

Asha for Education

Vikahar Project- Site Visit Report

Visited on 3rd- 4th January, 2008

By
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About Vikahar:

Vikahar is an impoverished village located in Tapan block of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal. The area is populated largely by schedule tribes, schedule caste and tribal community. Agriculture is the primary occupation of the people, although many of them do not possess any land, hence they have no option but to work as contract laborer for others. Even worse, most of the farmlands yield only once a year. The miserable living condition aggravates the social issues like illiteracy, child marriage and human trafficking. Also, the village is very near to the Bangladesh border, hence cross-border trafficking is quite rampant.

Nowadays Vikahar is well connected by road to Malda town and Balurghat- headquarters of the two districts, Malda and Dakshin Dinajpur. This road has been constructed fairly recently, but Vikahar was a remote village when ERDS (Economic Rural Development Society) started its activities in 1982.



Photograph 1: Newly constructed road from Malda town to Vikahar.

Reaching Vikahar:

In the morning of 3rd of January, my friend Arunabha Bhattacharya and I boarded the train *Sealdah-New Jalpaiguri Express* that reached Malda at 3 PM. Then we took a bus and traveled for 2 hours to reach Thinagar Project Office of ERDS. There we spent the night with Mr. Madhu Basu, and other members of ERDS team. Next morning, we went to Vikahar along with Mr. Basu and Mr. Prabhat Mitra.



Photograph 2: A snapshot of Vikahar village.

A Day Out at Vikahar:

Vikahar and the surrounding villages (Badalpur, Sukhdebpur, Bugdoli, Vior, Shampur and Katnidanga) have an estimated population of about 10,000 people. EDRS runs a school there (*Jhilmil Shishu Shiksha Kendra*), which was established as a part of the Vikahar Project. In fact, the school has two different premises, and one of them is specifically for students supported by *Asha for Education*. The distance between two school premises is nearly half a kilometer.



Photograph 3: Talking to the parents of the school-goers.

Apart from the school run by ERDS, there are two other primary schools in the neighborhood. One of them is a government school (*Vikahar Free Primary School*) and the other one is a private school, which has been started very recently. The neighboring villiage *Vior* has a government high school (*Vior Jalalia High School*), which is about 5 km away from Vikahar. Students who complete the primary education from Jhilmil school, typically go to this government high school for further study.



Photograph 4: Walking past the plow-land, on the way to school...

The school supported by *Asha for Education* (see photographs 5 and 6) currently has 75 students. All the students are in grade 1; although the school has provision to conduct classes till grade 4, grades 2 -4 are unoccupied now, and these 75 students are expected to be in grade 2 by the end of this year. There are three sections (three classrooms) for grade 1, and the students are categorized into different sections based on their ages and aptitude levels.



Photograph 5: In front of the school gate (Asha for Education supported school), from left to right are Madhu Basu- general secretary of ERDS, Prabhat Mitra- assistant secretary, Bhabesh Barman- social worker and I.



Photograph 6: Inside the school premises. Classrooms (seen in the background) are donated by Asha for Education, Philadelphia chapter.

Vikahar project had been set up in 1982, but the school had properly started its activities in 1999. In the year 2003, *Asha for Education, Philadelphia chapter* came forward to help the school. With some support from *Asha*, a portion of the school has been reconstructed from a mudhouse to a terraced structure (see photograph 7). The tuition is totally free for the students, and each student gets the textbooks, school uniform, school bag and shoes from the school. Everyday a light meal is provided to the students. When *Asha for Education* took over the responsibility to support the school, there were 25 students at that time, and in 2006, this number has been increased to 75. We are told that all the 25 students, who were in grade 1 in the year 2003-04, got into the government high school and now they are performing well in their class. During our visit, we in fact met a few of those ex-students as well.



Photograph 7: A part of the school building.

The day we visited the school, 69 out of these 75 students were present and attended the classes. Among the 75 students, 33 are girls and 42 are boys. The following photograph shows a morning prayer, which was held in the school premises at the beginning of the school hours.



Photograph 8: Prayer in the morning before the class starts.

There are four teachers for these 75 students. Teachers are local women, who are involved with the school for several years now. Pilu Samajdar teaches English, and she is the headmistress of the school. The other teachers are Shefali Ghosh, Purnima Pal and Mina Bhagat, who are the teachers for Bengali, science, mathematics, history, geography and drawing. The headmistress herself has completed higher secondary school (standard 12th) whereas the others got education till the secondary level (standard 10th). Although these women are underpaid (the headmistress gets Rs. 1200 per month and each of the other teachers is getting a meager Rs. 600 per month), none of them left the school in the recent years, and as a matter of fact, they love the school and really care for its students.



Photograph 9: Students sitting in the classroom.



Photograph 10: Students are closely supervised by the teachers.

Besides the teachers, there is a school coordinator (Nimai Barman), who works fulltime to manage various activities and agendas beneficial to the school. He is also the communicator between the school and the central office of ERDS. Currently his salary is not being supported by *Asha*, but we have been asked to request *Asha* for providing him some financial support in future.

An attendance sheet for the students is regularly maintained in the school. Several snapshots of them are shown in the appendix (see exhibit 1, 2 and 3). Three examinations are annually taken for each of the eight subjects (Bengali, English, science, mathematics, history, geography, drawing and sports). When we visited the school, two of the examinations were already over. Snapshots of the mark-sheets for these examinations are also attached in the appendix (exhibit 4- 9).



Photograph 11: Some inquisitive faces.

During our visit, we went to all the three sections, and randomly interacted with the students. We asked them questions from the textbooks, and also the questions which we believed appropriate according to their standard. Most of them were answered correctly. A few students recited some rhymes in English and Bengali; and before we left the

school, we asked all the students to draw with colored pencil, whatever they wished to draw in a 30-minutes session (photograph 14).



Photograph 12: A quick question-answer session.



Photograph 13: A *draw-whatever-comes-to-mind* session.



Photograph 14: A few of the sketches that we received from the students.

Recommendations to Asha for Education, NRV Chapter:

While we interviewed the teachers and some of the inhabitants, we realized that there are many more children in the locality, who wanted to come and study in the *Asha* supported school. ERDS could not help them out because of their financial limitation. I have already mentioned in this report that there is a second premises of *Jhilmil Shishu Shiksha Kendra* (see photograph 15), which is not currently getting any support from *Asha for Education*. Charitable organizations like *Give India* has donated some money to support the students there (also, some companies like *State Bank of India* has helped to get the desks in each classroom; see photograph 17- inside a classroom), but those are not sufficient to cover all the expenses to run the school. So the school has no other option, but to charge a tuition fee of Rs.20-40 per month (depending on the grade) from every student who wishes to attend it. Also, the school does not provide any school-uniform or the textbooks to its students. Many of the parents cannot afford these expenses, which results in a high dropout rate. There were around 150 students when the school started several years back, but now this number has come down to less than 40.



Photograph 15: The second school-premises of Jhilmil Shishu Shiksha Kendra.



Photograph 16: A closer look to Jhilmil school (second premises).



Photograph 17: One of the classrooms in Jhilmil school.

In the second school building (see photographs in the previous page), there are five classrooms. As most of the students have dropped out of the school, currently three of the rooms are not being utilized at all. But these rooms are well equipped and can be readily used as the classrooms. If *Asha for Education* decides to increase the number of its sponsored students, these additional students cannot be accommodated in the classrooms donated by *Asha* (classrooms shown in photograph 6). There are only three medium size rooms, and all of them are filled up by the current students (3 sections and a total of 75 students). Three unused classrooms in the second compound can be used in this purpose, which should help to avoid the initial establishment cost for accommodating these students. In that case, we only need to bear the running expenses (i.e. salary of the teachers, school uniform, bag, textbook and light meal for the students).

The unused classrooms can accommodate 75 students; and it would not be a problem to find 75 students from that neighborhood- at least this is my perception after talking to the parents and the teachers there. Failed to sustain the cost of attendance, a large chunk of the students has already dropped out of the school. We can bring them back if we take the financial responsibility and sponsor their education. Currently, there are three teachers for the school in the second campus. If required, additional teachers can also be hired from the locality. Educational qualification of the teachers may not be very crucial to teach the primary grades; rather a friendly and caring attitude of the teacher is more important. I think that the existing teachers are doing their job pretty good so far.

By the end of this year, all the 75 students of *Asha* supported school should be promoted to grade 2. So, classes for grade-1 and the grades 3 and 4 would remain empty. If *Asha* decides to extend the support to 75 additional students and if ERDS feels that most of these 75 newcomers are eligible only for grade 1, then all the three additional classrooms can be used for grade-1 students. If these students are originally the drop outs, then some of them may be eligible for grade 3 or 4. In that case, classes for three different grades can be conducted in those three rooms.

It does worth to mention here, that the second school compound has a small plot (see photograph 18) which can be utilized as a playground. Funds are required for its renovation and maintenance. Also, basic amenities for a playground, like slide, swing etc. can be provided, which will need some additional funds.



Photograph 18: The plot for proposed playground (Jhilmil school premises).



Photograph 19: Finally, goodbyes from the little students while leaving the school.

After my visit in Vikahar, I feel that the initiatives taken by ERDS (like, providing education, health care, making arrangement for proper sanitation and drinking water, and financing through micro-credit program etc.), is commendable. To provide primary education to more and more children in that area, ERDS needs to increase its budget in the next year. So, I would like to request *Asha* to increase the amount of financial support to sponsor 75 additional students.



Photograph 20: ERDS regulated micro-credit program in Thinagar, Malda.



Photograph 21: Many children like her need support from us.

In five villages in and around Vikahar, ERDS conducts a micro-credit program which lends small amount of money to the groups of local women. A total of 896 women in 114 groups are involved in it (and approximately Rs. 300,000 has been sanctioned as loan so far); but many of the women don't receive any money yet, because of a shortage in fund. Micro-credit is a proven way to improve the living conditions of the poor, and ERDS is looking for additional funds (at least Rs. 800,000) to meet its goal. I believe *Asha for Education* works for providing basic education to underprivileged children, and supporting a micro-credit program may not match the objectives of *Asha*. Still, in this

report I wanted to mention it, in case the reader can help ERDS to find some other organizations who will be interested to support their micro-credit program.

Finally, I wanted to thank the current members of *Asha for Education, NRV Chapter* for providing me an opportunity to visit Vikahar and to be acquainted with the activities of ERDS.

Note:

This is a brief report about the project. During my short stay at Vikahar, I have taken a number of snaps and some small video clips (interviews of the people around me). Please feel free to contact me (sourishs@gmail.com) if you are interested to get them. Also, I received a CD and a brochure from ERDS, which were published on the occasion of their 25th anniversary.

I would like to inform that I don't want to be reimbursed for my site visit expenses. Vikahar is not far away from my hometown, and the travel was not so expensive; also, it was a nice experience and a great enjoyment for me to spend a day at Vikahar interacting with the children, their parents and teachers and the social workers in that locality.

Appendix:

Exhibit 1: Attendance sheet for section A (April 2007).

Exhibit 2: Attendance sheet for section B (April 2007)

Exhibit 3: Attendance sheet for section C (April 2007)

Subject	Candidate Name	Roll No.	Marks	Grade
1. English
2. Mathematics
3. Science
4. Social Studies
5. Language
6. Arts
7. Music
8. Physical Education
9. Health Education
10. Environmental Studies
11. Information Technology
12. Life Skills Education
13. Career Education
14. Entrepreneurship Education
15. Financial Education
16. Consumer Education
17. Road Safety Education
18. Disaster Management Education
19. Cyber Safety Education
20. Environmental Education

Exhibit 4: Records for the first examination (section A).

Subject	Candidate Name	Roll No.	Marks	Grade
1. English
2. Mathematics
3. Science
4. Social Studies
5. Language
6. Arts
7. Music
8. Physical Education
9. Health Education
10. Environmental Studies
11. Information Technology
12. Life Skills Education
13. Career Education
14. Entrepreneurship Education
15. Financial Education
16. Consumer Education
17. Road Safety Education
18. Disaster Management Education
19. Cyber Safety Education
20. Environmental Education

Exhibit 5: Records for the first examination (section B).

Subject	Candidate Name	Roll No.	Marks	Grade
1. English
2. Mathematics
3. Science
4. Social Studies
5. Language
6. Arts
7. Music
8. Physical Education
9. Health Education
10. Environmental Studies
11. Information Technology
12. Life Skills Education
13. Career Education
14. Entrepreneurship Education
15. Financial Education
16. Consumer Education
17. Road Safety Education
18. Disaster Management Education
19. Cyber Safety Education
20. Environmental Education

Exhibit 6: Records for the first examination (section C).

