

Site Visit to Tomorrow's Foundation in Calcutta

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Asha Volunteer conducting the visit: Ms Arunima Dasgupta, Chapter co-coordinator, Asha Burlington

Background:

I had heard about Tomorrow's Foundation (TF) from DP even before our first Asha Burlington Chapter (ABC) meeting. He mentioned Arup and Swarup Ghosh, the pioneers in starting this organization way back in 1991. Since I was going to India for 10 days, I told DP that I will make a sincere attempt to connect with TF.

So when I reached Calcutta, I called TF's office and set up a time and date with Mrs. Banerjea.

Purpose of the Visit:

We had started the Burlington Chapter a month and a half before this trip and I was very interested in going and seeing a place where the "real work" is being done. Given Tomorrow's Foundation is one of the many projects that Asha supports and the fact that the TF office was located right in the heart of the city, I thought a visit to this place will give me first hand information of how an organization runs, who the students are and above all what to expect from a project.

TF Office and Half-Way Home:

We (Souvick- another Asha Burlington Chapter volunteer and myself) had called Mrs. Banerjea in the morning to let her know that we were coming around 2:30PM. TF's tata sumo came to pick us up from Ruby General Hospital. We went through the winding roads into the interiors of Easter By pass and stopped in front of a Gated 3 storey house. This was the TF office as well as the half-way home.

The receptionist greeted us at the gate and took us to Mrs Banerjea.

She introduced us to some of the TF team members and she walked us through a summary of what they did at TF. This included the different projects they support at present, the sponsors they have for each of the project, annual reports and expenditure. She also informed us about an upcoming project that dealt with handicapped students which are awaiting approval and funds. She gave us a copy of the PPT and a paper copy of the annual report which we have brought back with us, to share with the other ABC members.

Next we climbed up the stairs to the second floor which is called the "Half-Way Home". This home has been built for students who can stay and study for 3 months before their board exams – the 10th grade exam – Madhyamik and the 12th grade exam (Higher Secondary) . The second floor has a canteen where a cook has been appointed to serve

them their daily meals and also has 3 other rooms with bunker beds for the girls to live and study.

The third floor has the same set of 3 rooms for the boys. Each floor has a bathroom and the canteen has a black board with some details written on it – mostly about the lunch and supper hours and the rules and regulations that the students are supposed to adhere to.

It is a very well constructed house and I actually fell in love with the scenic beauty around and the excellent ventilation!!!

Since I wanted to talk to some of the students who were residing there, I climbed up to the roof top – in Bengali it is lovingly called a “Chhad” where they were sitting and discussing in groups about various subjects. There was a tutor there helping a group of 4 with Math problems. I talked with each of the students and found that they came from a variety of backgrounds but they were here because they could not study in their houses, given the predicament their respective families were in. But each one of them had a vivid dream and as I wished them the very best in their exams I think I whispered a small prayer to my God asking Him to help these kids live their dream.

But that was not the end to the half way home. As we rounded up the tour of the house, Mrs Banerjea took us to the printing department where some of the older TF folks were painting cards and making beautiful designs on albums and diaries and files and a bunch of stationary items which they sold to organizations and companies. This was the best part of the trip, because all the while when I was talking to DP about starting ABC, I had re-iterated that I would want to help the kids so that they become self reliant. That should be the purpose and here they were. While some were studying upstairs for their exams, the older boys and girls were working towards generating revenue.

Next we hopped into the Tata Sumo and headed for the school. Mrs Banerjea updated us that the school is basically an after school program for most kids where they go to regular government schools in the morning and in the evening they come to TF to do their every day homework and daily studies.

Between the classes preK to Class V the students are enrolled in the morning session of the municipality school, where these evening classes are held. There is a contract made with the various government schools which take students who pass Class V from this municipality school – where many of the TF teachers also teach.

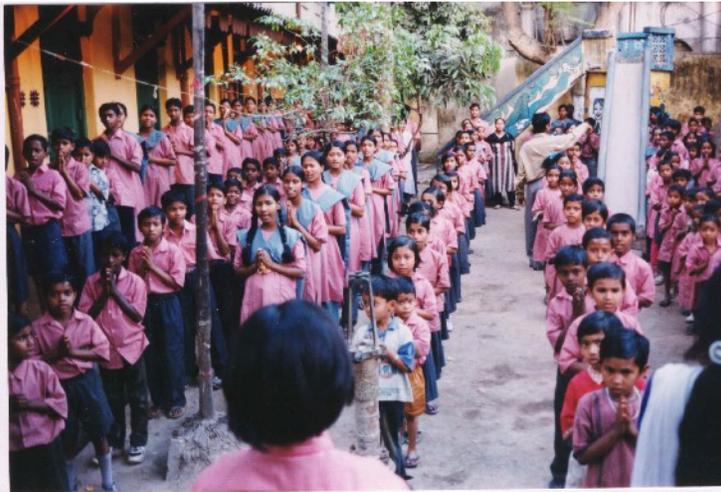
Interestingly, these kids all had uniforms and they eagerly came rushing right at 5:00PM even after a whole tiring day at school. I was very impressed to see their enthusiasm to study and be established in life. Though, Arpan – one of the key team members of TF begged to differ. Then I learned that Arpan and a few other TF members keep a tab on the students and their performance at these local govt. schools. If a student does not show up for a few days they even rush to their house to find out what the problem is. I think this core team within TF does a very hard job of having to convince parents to send their kids to school when in many cases it is hard for the family to provide even a proper square meal to these kids. The odds and the challenges through which these social workers go through and the courage and energy which they still present at the end of the day is truly commendable.

While at this school, I learned that there are many teachers who teach the students and help solve their homework problems every evening without even getting any

remuneration for the hard work that is done. Having studied in the same education system, I know how difficult it is to bring drop out children and older kids into mainstream studies and I personally salute the teachers for having the patience to continue everyday. The school results show good records. Many of these kids have passed their 12th grade and have taken up some vocational training in the side to continue with graduation. Some of the students are struggling hard, trying to balance the immense pressure of our education system with the family hurdles but are fighting the odds. These teachers give them the support and encouragement to continue.

I met some of the kids who are being sponsored by the different families in the US from the various Asha Chapters. One thing that is common in all of the teachers, students and the social workers of the TF team is the energy and spirit with which they are moving forward and overcoming the barriers that come their way. Their undaunted spirits really made my entire India trip worth everything.

Some of the photos taken during our visit to the school:



Kids from all the classes stand in assembly during the prayer session every day at 5:00PM



Munmun Dey, one of the first TF graduates who now comes back to the school to teach and guide the students. She serves as a big example for many who have just enrolled into the TF program



Posing for a picture with some of the students from each of the classes V – X and some of the dedicated teachers at TF. Many of the girls in the photo also take up dancing lessons every Saturday and have gone to Delhi for a competition. When I talked to each one of them personally they told me what they want to become when they grew up. There were aspiring doctors, engineers and dancers in this group of students. They all had a vivid dream. I was simply bowled over!!!