

Visit to Gramin Shiksha Kendra

Date: Mar 22-23, 2011

Visited by: Murali Narasimhan

Background

This was my fourth visit to the schools since 2005. Part of my motivation in visiting these schools is as a project steward for GSK with both Asha for Education and Vibha since 2005. Every time I visit, there is a visible improvement in the quality and quantity of personnel and infrastructure.

To visit, I reached Jaipur early in the morning on 22nd, and took a local train down to Sawai Madhopur where I was picked up by Maneesh Pandey, the coordinator for GSK.

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Around 11am, Maneesh took me to Jaganpura where the first GSK school is located. It's about 16 km from the city, and takes about 30-45 minutes to get there. The school is in a very rural area with desert-like arid conditions, and the school is set against a background of low lying hills from the Aravali range. The Uday school at Jaganpura has a large playground and eight classrooms apart from a store room. There is now a border fence around the school and a swinging gate.

As we drove into the school, we saw a carpentry class outside taught by Prithviraj, who teaches at Bodal as well. I was fascinated with small children handling carpentry tools with ease and poise - and surprised, I asked the teacher if using such sharp tools like chisels, drills and nails etc was unsafe, the teacher replied that the rural parents do not mind it. Actually, they encourage such skill development in their children and are very happy that GSK is providing such training. In the class, the children create new wooden objects or repair any old ones. On the day I visited, they were fixing a broken cricket bat. The tools I saw the children use included chisels, hammers, a manual drill, saw, plane, nails and glue.

After the carpentry class, I went inside a couple of classrooms to see what they were doing and learning. In one classroom, several children were practising questions from the VIII standard Rajasthan state board examinations.

Then I went to their store room where they store all the stuff created by the children including their newspapers, the wooden objects etc.

Leaving the school, we then went to the main GSK office in Sawai Madhopur where we met the new staff members - Naresh and Lokesh. I pored through the audit reports for the last 3 years, and tried to get an idea of how they manage their expense reports etc.

At Maneesh's home, I met Minu, his wife and a teacher at the Uday school in Sawai Madhopur. She talked about the recent success of their school day function (KILOL) that drew in a lot of participation and donations.

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I had gone to the Ranthambore National Park that morning with Maneesh's family and Vishnu Gopal, the seniormost teacher after Maneesh at GSK. Around 11am, Vishnu and I headed to the Uday school at the Bodal village. Bodal is situated right at the edge of the sanctuary, and the school itself used to be a game warden office earlier. The infrastructure has been spruced up in the last couple of years, and there are adequate class rooms, library, and sanitation facilities. There's also a big playground like at Jaganpura.

Most of the children here come from villages nearby, some of which fall within the National Park boundaries. Recently, several of these villagers accepted a rehabilitation package from the government and moved out of the area. The number of children, hence, has come down to 96 from about 145 last year.

At Bodal, I visited all classrooms. The first class I went to was similar to the one at Jaganpura where children were practising VIII examination questions for English. The teacher, Veni, had given everyone a story to read, and there was some discussion on the story after the reading. The children were actively participating in the session and the teacher was doing a good job of translating or making the children come up with meanings for difficult English words. The question paper that it was based on, however, had quite a few grammatical and semantic mistakes - showing the rather indifferent standard followed by the state board in Rajasthan.

The other classes I visited were more for the primary and middle school children. Prithviraj had a room as well where the carpentry lesson was going on. I then visited the library where there were hundreds of new books donated through the Room To Read campaign.

After the Bodal school visit, I then visited the GSK office again and discussed the future plans for outreach with Vishnu and Radheshyam. Radheshyam is a local who is part of the GSK Board and is currently serving as the outreach coordinator. Part of his work involves visiting many villages nearby and communicating the GSK model of education and making the communities aware of the potential. This outreach is part of a 5-year plan where GSK hopes to inculcate their model into 100 government schools through community ownership of the transformation.

I then had a discussion with Maneesh and Vishnu about their future plans for GSK. The primary goal outside of running the 4 Uday schools now seems to be outreach and work with rural communities to establish or strengthen existing Village Education Councils (VEC) and School Development Management Committees (SDMC). Both VECs and SDMCs are part of the government setup, the latter coming into effect since the Right To Education Act. However, in practice, they are not very functional even though there is power in these institutions. For instance, the Sarpanch and the Panchayats have control over teacher appointments but is rarely exercised.

When asked why the outreach wasn't being done directly with the schools themselves,

Maneesh believes that the government school teachers are already receiving a lot of training and spend a lot of time on these extra activities. Based on their successful model of community participation and ownership in the Uday schools, they hope to inculcate a similar model through energizing the villagers. Currently, the government spends about 15,000 rupees per child per year.

Conclusions

The schools are performing at an outstanding level as evidenced by their recent successes at the state board examinations. The staff is talented, motivated and understand the philosophy behind the schools. Most importantly, every child loves studying and playing at the schools.

Challenges lie in the form of chronic funding shortfalls - which lead to personal strains in the staff members and also hampers the original growth plan.