

## **HUT Vidyashram combined site visit reports, June 2018 and August 2019 Meera Sitharam, sitharam@cise.ufl.edu**

Please refer to the wonderful photos that Dr. Raja sends every year.

Raja as usual provided the 1.5 hour (each way) transport for me and Anousha (18 , who was present in 2018) and Kavina (15/16, present on both trips) whose presence helps immediate rapport with the kids, and a load of old clothes and toys from my parents' place to HUT.

Both years, I spent time in the classrooms as well as looking over the new student, health, educational, and alumni records. HUT files annual tax reports to ensure both their tax-exempt and FCRA status (which is renewed once every 5 years). In 2018, we ended the trip with the usual outing to hike up the nearby hill with all the kids. In 2019, the visit was somewhat shorter and we left before dark.

### **The overall state of the Vidyashram:**

Overall, it is impressive and heartwarming to see what the Vidyashram has achieved in the 11-12 years since its inception.

The biggest and most impressive change is the systematic development of an alumni network. See details further below.

The second, rather innovative change instituted by Raja is extensive and voluminous record keeping, documentation and accountability *via photo*, e.g., the daily meals offered to the kids, health checkups, spring clean ups of the dorms etc, various school events, visitors, etc. This is easier for the staff to do than keep written record or inventory. Apparently district government officials have adopted this practice as part of their own accountability processes. As a result, Raja has sent reams of photos to Asha vols documenting HUT Vidyashram's or "House of hope's" daily activities.

Third is a tie up with a local medical college for both psychiatric monitoring and dental checkups.

Since the last substantial infrastructure improvements around 2015 (including solar and an open state/hall where lunch is served and assemblies are held), there are no major changes to infrastructure and numbers. The number of children has more or less held steady. There are approx 105 children staying at HUT, including some who are staying there past their 8th grade and attending the local school, as well as others who are attending a technical institute, or higher secondary school, who essentially double as part time staff. In fact, they now play an integral in the running of the Vidyashram There are continued small scale donations from locals in the form of meals etc., approximately 10-15 lunches a month. Several groups of European volunteers visit at various times and continue to help out both by giving time and one-time cash donations (that are used for various infrastructure and other expenses).

The trees and other vegetation the students planted some years ago have now matured to make the campus look green and pretty.

## **Responses to previous Concerns, new Concerns and Suggestions:**

### **(1) Alumni network and Tracking**

After the death of 2 previous alumni (one of whom was HIV positive) who left Vidyashram before 2014, after 8th grade, the brother of one of the deceased kids was depressed and lived in the Vidyashram for a while (although he didn't have the concentration to attend school). It turns out that he, also HIV positive, left the Vidyashram of his own accord, against the wishes of the staff. Although he continued to keep in touch and worked at a cell-phone repair shop, at some point he went out of contact for a short time they found out later that he had passed away. This happened at some point in the 2017-2018.

Since then, HUT has taken impressive steps in keeping track of kids who leave the Vidyashram either in 8th grade or 10th grade or after.

*They have clearly internalized the importance: tracking is important above all to ensure the alumni (some of whom, being HIV positive need to continually monitor their health status) are doing ok, which is extremely important for the long-term sustainability of the Vidyashram.*

Tracking helps not only Vidyashram as an organization (alumni are the best well-wishers and potential donors and possibly dedicated future staff), but also the current Vidyashram students (to see concrete examples of how their forerunners have done, and potentially use the contacts for finding their way around the world when they become alumni), and finally the alumni themselves, who use their own network for information sharing and looking out for one another.

Many of the older kids are aware of the crucial role the Vidyashram played in their lives and the community it continues to provide them, and want to give back once they achieve some modicum of financial stability

All the mobile phone numbers of the alumni who have left the Vidyashram (over 100) are painstakingly kept up to date, and they are contacted on a regular basis. The 100 include those who have left after 8th grade, or later, those still studying (some are in trade school or college). Over 35 of those are working in an array of sometimes quite entrepreneurial jobs, in various places from Chennai to Erode to local areas – often networking among themselves.

Some examples. Three alumni who got diplomas in various technical trade schools have banded together to win contracts for electric/drywall/plumbing from builders. Their combined expertise and cooperation has earned them contracts in Chennai and other places. Two alumni operate harvesters and similar heavy farm machinery are hence sought after by farmers even from other states. Other alumni are truck “lorry” drivers with national permits to drive across state lines. Most truck operators eventually become owner-operators. Some alumni work in the catering industry, often abroad (in the middle east or singapore. Other alumni cook samosas and other snacks and supply them to stock street-side kiosks. Some alumni work as nurses.

One remarkable observation is that almost all of the female alumni are working (and *not* in farm or construction or domestic unskilled labor). This is in stark contrast to young, childbearing women of similar socioeconomic circumstances in nearby areas. Even those that temporarily stopped for childbearing fully intend to work. The bitter experience of having mothers left widowed, sometimes HIV positive, sometimes with HIV positive children, and penniless, often forced into sex trade has, presumably, left an impression about the importance of financial independence, as opposed to total financial reliance on their husbands.

## **(2) Psychosocial monitoring**

The local Dhanalakshmi medical college has visited once for a psychiatric check up day (soon after my 2017 site visit). This has been documented as a report sent to us by Raja.

It is important for Vidyashram to continue having yearly outside visits by a psychiatrist or at least a psychologist. Even for the other kids, the overall emotional fragility of the kids' home situation mandates it.

## **(3) Stunting, health monitoring etc.**

In response to prior years' concern about the low measurements on pediatric growth charts, further monitoring and changes in meal plans have taken place . Nutrition has been changed to include more fresh vegetables, fruit and protein (boiled eggs). In addition to further attention to supplementation and deworming/delousing medication to ward off anemia and deficiencies. Dental checkups have also been arranged from (I believe) Dhanalakshmi dental college.

I would like to emphasize that this is all in addition to the continued presence of a nurse and weekly to monthly checkups of increasing thoroughness by health workers and Dr. Raja himself.

Children appear cheerful and are doing relatively well in school (as Raja's yearly reports of 10th grade exam results shows). However, the children are still often below the 5th percentile in height, weight etc. per the Indian pediatric chart.

There is research to show that kids that were born in poor circumstances (maternal nutritional insufficiency) have somewhat stunted growth

but with reasonable nutrition they seem to somewhat catch up in growth immediately after puberty. Of course for over half of the kids who are HIV positive, there are additional challenges.

Dental camps have also been arranged. This in addition to the regular health monitoring of all kids once a week by a nurse and also by Dr Raja.

#### **(4) Electronic records, training staff to take initiative and make decisions.**

Much of the record keeping is on paper, or in the form of photos. While photos are great for immediate accountability, and sometimes paper may be just as efficient because of the cumbersome effort of data entry, for certain purposes, online spreadsheets are unavoidable for organizations who seek to improve their processes.

Health records etc. must be in the form of spreadsheets that can be easily analyzed and information extracted. Even alumni records are best kept online for information to be easily added, updated, searched for, etc.

In 2017-18, they had someone who was starting to convert the record keeping online, but the effort seems to have stopped, perhaps because it was a voluntary as opposed to a paid position.

There was a related concern about staff development from last time which I repeat again. While there are senior teachers now who can take initiative in academic matters, I am not sure they are capable take initiative on various administrative matters.

Even now, there seems to be a single resident senior staff member capable of taking initiative and making decisions in Raja's absence. As this is likely to result in inevitable impatience, stress and fraying of trust and respect in relations, it is crucial that other staff are rapidly trained to take ownership and clearly demarcated, but higher level of responsibilities. While it is not easy to find and train folks who can take responsibilities, and while it may take a very long time, persistence and tenacity are called for in this effort.

#### **(5) Visitor tracking and code of conduct**

Last time, it was suggested to draw up a clear visitor policy, both to prevent any chance of abuse, as well as to ensure visitors are monitored by staff especially during interaction with children and that the visitors are given clear guidelines how they should conduct themselves. There are many types of visitors besides the regular staff. (i) parents and guardians (ii) people who are visiting the staff (iii) working-hours volunteers, site visitors etc. (iv) volunteers who help after working-hours (v) overnight visitors. This is very important. Even a single incident can cause much damage.

I did not hear about any policies put in place concerning this. This must be followed up.

#### **(6) Inhouse apprenticeships and Job prospects**

Last time it was mentioned that kids could be trained in house on small maintenance installation book keeping and even administration jobs.

While the kids are naturally handy in cultivating vegetables etc. and in cleaning and maintaining their dorm, what is needed is a formal apprenticeship pipeline.

*There are many jobs that need to be done including record keeping, all the way to administrative responsibilities, see above. Not training senior students to do these jobs is a missed opportunity.*

They can be employed also in the alumni tracking effort mentioned above. Or in maintaining/preparing accounts or updating websites. This affects their employability when they leave. While the staff are aware of this gap, they aren't confident giving the kids such responsibilities.

Even more urgently, we need to set up an employment pipeline, in addition to the alumni network. Start with a network of acquaintances and contacts and organizations public sector and NGO and private sector that could employ these kids. The alumni network is an excellent start, but a formal network is needed of acquaintances of HUT staff, local public officials, various AfE vols and their acquaintances, nearby AfE and AID supported projects and organizations. We will brainstorm on how to get it started and go from there.