

10th April 2009

Site visit to Akshardeep NFE schools in PCMC

Asha Pune volunteers: Guru (project owner), Mousumi, Joseph and his friend
Akshardeep: Smita Talwalkar, Mrs. Navale

This site visit was unannounced. We had informed Mrs. Bapat and Mrs. Talwalkar that we wanted to do a site visit today, and had asked them to not inform the supervisors/teachers at PCMC. We met Mrs. Talwalkar at the University circle at 10am, and called Mr. Bagav to inform him that we will be visiting today. However, since we had not informed him earlier, Mr. Bagav was busy with some end of the financial year auditing, etc. and was away from PCMC. Therefore, Mrs. Navale, one of the (three) supervisors was our guide to the classes. We drove to Nasik Phata, and met Navale at the Nasik Phata class.

At the Nasik Phata class, only the older children were present, and they were revising for their examinations. Akshardeep conducts exams for the children in their NFE classes. In Pune, the children are brought together to a local school and the exams are held there, while in PCMC, exams are administered in the classes. The children at the Nasik Phata school are migrants (from Gujarat and Rajasthan) and are not comfortable with Marathi. The teachers in this school, therefore, teach in Hindi, and use Hindi text books. However, since the Akshardeep exams are in Marathi, these children also need to learn some Marathi for their exams. I spoke to a boy (whose name tag said that his name was Babloo) who was reading a Marathi text book aimed at 1st standard children. Babloo was able to read most of the words, but when I asked him what the words meant, he did not really know. For example, he read out “Chivada” (a kind of snack) and when I asked him what that meant, he said that that was a bird. These children don’t speak Marathi at home and have very little exposure to Marathi – therefore, while they are able to read the script (due to its similarity with Hindi), they don’t necessarily understand what they are reading. I spoke with another girl, Kiran and asked her if she wanted to go to a “big school”. She said she didn’t since they only spoke Marathi there and she didn’t understand what they were saying. Kiran had gone to a local PCMC school for a year, and had dropped out since she could not follow Marathi, and then came to the Akshardeep school. To test their comprehension, I obtained a Hindi text book from the teacher (also a 1st standard text book), and sat with Roshan and Kiran and asked them to read. In this case, they were able to read the words and explain what they meant in most cases. So, the kids are smart and can read/understand Hindi and are normally taught in Hindi by the teachers. However, since Akshardeep only administers “standard” exams to all the classes, and since these are in Marathi, these children were preparing for their exams (sort of doing a crash course to clear the Marathi exams). An amusing/ironic thing that I noticed was that the calendar hung up in the class was an MNS calendar (this is a local political party that was recently in the news for targeting non-Marathi speaking people in Maharashtra, including in Pune).

Two aspects that struck me – (a) there were about 15 children (out of a class strength of 18 on their rolls) and no small children (typically, there are always some siblings, etc.). The teachers told me that this time of the year, there are many “yatras”, viz. several parents go on pilgrimages (involving walking, and a fair) and that the parents had taken the smaller kids with them. In fact, several of the teachers explained the low attendance in their schools saying that the kids had gone to “yatra”. (b) the

teachers were doing a good job. The school was disciplined and organized, the children were studying. A lady from the neighbourhood stopped by, and the teachers and supervisor (Mrs. Navale) talked to her and asked about her child (who was ill and needed medical treatment). It seems like the teachers are also well accepted by the local community and are in good touch with the parents.

We next went to the Balaji Nagar school (around 12 noon, teacher: Mrs. Khalge). This school used to be in a different shed in the same slum, but since that was taken back by the owner to be converted to an office for the NCP (political party), this class has moved to another location within the same slum. This room is, however, much smaller than the previous. However, it has electricity and appeared better illuminated than the previous class. During the last visit (Oct '08), I hadn't been impressed by this school since the teacher appeared to not be able to control the class and effectively teach. When we went to the school this time (around 11am), the teachers were sitting outside and there were very few children (around 10) in the school. The teacher told us that there had been a death in the neighbourhood and several of the children had gone there. However, when I took a look at the teacher's attendance roll later, there were 22 kids marked present. I was surprised and when I asked her, she said that the children had come earlier and had left after the mid-day meal at around 11.30am. I was not impressed by this class (the same teachers are responsible for 2 classes in the same location). I didn't like it that the teachers were sitting outside the class when we visited and that there was such a large disparity in the number of children in the class versus marked present on their rolls.

Next, we went to the Gandhinagar school (teacher: Vidya Shirole). This class had about 7 children (plus 3 small kids, who were siblings). The kids were grouped into 4, 3 and 3 (smaller kids, who were playing with some beads and were keeping out of the way of the older kids). The group of 4 older girls were in the 1st standard and again, they were studying for the exams. They could understand Marathi, but one girl spoke only Kannada (and could only haltingly follow Marathi). However, when I spoke with her, she seemed quite smart, and was clearly coping well with the lessons. The class rolls had 22 children of whom about 9 had gone to their villages, to the yatra, etc. 13 children were marked present, but there were only 7 children in the class. The teachers said that the other children had come earlier and then left.

Finally, we went to the school in Anandnagar. This school was a 1-5pm school, and we got there by around 1.10pm. The school is normally held in a Hanuman temple – however, this temple was locked. The temple had apparently been painted the previous day, and the local community had told the teacher to hold classes for a day in another nearby shed (this looked like a local Shiv Sena office/room). The teacher had gone into the vasti and came to the class with the kids at 1.10. The class began with the children being separated into two groups (one with the very small children, siblings of the bigger kids). The teacher and her helper each managed one group. They began with some exercises and songs. This went for about 15 mins. The teacher then asked the kids to get their books out (but the kids wanted more songs, rather than to study). However, they got their books out and started reading Marathi. I spoke to the kids and they seemed conversant with Marathi, and were able to understand the words in the books. I spoke with the teachers and she said that they were done with lessons for the school year and were now doing revisions for the upcoming exams.

Summary of my impressions:

I feel that the report card is mixed. Some of the classes are managed well, while others are not. With increasing size, there has to be standardization and systems, and at the same time, there needs to be supervision and checks to ensure that there is no dilution in quality. I think that this is still a learning phase for Akshardeep as it scales up. Having more visits from people at the level of Mrs. Bapat and Mrs. Talwalkar is important to ensure standards – they are not involved in the day-to-day running and can take a high level view of the classes to see if the objectives of the project are being met.

There are some things that I definitely did not like: for example, in all the classes, the number of children marked present was always higher (often significantly so) than the actual number of children that I could count in the class. Why is this so? If a child makes a 10 second appearance in a class, should s/he be marked present? Have the teachers been instructed to records as many present as possible? Is this to show better numbers when there are audits by the Mahatma Phule people or Asha? Is there a way of making kids not drift in and out of the class? Also, the teachers sitting outside the class when we visited Balaji nagar did not make a very favourable impression.

Overall, there is still good work being done and children are getting academic help, are being mainstreamed into regular schools and these schools are creating avenues for the teachers (training, employment). However, I think that as the number of classes increase, there is a need to be vigilant that the passion that exists when the project is smaller is not lost. Site visits from us, and from Mrs. Bapat/Mrs. Talwalkar will help in this direction.



Nasik Phata class in progress



Children at the new school location at Balaji Nagar



Balaji Nagar: Mrs. Khalge (teacher, left) with kids and Mrs. Talwalkar (right)



Gandhinagar school: Mrs. Shirole (teacher) with some of the students



Students at the Gandhinagar school



Younger children stringing beads at Gandhinagar school