

Asha Site Visit Report

Chapter	Pune
Site/Project	Vigyan Ashram, Pabal
Date	January 23, 2005
Funding Chapter/s	Seattle and Redlands
Visitors	K. Guruswamy, Sujata Bogawat, Atul Kulkarni, Ranjit Gadgil, Ashwini Mantri, Amar, Girish Galgali

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Background

Vigyan Ashram located in Pabal near Khed is about 80 km and a 2 hr drive from Pune. Vigyan Ashram was started about 25 years ago by Dr. Kalbag with the intention of creating an education system that is relevant to rural needs. The methodology for teaching was to be based on hands on learning and the use of scientific thinking. The culmination of his and Vigyan Ashram's efforts are an NIOS approved 1-year course, DBRT (Diploma for Basic Rural Technology) as well as a 3 year school curriculum for 8th, 9th and 10th standard students, IBT (Introduction to Basic Technology). Vigyan Ashram continues to update the curriculum through need-based drivers. Vigyan Ashram also runs a residential program for older students as well as a Balwadi. This and additional information about Vigyan Ashram can be found at www.vigyanashram.com

Visit

Introduction

Asha-Redlands has been providing funds to Vigyan Ashram for their non-formal center in Pabal, covering the costs of their staff and basic amenities.

This visit is part of the regular 6 monthly visit. The last visit was conducted on 23rd July 2004.

Yogesh Kulkarni, the director of Vigyan Ashram, met the group. He proceeded to give us an overview of the work conducted by Vigyan Ashram, first by showing us a documentary and then (after the power failed) verbally.

Yogesh explained that the next big steps for Vigyan Ashram were

- i. to get the IBT school program adopted by as many as a 1000 rural schools
- ii. to lobby the state govt. to push the program in all rural schools

The group asked several follow up questions.

Q. How well are the programs running in the schools that have adopted them?

A. Some schools find the new self-funding a challenge. The need for self-funding has arisen due to the end of the funding by the Sir Dorabaji Tata Trust. Foundation.

Q. Does completion of the course make a difference in the success of the students?

A. Yes. Quite a bit. Having the basics makes them better at what they do and allows them to run a better business.

Q. Does their success encourage others around them to enroll in the course?

A. Some times, but we haven't seen a major effect.

Q. Do city kids enroll for the residential program?

A. Not very often, but they do. Vigyan Ashram however prefers rural students, they find urban kids harder to manage. Also the rural kids are more likely to benefit from the course.

Q. How many resident kids in total?

A. 26.

Q. Are there female students?

A. Yes, 3.

Q. Amongst non-residential courses, are there female students? What activities are they more likely to enroll for?

A. The female students are more likely to enroll in the following
goat farming
sewing
poultry farming
agriculture

Q. How often is the course syllabus updated?

A. In the Ashram it is constantly being revamped, based on inputs they get from the locals. At the Education Board, the syllabus is updated once every 5-6 years.

Walk-Through

After the introduction Mr. Nimbalkar took us through all the facilities.

Workshop

The workshop has facilities for welding (both arc-welding and newly acquired spot-welding) as well as metal cutting. Students are taught the basics and get hands on training from real work orders given to the Ashram by locals.



Poultry Farming

This facility allows students to learn the basics of raising chickens in captivity. They learn the use of weight charts to monitor the progress of the hatchlings, the use of specialized feed etc. Due to recent market pressures they have started producing dried chicken rather than selling fresh poultry.



Pabal Domes

These geodesic structures were designed at Vigyan Ashram and are meant to be multi-purpose units that can be used for living or work areas. They are easy to manufacture and easy to set-up. They have been used even in seismically active areas.



Goat Farming

Vigyan Ashram teaches students the benefits of hybridization. The Israeli breed, Sana, gives a higher milk yield and makes for a good hybrid with the sturdier local variety.



Cattle Farming

Vigyan Ashram has Holstein and Jersey cows to give the students an idea about the various breeds and their different qualities.



Brick Making

The local community still uses red clay bricks. Vigyan Ashram has introduced 2 alternatives, cheap packed mud bricks as well as sturdier cement bricks. We saw the local school using the equipment built by Vigyan Ashram being used for making these cement bricks, which though more expensive upfront, turn out to be cheaper in the long run.



Pathology Lab

This lab is used to impart basics of chemical analysis to students. It can be used for soil testing, blood testing etc. Amar, wanted to find his blood group, so one of the students obliged and went through and explained the procedure to us. By the way, Amar is A+!

S. NO.	NAME OF TEST	RS/TEST
1	URINE ROUTINE	6/-
2	BLOOD SUGAR	16/-
3	HAEMOGLOBIN	5/-
4	W.B.C.TOTAL COUNT	5/-
5	W.B.C.DIFFERENTIAL COUNT	5/-
6	BLOOD GROUP	10/-
7	V.D.R.L-TEST	10/-
8	URINE FOR JAUNDICE	6/-
9	SPUTUM FOR T.B.	5/-
10	E.S.R.TEST	5/-
11	CLOTTING & BLEEDING TIME	5/-
12	URINE FOR PREGNANCY	35/-
13	WIDAL TEST	10/-
14	MALARIA TEST	10/-



Electrical Workshop

This workshop allows students to get hands on experience with electrical components commonly used in rural equipment, like pumps.

We saw a class in session, with one of the students at the lab table.



Cooking Class

Here students learn basics of cooking. We were delighted to see an all male team making *chaklees*. We also got to buy a few samples of the *chaklees* as well as peanut *chikki*. Vigyan Ashram created a novel way of creating 'healthy' *chikki* by extracting some of the oil from the peanuts, which is then used for frying.



Juice Production

Vigyan Ashram has procured a juice filtration unit that allows fresh juices to be made bacteria free for bottling. They have experimented with various juices and have successfully bottled and marketed lemon juice. Packaging and marketing a product are also important skills learnt by students.



Vermiculture Pits

Vigyan Ashram, in keeping with the tradition of using local organic methods of generating resources, also teaches students the science of vermiculture. Organic refuse is turned into useful manure in specially created pits.



Agriculture Plots

Most relevant to rural students is the teaching of scientific methods in agriculture. We saw small plots of land where various experiments are done to see the effect on yields. Students are encouraged to keep track of costs associated with cultivating their assigned plots and then figuring out the profit (or loss) incurred on the sale of their produce.



Community Impact Evaluation

We also conducted informal interviews of people in the community who have been associated with Vigyan Ashram in various ways and tried to assess the impact or influence of Vigyan Ashram in the local area.

The people we talked to were

Kasimbhai Inamdar – Workshop owner

Mr. Inamdar used to be an instructor at Vigyan Ashram. He himself picked up welding skills while he was at Vigyan Ashram, which has come in handy in his work. He currently employs 6 Vigyan Ashram students, who as apprentices are honing the skills that they are taught at the Ashram. Currently they are fulfilling an order of 46 Pabal Domes.

Shinde Sarpanch – Khairenagar (neigh. village) ex-sarpanch

Several young men and women from neighboring Khairenagar have attended Vigyan Ashram courses over the years and many of them have set-up their own businesses back in their village. The sarpanch opined that Vigyan Ashram has definitely had a positive influence on the local community.

Sunita Pandit Jadhav – Chikki business owner

Ms. Jadhav was also an ex-Vigyan Ashram teacher and taught cooking for several years. Since then she has started her own Chikki making and selling business. Over a cup of tea, she told us how Vigyan Ashram had a positive influence on her life and gave her the skills needed to run her own business. Her niece, who stays with her, attends school and her aunt felt strongly about her continuing her education. Ms. Jadhav also maintains a chicken coop in her yard, another skill she picked up while at Vigyan Ashram.

Addition by Sujata:

Discussions with Yogesh Kulkarni

Students' progress –

Most students are doing well (refer mark lists and health reports). There is only one dropout so far – Alka who came from an NGO called Maher, Pune. She is getting married. Though she is still under the age of 18, there isn't much VA or the NGO that sent her here (Maher) could do to stop her from leaving. One other student Ganesh Satpute has gone back home for a back surgery. He is expected to rejoin school after recovery.

Concern over WLL project – Due to change in the Telecom policy by TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority), Tata Indicom (service provider for WLL) is not required to give services (in terms of a minimum number of connections) in the rural area. Instead they have to pay a “minimum deficit charge” of Re.1 for every call made from their network. As a result of this change, an ambiguity regarding revenue sharing among Tata Indicom, N-Logue and Vigyan. The process of deciding the same is under process. As a stop gap arrangement, it has been decided that Vigyan Ashram will retain the money collected (for providing services) in a separate bank account. Until the business plan is revised and a firm contract is drawn, no further investment will happen in this regard from Vigyan Ashram.

But the time required for this process is uncertain.

These changes have cast a shadow of doubt regarding the self-sustenance of VA with the help of the WLL project. But VA is looking at other ways of raising revenues. For example - starting a distribution chain for the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables to corporate employees in Pune. The plan is that this will be an entirely web-based process. The kiosk operators will take orders from various corporate employees via email. Vigyan Ashram will do the marketing. They will also liaison between the companies (whose employees will get fresh organic vegetables at the company gate), farmers (will earn more with the elimination of middlemen) and kiosk operators (will benefit by increase internet usage). VA is of the opinion that there is big revenue generating potential in this kind of an activity.

This activity is still in the planning stage. They have approached Persistent Ltd with their plan but as of now, but have not heard from them. But it is heartening to know that they are not just sitting and waiting for the WLL to take off. And that there are other innovative back-up plans for achieving self-sufficiency.

Annexes:

A. Reports submitted by Vigyan Ashram:

1. Note regarding the DBRT 04-05 activities
2. List of students and their details
3. Health report of students
4. Batch-wise breakup of students
5. Batch-wise time table
6. Mark list for three semesters
7. Utilization report of funds obtained from Asha-Seattle

B. More pictures

Mechanical workshop (equipped with some very old machines: lathe, cutters etc.) These machines are too old to be used for precise work – they are largely used for instruction and not very expert jobs. Could do with replacement.



The DBRT course is residential and the students live in spartan hostels on campus. Some of the hostels have been funded by organizations such as the Rotary club. Each hostel is a large room with a number of beds for 7-8 students.



The poultry farming students have to learn how to care for the chicks and are required to document their growth carefully. They maintain a chart (right) that lists daily readings of the medicines administered, weight of the bird etc.



कुकुट पालन			
दि.	जिवित मूल्य	मोलन मूल्य	आप्य
7	51	-	1.600
8	51	-	-
9	51	-	2.500
10	51	-	-
11	51	-	-
12	51	-	1.600
13	51	-	-
14	51	-	7.00
15	51	-	-
16	50	-	0.25+0.25
17	50	-	1.000
18	49	-	1.000
19	49	-	1.500
20	48	-	1.200
21	48	-	-
22	48	-	2.500
23			

We visited Salim's workshop (Pabal). Salim was an instructor at Vigyan Ashram and now has VA students interning at his workshop. The students are working on the Pabal dome project. VA has received an order to supply 48 Pabal domes – they have contracted the work to Salim who employs VA interns to make the parts in his workshop.

