

# **Kamalakar memorial trust site visit report**

Priya Mocherla

Kamalakar trust recently completed its 20 years of existence and Vikas Bharathi School has been running under this trust for the past 10 years. I got a chance to visit this school a few times during my India trip in July and August.

My first visit to the school was on the 25th of July. I met Bharati Devi garu in the principals office. After few initial greetings we took a tour of the old and new school buildings. The new school building is still under construction. After the school tour we sat down again in the principal's office and discussed about the general school functioning and the new school building.

The discussion started off with the new school building and its budgetary details. The information what I gathered from the discussion was

1. The new school building is being built by a person who owns that land and also is interested in leasing the land to Vikas Bharthi school.
2. The new building has 2 floors and each floor costs around 15,000 per month as rent. This sums to 30,000 Rs/- as school building rent.
3. The New school building is located just diagonally opposite the old school building hardly few steps away.
4. Each floor is being portioned into 8 rooms and few restrooms have been constructed as well. So a total of 16 rooms will be given upon completion.
5. Only the first floor has been finished and has been occupied in June this year and the second floor needs at least another 6-7 months to get finished.
6. Bharathi devi garu and the land owner have written an agreement (not on any bond or legal paper). It's just an ordinary paper agreement.
7. The new school building agreement needs to be renewed every 11 months.
8. The land owner took a deposit of 1Lakh for each floor which will be returned once the lease ends.

The second floor of the building is still under construction. The class rooms on the first floor have been occupied by the primary class students and the secondary classes are still in the old school building. So Bharathi devi garu is paying rent for the old and the new school building for the past couple of months which sums up to 25,000 Rs/-((15,000(new)+10,000(old)).

I noticed that the new school building is very spacious and will be able to accommodate all the classes from nursery to 10th standard. But it's getting difficult for Mrs. Bharathhi devi to manage that extra surge in the budget. So far she has been managing with her own money and the intermittent donations from the local donors.

The new school building doesn't have a school ground or a playing area. The only free space available to students is the corridor of the building (which is not big at all) where children are free to sit, have their lunch and talk for a while. But in my opinion having a play area with some sand, slides and swings will add to students learning and of course provide some fun while in

school.

After some refreshments we started talking about the students, teachers and their work in school. Currently there are 14 teachers in the school. Four of them for pre-primary, five for lower and another 5 for higher classes. Mrs. Bharati Devi is thinking of appointing a new person as coordinator who can take care of the school and as well as day to day monitoring of the teachers work.

Since I have been to the school a few times I had a very insightful interaction with teachers about their work, interests and the like. I asked them questions like

1. How do they schedule their day?
2. How do they organize a class?
3. Are children encouraged to speak during the class?
4. Do kids talk to each other during the classes?
5. Do children volunteer in the class?
6. Do they discuss, disagree, and debate over topics.
7. What is their teaching style like?

I got some interesting responses from the teachers when I asked these questions. One of my first interactions was with a teacher who taught math and science to higher standard students. She has MSc in computers and is really interested in teaching. She came across as an active and a curious person. She explained me how she organizes with a lesson plan and schedules her class for a given day. Her observation is that kids stick to rote learning and she feels helpless about it. But she thinks that at least the students will get the marks and pass the exam through rote memorization. However she wants them to understand the subject rather than learn it by heart.

Just to probe a little more I asked her as to why she thinks that kids are learning by rote. She said that when she tried changing the questions in the exams (changing names, numericals etc) even a slight change in questions given at the end of each chapter makes them tremble and get confused. She told that the kids in general were afraid of asking questions, discussing and debating during the class except for the one or two students who are proactive. She puts effort from her end to help improve the slow and weak students in the class. When nothing else works in improving these kids, she resorts to punishment and she feels that it does work and result in improving the performance of the kids, albeit in very few cases.

I asked her if she ever tried to explain the concepts with an activity/experiment to her students in any class be it math or science. She told me that, though she is very inclined to show experiments in the class she feels that it slows the pace with which she can complete the syllabus and she is afraid that she may not be able to finish it on time. To me it seemed as if she (and other teachers too in general) think of in-class experiments as activities that need complex and heavy apparatus.

I suggested to her that while “finishing the syllabus is important”, it is also important that the child understands the concept properly of what is being taught. I explained to her that in-class experiments don’t necessarily mean heavy apparatus and complex equipment. It can be done by walking the students through a concept by using every day house hold materials, pictures, stories, doing role plays etc. which helps students to observe, feel, visualize and get stimulated.

She was curious to know more, so I chose a lesson and actually showed her as to how she can work with the concepts in that lesson through activities. She seemed to be impressed and inclined towards implementing what she heard from me. (When I visited the school the next day she told me that she used some of the activity based methodologies I discussed with her she found the difference in the kid’s attention and response.)

In my subsequent visits to the school I spoke to the other teachers too about similar issues and their response to the questions on lesson organization seemed to be not much different from what the science teacher gave. I went through the exercise with them too and gave them ideas on various techniques / methodologies they can use in subjects like history, geography, english etc.

By the reaction of the teachers, after my discussion with them, it did seem to me like they are definitely interested in more information/resources on activity based learning approach in teaching. I did promise them to provide more resources on teaching through activities.

The other important aspects which were discussed with Bharathi devi garu was about the students and their performance, about the various facilities/resources the school provides the students.

The school has kept a nominal charge of Rs.100 per month as a fee (which is strictly on an ability to pay basis). This is collected just to instill a sense of responsibility in the parents and students. The school provides the students with two pairs of school dresses, 12 sets of notebooks a set of text books to all the students. Transportation is also provided to some younger kids with an auto riksha.

The performance of the students in examinations is fair. All the students who appeared in the 10th standard board exams last year cleared the exams with good marks. The school encourages all its students to actively participate in various competitions like elocution, essay writing, painting, singing, drama etc. The students are doing pretty well in those competitions not only at the school level but also at various city level competitions as well in which kids from costly private schools participate.

During the past academic year, the school invited many poets, freedom fighters, doctors, IAS, IPS officers to preside over many annual day and school functions. The school also takes children on excursions to various educational places in the city like Birla planetarium (for higher

grades) and to amusement parks (for lower grades). The trip is free of cost for the students. Every year the school sets up a free vital health checkup for students and the needy students are given medicines for free.

Overall, I believe the school is doing a pretty good job of helping the kids from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. There can certainly be improvements made in the quality of education when looked at it from a holistic perspective. The teachers were receptive to suggestions made and it would certainly be helpful to provide the teachers with some teaching aids and / or teacher training.



