

Tribal Empowerment Site Visit Report – April 2004

THE PEOPLE

Manipur is comprised of mainland Manipuri's - who live in the valleys and the plains and as a result are more advanced and well off. Their religion is Maitheyi, close to but not the same as Hinduism. There are a number of tribes in the hills.

People are mainly from 2 tribes: Kuki and Naga: fierce rivalry between the 2, with one claiming the other as intruders. They have completely different languages. Ethnic clashes have led to bloodbaths with entire villages wiped out leading to large-scale migration of people. Militancy has degenerated, there is no ideology merely gun running and dacoity, kidnapping for ransom, etc. Idraeli rabbi's have recognized Mizo and Manipuri's are as one of the B'Nai Menashi, one of the lost 10 tribes of Israel, about 2000 of them are already in the promised land. The maitheyi's were Hinduised after 'Shanti Das Gossain' converted the Royal Family long back. Marwari's run most of the businesses; there is a sizable contingent from Bihar and Nepal. Population has gone up 4 times since 1947. The Mon-Khmer language of the tribal suggests Cambodian roots, the rest are Tibeto-Burman from the Shan states, and there are some mixed from southern china and Siberia. MP's are seen as powerless in Delhi, explains the lackluster response to the elections, which in any case are run under the shadow of the UG's - the Under Ground groups. MLA's make hay while the sun of centrally funded contracts shine. During the elections - which were underway when I was there the UG's get into some hard bargaining with the politicians during this time. Manipur was coerced into joining India after our Govt placed the Maharaja under house arrest, in any case the land would have become Burma's and eventually China's plaything had India not usurped it. Strong animosity between the maitheyi majority and the tribal from the hills, and then more within the tribes themselves. The latter are entirely Christian, conversion having taken place in the past few decades - missionaries from the US.

THE BUILDING

School is up. It took 1 month to complete it from scratch. About 20 villagers reportedly worked on it. Walls are made of mud, straw and bamboo, a local construction that is proven and safe. Roof is GI sheet - tin mounted on wooden logs. There are 5 classrooms and a staff room. Construction is neat, and was done by the local mason/ carpenter. A number of people are said to have worked on the building on a voluntary basis. School is on leveled hill slope. View is fantastic, into the valley, watching the setting sun is a treat. Only con is that expanding will be messy - you will need to level the ground, and making a playground is impossible - bulldozers cost RS 10,000 per day. I was impressed by the pace at which the school had come up.

I sensed a strong sense of belonging amongst the few people I met when I was there. They seem to take a lot of pride in the fact that there is a school now that they - who can't afford to pay fees, can send their children to.

Also met the managing committee of the school - 5 locals and spoke to them. The headman promised that they would treat the school as their own and take care of it in future. It is important to involve other people in the village in this endeavor and give them a sense of belonging to the school- to not give the feeling that this is an outside effort by an NGO - which is what the locals think it is now. I propose disseminating pamphlets to the villagers - the text of which has been given to John, the principal. I also explained this to the village representatives. It had only been 15 days since classes were running, and so nothing I could test with the children. Principal John is young chap, just completed his graduation from Delhi, and now wants to settle down with 'security' - read monthly income in a single place. His intentions are good, and I am willing to trust him with handling of funds - this needs to be more transparent. Right now Joy has been transferring the funds to his sister - Primrose who has been spending the money. Accounts should be made public, and John should be a part of the same. Details in site visit report. This one is important.

SCHOOL OPERATIONS

There are 4 teachers, right now, one is useless and should be sent away. He is well over 70, claims to have spent 30 yrs in the army, and of half Scottish parentage, walks around wearing a Naga regiment cap, - quite a specimen. He can speak only English and Hindi, the children know neither, so there is nothing he can do there. One of the teachers is good, - she has an MA in geography, from all the place - Muzaffarnagar in UP and has taught before in a govt school. There is a lady to teach the kindergarten kids, she is good at her work, and has taught before. That leaves John - the principal and Rose - Joy's sister as the other teachers. John should be able to do a decent job, and so should Rose. John says he wants to stick around at least for a few yrs. He comes from a reasonably well off family - by their standards, and so seems as of now, to have no family obligations.

NEED OF THE SCHOOL

There are 2 pvt. schools in the vicinity, and they seem to be doing a decent job. I visited 1 of them; learning levels are ok. So is the staff. They charge fees of about 80 a month, which the local poor cannot pay. The govt primary was shut when we got there, a pitiable mud structure. There are some mud govt teachers quarters next to it, since the said teachers are never around; some locals live in the houses. There is a govt. high school about 2 kms away that seems to be running well, but it is full up. This school is from classes' kg1 to class 4 right now. These kids would never have gone to school had it not been for this one, so the school does definitely serve a purpose.

THE KIDS

The kids are incredibly pretty and sweet. Some of the kids trudge through the slopes to get to school. Total - 166 kids. Nursery: 73, grade 2: 21, grade 3: 28, grade 4: 13, grade 1: 30. Kids are from poor families, I visited the houses, mud hovels,

firewood is used for cooking, existence is subsistence on small quantities of rice grown on hill slopes in shifting cultivation, snails, pork, dried fish, roots and green leaves from the forest and the occasional vegetable. People fan out into the hills in search of firewood and bamboo shoot and banana roots, flower and fruit, all of which grow wild. Nothing much is left on the hills anyway, they have been shaved clean, thanks to the expanding population pressure.

THINGS TO BE DONE

1. This needs to be built into a fully functioning NGO - they have to get that status to diversify into other sources of funding, Asha funds cannot be looked at for an indefinite period. Joining a functioning school and teaching there if say you are class 12 pass is one matter, starting a school and running it is another. None of the team present there has an idea about this, and a lot of work needs to be done. The educators need to be educated on teaching and learning techniques and methods, the objectives, how to use various materials and aids, and the dangers of rote learning, the essence of learning, etc. also required is an idea of the purpose the school will serve, and future plans, etc. I have explained all this in detail to those present; hopefully, the same will be acted upon
2. Get govt recognition. Very important if kids are to be eligible for entry into diff. schools for higher classes.
3. Framing of the syllabus and the timetable. Important to allow for an appropriate syllabus, with adequate local knowledge and issues components, and for the teachers to appreciate the same. The key being that the school should educate the kids and make them think, rather than only making them literate in about 5 subjects
4. Need money for books
5. Some of these kids have been to school before, to private and govt ones. The teachers have administered a test to gauge their levels; this was rudimentary at best and needs to be done. Accurate profiling of the kids w.r.t to their earlier schooling, no of years spent and corresponding learning levels needs to be found out. There might be some kids who have levels beyond what can be taught in class 4 in this school - I identified 2 myself, and they could be taught separately
6. Find out aptitudes for individual subjects within a class, so common weak points like English, math, etc can be identified and stressed upon
7. The school will charge an admission fee of Rs 50 @ head and monthly fees @ rs 5 @ head. This is to give the parents a sense of belonging and responsibility; money will pay for teacher's tea expenses
8. After framing syllabus, find out cost of books per head, to calculate hoe much parents have to bear per head. Then find out how much parents can pay, and how much funding agency has to bear. Find out sources for cheaper books, ex: second hand, donations from city/ town schools, etc
9. Need to buy maps, charts and some playing material

10. Stress on local history, culture and place of these kids in larger Manipur and Indian society to instill a feeling of identity and appreciation of their own race
11. The local private. Schools might feel threatened; I sensed it when I went to visit them. They feel that this school being free would draw away fee-paying students from them. I have asked John to visit them and get friendly, and explain that the new school would only take in those kids whose parents cannot pay/and / or produce a leaving letter from the private. Schools - to avoid 'poaching' of children.

SUMMARY

Presence of the UG's will not affect the functioning of the school in any way. UG's have been known to extort money from NGO's receiving foreign funds. Hence the suggestion to take the villagers into confidence using the pamphlets and during PTA meetings. Also, the village chief assured me that UG's would not touch this school once they know that good work is being done. Each house in the area pays a 'tax' of about Rs 100 @ month to the UG's. It is hoped that relevant education will avoid some of the pitfalls that the other youngsters fall into here - namely drugs, UG's and other things. It is a strange society. One where poverty stricken youngsters will spend money on cosmetics and looking good, and then walk up and down the local marketplace seeing, and being seen.

I suggest the chapter wait for the final report before deliberating on any decision.

As an aside, I think it is more important to do work on population control and health in this area. Education will not help, since people breed well and have 6-13 kids. Having children is linked to religious beliefs - as a gift from god, reminiscent of more orthodox Muslim communities. This web needs to be broken. A number of houses have been destroyed by untimely deaths of 1 parent, normally the father due to easily curable/ avoidable illnesses like TB, and Malaria. There are only so many schools one can up with. Most of the people and the children end up having stomach problems with worms, dysentery, piles, etc, due to the dirty water from the streams. It will be good if the people working on this school can also diversify into health in some way at a future date.