

Asha Silicon Valley

Apna Skool Site Visit

School Location: Kanpur, U.P.

Date of Visit: February 14, 2024

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Apna Skool is a project that runs supplemental education centers for children of migrant laborers at brick kilns and construction sites around Kanpur. There are 25 such centers around Kanpur usually with 20-30 children at each center. I visited three centers: Dedupur, Kalra-3, and Samrat.



Dedupur center, Apna Skool

The Dedupur center is a modest two floor house that overlooks the *basti* (settlement) of huts. The children were assembled on a terrace, with a big tree serving as a backdrop. The children

are provided uniforms, including sweaters and caps for protection from the north Indian winter chill. The children at this center were all very young, the oldest perhaps being ten. I was told that the children sometimes have to be fetched from their homes by the teacher. Still, they seemed to enjoy the class. Several children stood up and led the class in chanting poems with the class following along. They were also able to understand simple questions in English. They were shy at first, but eager to show me their work. They gave me small mementoes such as paper boats and greeting cards.

After this, I visited the center called Kalra-3. The center is a single brick room with a corrugated metal roof. On the day of my visit there were about 25 young kids, most of them below the age of 10. They demonstrated their knowledge of numbers via a poem chant, led by one of the kids. They asked for my name, and I wrote it on the board and asked them to spell out the letters and read the name. They did it with ease, showing familiarity with the English alphabet and basic reading ability.



Kalra-3 center, Apna Skool

As we walked away from the center, I saw the parents of some of the kids making the bricks nearby. It is tedious back-breaking work. The laborers squat on their haunches, beside a mound of wet clay. They rub some dry dust on the inside of the mold before filling it with the clay, compacting it, and then flipping it over to get a brick-shaped block. These wet bricks are dried in the sun and will be baked later in the kiln nearby. The laborers earn ₹400 for every thousand bricks they mold, which takes them the entire day. The work is usually done together by a family unit, which explains the incentive to put children to work when they are old enough to help.

After the Kalra center visit, we went to see the Samrat center. This was a slightly larger center that had about 80 children. I was asked to join them for lunch. Lunch was a simple but filling meal, with roti, rice, and sabzi. After the meal, each child was given two small bananas.



Lunch at Samrat center, Apna Skool

The children later assembled together and we went through a round of poem recitations. Then, a few of the older children demonstrated their knowledge of basic English by telling me their names, the names of family members, their teachers, their school, etc. Some of them fetched their notebooks to show me grade level reading and arithmetic exercises. Some of the older children had written notes on basic science topics such as the occurrence of eclipses, which they were able to explain quite well. I think they are very well prepared for enrolment in any government school.

The teachers at all three centers are clearly very dedicated. Their love and empathy for the kids shines through. Several of them have been with Apna Skool for many years; a few younger teachers are relatively new. All of them appear to be very gentle with the kids. The kids are also comfortable around the teachers and call them “Didi” (older sister) or “Bhaiya” (older brother).



Students and teachers, Samrat center, Apna Skool

In later discussions with the teachers and with Mukesh Kumar and Raju Gaur, I learnt that Apna Skool teachers are also traveling to Bihar to track the students to ensure continuity in their education. They are not able to track all the children every year, but a beginning has been made and they hope to continue and expand this effort.

My conclusion was that these centers are crucial to ensure that the children get some quality education. The children of migrant laborers fall through the cracks of a state-centered education system, so much so that UP government schools are reluctant even to admit them. From the small sample of children I encountered in these centers, I think that the outcomes are remarkable, given the background of the kids and the circumstances in which the centers operate. The alarming reports of student performance standards in UP, Bihar, and other states that we hear about are nowhere in evidence. Based on my brief interactions with the children, I found them to be lively, curious, and intelligent children who deserve all the support we can provide to them.