their social standing and impressive work, all people in the neighboring villages respect him. Realizing the importance of maintaining good relations is essential in this field of work.

The evening schools are important to help bring change in the village. Children and elders alike have been able to realize the necessity of education, and Aviram is playing a key role in this regard. The focus of the private school and evening school though remain literacy, which is different to education. Literacy on its own does not ensure empowerment, we need to go beyond that. Allow the children to think independently, and be confident. Make them part of the society, teaching them their rights and responsibilities. Have open discussions on different topics, which will be of interest to the children. Talks about history, culture, languages, govt. etc. maybe of interest to all. Basically, there are many activities that can be undertaken to help the children grow and learn out of the book.

The stark difference in the quality of the private school and evening schools was saddening. Unsure of the cause, but this needs to be corrected. There are a few possibilities where the chapter can contribute -- training teachers, finding better teachers, smaller class sizes, more teaching material, libraries, excursion trips, share leanings between the day/evening school teachers etc. Indrajit needs to play an important role in this regard. Just having the evening schools running is not sufficient, we need to ensure improvement in quality also.

Though Aviram is interested to increase the number of evening school centers, I don't think that is a good idea at this time. There is much work to be done in these 6 evening schools, and until we are confident that these schools are functioning well, it may not be best to start another center. At the same time, if Indrajit is interested in working in a muslim village, this would be quite beneficial. This will have additional challenges and complications, but something that can be considered. This effort will also allow to bring the different communities together and closer, while providing additional educational opportunities to the children.

The project coordinator's responsibilities seemed unclear in context of the Aviram educational project. Mr. Indrajit is the coordinator of Aviram as a whole, which has multiple activities. It would be beneficial to have an independent supervisor for the educational activities of Aviram. Virendra could play an important role in this regard.

The private day school is running fairly well, with 6 competent teachers, and a school building. The school does lack furniture, library, and other teaching material. Aviram and the teachers requested for assistance in this regard, while also an increase in salary. There are 3 computers in

this school though, and Aviram has taught basic computer functioning to teenage children in the past. The children come to this school from the same villages, but are expected to pay some fees. It seems the parents prefer to send their children to this school instead of the free government schools. But the private school is constrained by space and cost, thus unable to take more students.

Closer cooperation with the govt. schools is essential for sustainable development. Upon visiting the government schools I was discouraged at the ignorance and lack of imagination on the part of the teachers. Aviram can be a liaison between the schools and administration, while providing additional help to the government schools in the form of teachers, training, material, constant interaction. This is quite necessary, I believe, but quite a challenging task also. People know of Aviram and Indrajit, thus this association with the govt. schools is quite possible.

Further improve the Mahila Mandal's, and have them play an active role in the evening schools and govt. schools. Other income generation schemes may also be of interest. Unsure if something like the micro-lending would be helpful here, but is a thought to be discussed further.

The different activities including farming, duck rearing, fisheries can be expanded, and additional activities researched and invested in (eg. water harvesting, long term vegetable storage). The association with the MPs and MLAs should be benefited from. Help fasten the pace of electricity connections, road constructions and other developmental efforts.

In ending, this is an interesting project with some issues and concerns, but with a group of determined and considerate people. We can work closely with them and share our learning to improve the quality of the project gradually. Further, the people associated with Aviram are from the same village and of the same tribe, thus an effort of the community itself. I do suggest Asha Boston's continuing support and involvement for this project, which will be beneficial for the development.



Aviram evening school teachers.

L to R Vasudev, Kartik, Krishna, Phuldev, Jageshwar, Taramani



Jido evening school



Hudu evening school



Inside the Mehrley evening center



Outside the Merley evening center