

## **Visit Report to NICE**

**By**

**Srikanth Voorakaranam**

**January 26, 2011**

I visited NICE along with Mr. Purnachandar Rao (PCR) and Mr. Gopal from the organization Helping Indians. We reached the school, located in a rural area near Guntur, in the early hours of January 26 after a 6-hr drive from Hyderabad.

The school has grown significantly since the last time I visited in 2005, when there were just 3 rooms. The school stands testimony to what a single person, who puts others before himself and works with commitment for the cause, can achieve. PCR almost single-handedly raises the funds for the school by personally making the rounds of numerous individual donors and contacting organizations in Hyderabad. A commitment to transparency in the operations of the school, including accounting, and a refusal to compromise on the quality of facilities and education offered have been the guiding principles of the school from the outset. It determined the choice of following a CBSE curriculum (a rather rare occurrence in a rural context), and providing the school with good infrastructure, adequate number of teachers with good qualifications, facilities like a library and good nutrition to the children.

### **The Infrastructure:**

The Boys school and hostels are hosted in a two-storey structure with two wings. The girls school and hostel is housed in a large open hall in a separate building. There is a large open space in front of the school which serves as a playground. An adjacent strip of space is used as a volleyball court. There is a small garden on the side with a hand pump. A small strip of open space serves the purpose of hanging out the clothes to dry. The school has also taken a small strip of land on lease next door in an attempt to experiment with organic farming.

### **Admission Process:**

For admission, preference is given to children who lost both parents, followed by children who have lost one parent. The economic condition of the children is factored in. An aptitude test is also administered to the children at the time of admission. Children are admitted into the equivalent of class V. The assumption is that many villages have at least a primary school but it is at the middle and high school levels that there is a serious lacuna and NICE attempts to bridge this.

### **Kitchen:**

The meals are cooked centrally and then catered in the respective hostels for boys and girls. After every meal, children wash their own plates. Children take turns with the serving and cleaning up duties. Another notable aspect is that the teachers are also served the same food and eat together with the children.

**Education:**

All the teachers stay on campus so they are available to the children all the time. All of them have Masters degrees. They also get adequate time for preparation with breaks between every lecture period.

Every class has a library period every day as part of the timetable. This goes a long way in cultivating the reading habit in the children. The library is well-stocked in terms of reference books, books to help prepare for competitive exams etc. Some of the teachers have been taken to Rishi valley to provide them exposure to the methodology and approaches adopted there.

Children take the class X exams under the Open School system (it is a significant overhead for the school to get formal recognition from the CBSE board). Everybody who took the exams had passed the last time around. The exams are held in Hyderabad. The children have to go there and stay the duration of the exams. Television is not permitted on the premises as it is a distraction. Every couple of weeks, children get to watch some movies on the computers. They are taken on a visit to a nearby place of interest (such as Amaravathi, which is a place of historical significance) every year. Children get a break of about 15 days in summer from school when they go to visit family or relatives.

Children graduating from the school are given counseling about future career options. Several children who graduated out of class X in previous years are now attending govt colleges in the nearby towns. Several of them still stay at NICE and help out the younger children as per need.

**The Republic Day Program**

The children had taken over the preparations for the event starting early morning. They erected a pole for the flag-hoisting ceremony, strung lines of flags and created a rangoli in the pattern of the India map. All the children had small India flags pinned to their neat uniforms.

Following breakfast, the formal program started with a smart drill and marchpast in front of the school and was followed by the flag hoisting ceremony. We then moved to a large room which served as the auditorium. The children put up an impressive cultural program, which included several plays, speeches and songs. Several of the plays and speeches were in English. Considering the fact that many of these children are first generation learners, and they don't get adequate opportunities to practice their English-speaking skills outside of the school, the proficiency exhibited in English was certainly commendable. Prizes were awarded in different categories, based on their performance in studies as well as extra-curricular activities such as cricket, kho-kho, elocution etc.

**Interaction with Children**

Following lunch, we interacted with the children. We expressed our views to the children that they are lucky to study in such a school, since city kids rarely have access to such large open spaces and proximity to nature. When asked what they wanted to become, the replies ranged covered a spectrum such as pilots, policemen, doctors, and engineers. One of them wanted to become a politician as well. We asked him which subject is most important for somebody interested in becoming a politician to which he

replied Civics. We discussed the different wings of the government (legislature, executive and judiciary), their key features and significance of each and how each is supposed to be independent, yet expected to provide checks and balances on the other wings. We underscored the importance of cultivating communication skills and articulating one's views with confidence. We also talked to them about the importance of critical thinking in the age of media, where one is constantly buffeted by information from media outlets with often contradictory messages.

#### **Recognitions:**

The organization has received recognition from Maa TV, a prominent TV channel in Andhra Pradesh, which profiles a social organization doing notable work every week in their program Velugu-Veliginchu (which loosely translates to *Shine and Kindle*). The Governor of Andhra Pradesh presented mementoes to the top 5 among them, and NICE stood near the top of the list.

PCR's work has also been recognized by the management of the school in Hyderabad where his own children study. They are providing education for free to his children in recognition of his service to society.

#### **Future Plans:**

A quarters for the staff of the girls school is under construction and is expected to be completed by summer.

There are currently 13 girl children studying in the school. The plan is to increase the intake to 25 from this academic year.

The cost for buying milk for the hostel runs into a substantial amount. PCR wants to explore the possibility of buying several buffaloes and setting up a cowshed. Besides assuring a supply of pure milk for the children, the dung could be used on the farm. A couple of full-time workers would be needed to help maintain this, and the children can help occasionally once school is completed which will add to their learning experience.

The school also has a computer room now with some donated computers. They are looking into the possibility of getting a full-time instructor.

Drying clothes out in the open runs into the obvious difficulties during the rainy season. PCR wants to create a structure/shed for this purpose.

#### **Some suggestions the school can consider:**

The Library could be augmented with selections brought out by the National Book Trust which has excellent books at reasonable prices. NBT has a large collection in Telugu as well.

Possibility of having co-educational instruction at least till class VIII can be considered to promote a healthy interaction and respect between genders.

PCR was open to the possibility of hosting interns who would stay at NICE for an extended period of time.

Sending teachers to courses such as Jeevan Vidya and to other organizations such as School Without Walls and Vigyan Ashram.

**Conclusion:**

NICE is doing commendable work and is constantly looking at ways to improve things for the children. It deserves support in this endeavor.