Site Visit Report - Ashraya

Visit on November 19, 2019

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I visited Ashraya on November 19, 2019 for a day. I arrived at Kollam by train on the morning of November 19th and was warmly received by Dolly at the Station. This was my first visit to Ashraya; and to Kollam after a decade. After getting refreshed, I proceeded to Ashraya to be in time for the morning prayer at 10:15 AM. Ashraya caters to both residential children and day scholars. The morning prayer is the first session in the day when both groups congregate.

A typical day at Ashraya starts with the morning prayer session, followed by classes for about 2 hours, lunch, after noon session for about an hour and outdoor activities, before the day scholars depart for their homes. For residential students, the day starts much earlier at 5:30 AM and stay in the premises for 6 days a week.

On the day, I visited them, they had music classes in the morning and art and craft sessions after noon. It was a classical music class and the students were taught the *swaras* and few songs. While many of them cannot sing on their own, they certainly made an attempt to follow the teacher and express themselves. Music has a therapeutic effect and helps some of the agitated children to calm down. On other days, sessions include Yoga
classes on three days in a week and physiotherapy sessions on four days in a week.

Before the teacher arrived, some of them volunteered to sing a few songs. They were provided with a microphone and it helped in them being heard by everyone in the hall. The children were very disciplined during the class hours. I had my lunch with the children and they were well mannered during the lunch. One of the student undertakes to serve all the children and they eat together after a prayer session.

The after-noon session was largely around craft and other activities for children to use their motor skills. Dolly shared with me some of the work done by the children.

The core objective of Ashraya is to help children become independent and lead life with dignity. Their efforts are focused on children being independent to do their daily chores, feed themselves and take care of themselves first before doing work. There are instances of some students showing improvement to get admitted in colleges and even join mainstream education.
Meeting with Dolly

Dolly (a) Sreekala, has been associated with Ashraya since its inception in early 2000s. A qualified social worker and a native of Kollam, she is largely responsible for the day-to-day operations in Ashraya. Our discussion ranged a wide range of topics from admission process, students moving out of Ashraya when they are ready to leave, counselling for parents and others. I also learn that they actively implements the Niramaya Insurance Scheme of National Trust under Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment for differently abled children. She has ensured that over 9000 beneficiaries availed benefits through this insurance scheme.

We discussed about recruitment of teachers for the program and keeping them motivated. Her view was that most of the teachers they recruit are fresh graduates/diploma holders and have an aspiration to get a Government job. This has resulted in large teacher turnover in Ashraya. Dolly feels fine with this trend as she believes that everyone has to find their satisfaction through their work. During their work with Ashraya, she trains them and helps them to improve their skills working with the children. They also find opportunities for these teachers to participate in conferences outside.

Venugopalan

Venugopalan started Ashraya in 2000 in his private estate (his residence is next door). His parents (his father had become a renunciate then) were associated with the project in the initial years until their demise. A businessman by profession, he wanted to give back to the society through Ashraya. He doesn’t seek much external assistance and tries to fund the project largely from his internal resources and support from few well wishers. He was also associated with the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India as the the NGO member of the Local Level Committee, Kollam, where he worked in the areas of Legal Guardianship of children affected with mental ailments. When questioned about his expansion plans, he was conservative in suggesting that institutions like Ashraya can serve well only if they are small in size. He wishes that the Government can work towards setting up similar models elsewhere.

Staff Update and Meeting

Ashraya’s staff largely comprises of young girls who have recently passed out of diploma courses. They join Ashraya for work experience and on-job learning. According to Dolly, this model serves everyone as the teachers get to learn before they seek career options with the Government. There has been changes in teaching staff since the last budget. Two of their teachers
left Ashraya after they got married and were replaced. I met the three teachers currently on rolls - Sneha, Subimol, and Anitha. Anitha is one of the first students of Ashraya and went on to complete her B.Com and Diploma in Computer Application. Sneha has been working in Ashraya for about 2 years and Subimol joined them recently. The teachers were quite shy to converse. The teachers reside in the same premises as the children. I presented them an overview of what Asha stands for and the role of stewards and volunteers. I also mentioned them about the network of schools that we work for and how we can help in getting more exposure for them through workshops, conferences etc. I also recommended counselling for the teachers by qualified psychologists, which will help them to manage stress.

**Summary**

Ashraya serves as a good model for other institutions to emulate in offering home for marginalised children. While the size of operations may look small, it is well administered and sustainable. Currently, it appears that there is heavy dependence on Dolly and Venugopal for running the centre. Venugopal has some ideas to keep the funding of the institution sustainable well into the future, which looks promising.