

Site visit to Ankur/Akshardeep

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Site-visit by: K. Guruswamy (Asha-Pune), Kamal Khosla (Asha-Pune), Vishwa Herle (Asha-Zurich), Anjali Bapat (Akshardeep) [we were accompanied by Kaushik (Asha-Pune) and his friend, Hartmut Balke]

Site report written by K. Guruswamy

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Summary: Ankur is a school that focuses on “integration”, viz. the children who go to Ankur include both “normal” children as well as those who are disadvantaged – either physically/mentally or socially. The special children learn to integrate well in society since they are immersed in a “regular” school environment, while the other children are sensitized to the needs of their less-fortunate brethren – this is the unique feature of Ankur. Akshardeep is an organization that runs classes that cater to children in urban slum areas who have dropped out of government school – these NFE classes run until standard IV. Akshardeep’s classes in the PCMC area are funded by Asha-Zurich (2003-). Akshardeep proposes to send 25 children from its Pune schools to Ankur, and is seeking funding for this via. SAC. The proposal, an initial write-up and our email discussions with Mrs. Bapat (from Akshardeep) are on our web-site (<http://www.ashanet.org/pune>). Detailed documentation on Akshardeep are also on our website (under Projects). Akshardeep is looking for Rs. 1,75,000 per year to fund these 25 children.

Details on Ankur:

Managed by Mrs. Madhuri Deshpande (used to be a professor at SNDT, Pune teaching early childhood education and orientation towards children with special needs, contact information at the end of this document). Ankur is a part of the Center for Opportunities in Education and Rehabilitation (COER), which is an ISO9002 certified organization that runs daycares, schools, teacher training programmes etc. I have scanned Ankur’s prospectus and it has been uploaded on our website for those looking for further details. Mrs. Deshpande started Ankur with just 2 children, and ran it on an experimental basis for 12 years, formally opened up the school and admitted more children in January 1998. Ankur currently runs classes to class IX (English medium) and to class IV (Marathi medium). Mrs. Deshpande intends to add classes so that the children can graduate their SSC (class X) from Ankur. Ankur currently has 110 children, of whom 30% are disabled children while 70% are normal children. Mrs. Deshpande mentioned that she would like Ankur to expand to have 50 socially disadvantaged children next year – she said that NGOs such as Akshardeep, Doorstep and Aanganwadi wanted to send some of their children to Ankur.

There is a high teacher-to-student ratio, with only about 7-8 children per class. Ankur currently employs a total of 42 teachers – all of whom are paid (average pay = Rs. 4500 per month, range from Rs. 2500 to Rs. 8000 per month; Mrs. Deshpande said that she is an unpaid volunteer). However, some of the teachers (10 to 11) handle training programmes and the daycare center that Ankur runs to raise funds (see section on funding). At Ankur, children receive individual attention, and each teacher is assigned responsibility for 4 or 5 children.

Children at Ankur are schooled according to the regular Maharashtra government curriculum (SSC board). In addition, they receive vocational training in carpentry, cooking, gardening, tailoring, handicrafts and computers. The children are free to opt for one or more of the vocational training streams until class VII, but after that, they are expected to “specialize” and be able to produce good quality products. These products are sold at events to raise awareness, generate publicity for Ankur and bring in some minor revenue. The SSC board in Maharashtra allows children to opt for some of these vocational courses as part of their curriculum for the board exam. The curriculum is based on the government guidelines and has been evolved based on the prescribed syllabus.

Ankur spends a lot of time training their teachers since they have to learn to be especially sensitive to the needs of special children and have to know how to handle a heterogeneous class comprising of normal and special children. Mrs. Deshpande says that she has good contacts at SNDT and several of her teachers come from there. She also says that her teachers typically are very committed to the cause/philosophy of Ankur. The teachers have B.Sc./M.Sc. (Home Science) or B.A. degrees, with a B. Ed. (Bachelor of Education). They are then trained at Ankur’s teacher training camps that train them on teaching methodologies that need to be adopted in heterogeneous classes as well as assessment strategies. In addition, their training is upgraded at the three-week summer camps conducted every year. External experts are invited for these camps. Ankur recruits teachers every summer, and teachers are allowed to teach only after they have completed their training at Ankur’s camps. In addition, there is a supervisor who oversees the activities of the teachers. A document that lists job specs for the employees at Ankur has been scanned and uploaded to give a clearer picture of what is expected of the teachers. In addition, Ankur employs skilled people (but perhaps without formal degrees) for the vocational training programmes.

Ankur has received considerable help from the Deccan Education Society (an old and very well established organization in Pune that has a network of educational institutions: schools, colleges – including the 150-year old Fergusson College). Ankur is currently located on the Fergusson college premises, on land donated by the DES. (Note: The location is really lovely: centrally located in Pune, in a nice little bungalow on a beautiful leafy campus, see pictures). Ankur’s children appear for the state board examinations by registering through the DES schools.

Funding: Ankur does not receive government funds. Most of the children at Ankur pay fees – they have a steep fee structure for children who can afford to pay (around 75% of the children at this time). Annual fees run at about Rs. 12,000 (based on the prospectus given to us). Mrs. Bapat’s email says that the annual fees are about Rs. 18,000 (this might be including the mid-day meals – but, even with that there is some inconsistency in the figures). Socially disadvantaged children pay minimal fees (around Rs. 6,000 per year). Sometimes the children have sponsors, but for some of the kids from the Akshardeep schools, at least part of the fees were being paid by the parents. Mrs. Deshpande said that she also raised money via individual donations, but had not sought institutional funding until now. Support has, however, come from institutions such as the DES in terms of donations of land or providing access to facilities (such as letting the Ankur children register for their boards through the DES schools etc.). In addition, Ankur (or rather COER) runs some commercial activities such as teacher training

programmes and a daycare center for severely challenged children that they use to raise funds to run the school.

Recommendations:

I was very impressed with what I saw: in terms of the concept/vision that Mrs. Deshpande has and the manner in which she has implemented her ideas. What little I saw of the teachers was also very promising. They seem like a dedicated and enthusiastic bunch and appear to enjoy working with the children at Ankur. The campus is lovely, and looks like an ideal environment in which to learn. The children seem eager and confident and appear to be enjoying the mix of regular and vocational training. Especially the Akshardeep children seem like they have adjusted very well to this school. Given their background, it was really quite heartening to talk to them – they have made definite progress in Ankur. Further, of the 5 children, two of the children were being funded at least in part by their parents. Rs. 6,000 a year is not a small sum for a construction worker living in an urban slum – so, it appears that the parents too greatly value and can see the benefit of the education that the children are receiving. I have monitored Akshardeep's other projects and feel that they have the organizational capability to run this project successfully (see Akshardeep visit reports on our web-site). I think this is definitely worth funding. However, I think we should first ask Akshardeep to address some issues (next section).

Unanswered questions:

My main concern with this proposal has to do with retention of the Akshardeep children in school. The children are often from families of migrant workers (for example, construction workers who migrate to Pune from northern Karnataka depending on the availability of jobs). If these children had to quit Ankur when their parents relocated, then they would probably gain very little from attending school. It would be very disruptive for the child and his/her education would suffer. Besides, someone who sponsors a child develops a special relation with that child, and if the same child were to not go back to school the next year, that bond would be broken. Mrs. Bapat has promised to think more about this and get back to us on this issue soon.

Contact information for Mrs. Deshpande:

Managing Director, Center for Opportunities in Education and Rehabilitation (COER)

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Administrative Office: Fergusson College Campus, Gate No. 1, Bungalow No. 2, Shivajinagar, Pune – 411004. Phone: 91-20-566-0574/91-20-566-2364.

Contact information for Mrs. Bapat (Swadhar – Akshardeep):

C/o Swadhar, Niwara, David Sasson Anath Pangu, 96, Navi Peth, Pune – 411 030. Phone: 91-20-565-3035 (home); 91-20-546-2626 (office), sdbapat@rediffmail.com

Related documents (linked):

- Original proposal from Mrs. Bapat
- Initial write-up (by K. Guruswamy) based on discussions with Mrs. Bapat

- Profiles of Akshardeep children who already attend Ankur
- Job specifications for teachers at COER
- Ankur's prospectus
- Site-visit photographs