Apna Skool: Migrant Labourers Project, Jagriti: A Site Visit Report
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Background

Jagriti is an organization at IIT-Kanpur. Prof. Mahendra Verma (Physics dept. IITK) is the main coordinator of Jagriti, and Mr. Mahendra Dwivedi is a full time secretary, and coordinates the field activities. Jagriti’s activities are two-fold. First, it runs a school at Lodhar village (near IIT). Second, it runs schools at several brick-kilns around IIT. Some of these are 15-20km away from IIT. Many of the workers at these brick-kilns are migrant labourers, and hence the name of the project.

The work with migrant labourers' children was started back in 1987 by Vijaya didi and Mahendra Verma. They now have schools running at as many as 18 centres.

Site visit: starting from IITK

We started the site visit from the visitor’s hostel on IITK at 10am in a maruti van. We stretched Indian time by only 5 minutes! The day was hot by normal standards, and very cool by Kanpur summer standards. Mahendra Dwivedi joined us at the Dhamikheda centre, which is the first place we visited.

Dhamikheda Centre

Background

This centre had the most number of children (104) among all the centres we visited. The classes were being held in a little house which belonged to someone else. It was a temporary arrangement. The small house was partitioned into four parts, and classes 1, 2, 3, and 4 were being held in these parts. The number of children decreased steadily from class 1 to 4, with only 5-6 students in class 4. They are planning to shift the class-4 students to the Lodhar school, also run by Jagriti.

The students are mostly children of migrant labourers at the construction sites around the centre. There are also some children from the local area (from a poor background).

There were three teachers for the four classes. Two of them are being paid Rs. 1,500 per month, and one teacher who has been with Jagriti for several years now is being paid Rs. 1,600 per month. The children sang a song. They were very enthusiastic and insisted that I tell them a story! I managed to convey something in Hindi, which they hopefully understood.
Some interesting features

- The children do not clap, but lift their hands and wiggle them to indicate they are showering flowers. This seemed an interesting thing which has been taught :-)  
- The children are taught art, clay modeling, etc. apart from the three R’s  
- Each child is a VIP, with a name-tag in front of them :-) They have names written in English/Hindi on either side of a cardboard placard. This is a very good idea, so that any visitor can address individual children by name immediately.

Some problems

- Lack of a permanent location for running the classes has been a problem here. They have shifted six times so far.  
- There was no wall separating these parts, and interference among classes was also a problem.  
- Transportation of the class-4 children from the current location to Lodhar school will be a problem due to poor traffic conditions on the road (they have to go through a national highway for a stretch of the route).

Some pictures

A view of class-1, two students of class-3 can also be seen; some art work of the students can be seen on the walls

Vijaya didi, Ms. Sunita (teacher), and students of class-3; name placard of a student can be seen

Clay-modeling done by the students
Mehra Centre

Background

This centre is right near a brick kiln, about 15m away from IIT-anpur campus. It has been an upward struggle to start and run these centres. Brick kiln contractors are not very interested in children's education. Jagriti has been constantly requesting the contractors to avoid child labour, and provide room for children's education. At this particular centre, there were only about 15 students when we went. There were supposed to be about 25 students. The students present were of class 1-2 level. At this centre, just the previous day, a room had been made available for conducting the classes.

Some interesting features

- The children were shown a UNICEF cartoon video by Mahendra Dwivedi on his laptop. The storyline was designed to motivate students to attend school.

Some problems

- Attendance is quite irregular. Only 3-4 students attend regularly.
- Child labour is rampant. Children often do the work of transporting bricks from one place to another on mules (relatively easy job for even children of age under 10).
- Government is supposed to provide day-care centres (creches) for children under 5, but there is no such centre. There were a couple of students who had younger siblings along with them in the class (no one to tend for the under-5 since parents are working at the brick kiln).

Some pictures

Vijaya didi, Mahendra Dwivedi, and a view of the room at the Mehra centre

Another view of the class-room. One of the students can be seen taking care of a younger sibling.
Ankit Centre

Background, more information on brick-kiln workers

This centre is very close to the Mehra centre. A lot of the children were from Bihar (migrants). I gathered some more information about the brick-kiln workers at this centre. The workers earn about Rs.100-115 per 1000 bricks. A family with husband and wife working can make about 1500 bricks in a day. Transportation of bricks from the place of making the shape, to the place where the bricks are baked, is done using mules. This fetches about Rs.52 for 1000 bricks. And a family presumably can transport about 12,000 such bricks per day, probably less in summer due to the intense heat. However the money earned this way also has to go into feeding the mules, so less actually reaches the hands of the workers for their purposes.

The money made by the brick kiln contractors themselves is huge; about 50-60 lakhs per contract (per year perhaps). As mentioned earlier, child labour is rampant, especially in the transportation of bricks using mules, since this work is quite easy physically even for small children (just have to follow the mule around with a stick, once the mule has been loaded). I could see many children working this way. Jagriti had earlier tried reporting the cases of child labour to the labour commissioner, but nothing positive has resulted so far.

More information on the students, class-room

The students seem quite good in reading/writing Hindi/English and basic Math. That is, as compared to regular government schools. Jagriti has provided the centres with various learning material. Many of Eklavya's teaching methods are used. For instance, children are not taught Hindi letters/alphabets to begin with. They are first taught two-letter Hindi words, like ‘cup’, ‘hal’, “bus’, etc. to which they can easily relate. They are later taught to recognize letters using alphabets printed on cardboard pieces, and asked to form those two letter words.

Jagriti was planning a trip to the Kanpur zoo for the kids the next day (23rd March). During the site visit, children were asked to be ready for the trip the next day morning.

Some problems

- One severe problem in these centres is the heat + dust storm. There is a lot of dust in the area, especially due to the brick manufacture. And there is very hot wind which blows, kicking up all the dust. This problem is likely to get far more severe as the summer advances. While it is good that the classes are not completely in the open, still the dust storm can affect the half-covered class-room quite severely.

Kalra Centre

The final centre we visited was the Kalra centre, on the way back to IIT Kanpur. Here there were children of classes 1-4, although there was only one teacher. One interesting kid I encountered wrote the exact mirror image of Hindi words I asked him to write (not intentionally). Pretty interesting I thought :-)

Making the brick mould at the Ankit brick kiln

Bricks are baked at the kiln (Ankit)

Transporting bricks to the kiln on mules. It is a common sight to see children doing the work of walking the mules back and forth (Ankit)

Cardboard pieces with Hindi letters, used as teaching aid

Teaching material for kids, at the Ankit centre
Summary

In summary, I feel that Jagriti has done an excellent job in setting up and managing these schools at the various brick kilns. It is a continuing uphill struggle with a myriad problems. It is difficult to get children to stay in these schools due to the circumstances. But all the same, it is very important to address this class of underprivileged children, since with their parents being migrant workers, they are not even catered to under any regular government schools. With Jagriti’s efforts, if at least a generation of children grow up with minimal exposure to education, perhaps the next generation will see the fruits of the efforts. We should support Jagriti in whatever way possible in their efforts.