

DHULE PROJECT APPROVAL MEETING
September 22, 2004
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Introduction

- Proposal was created after a site visit of the project (October 2003) by two experienced Asha volunteers (Subashree and Shanmuga). It came highly recommended.
- The Vishwamandal Seva Ashram, Shirpur, headed by Father Godfrey D'Lima, is a registered organization and has FCRA clearance (both documents are available with Asha Zurich). The association is affiliated to the Society of Jesus in that 3 members of the governing board are members of the Society of Jesus.
- The project has to do with education of the children of the Bhil people in Dhule district, Shirpur area, in Maharashtra. Specifically, the funding is for the education of 400 tribal children in 25 schools, including teacher's stipends, training, educational workshops, teaching aids, and supervision of the learning centers.
- Out of 400 children, nearly 250 will be girls.
- The total requested amount is: INR 5,09,000
- VSD is also involved in other issues such as watershed development, organic farming, medical training, etc.
- Fr. Godfrey has been active in this area for the last 15 years.
- Asha Zurich started looking at this project: February 2004.

Questions and Answers

Question: Since the activity is on-going, how will the requested funds be used?

Answer: The funding we are asking for is to facilitate the current work with greater effectiveness and efficiency. In the case of our health and agricultural development components it will raise the quality of our intervention besides the quantum.

Question: What is the total area of coverage of the project?

Answer: The 25-30 learning centers are in a rough triangle, each arm being about 25 kms in length. The maximum centers operate on the Satpuda foothills on the Maharashtra-Madhya Pradesh border.

Question: On the secular nature of the intervention. As long as the intervention (say in terms of educational curriculum and activities) is secular and inclusive in nature, we do not see any problems. Eventually, if Asha Zurich decides to fund this project, we would be requiring something in writing to this effect.

Answer: Evidence of undue influence on local tribals, thus displacing their own beliefs, culture and traditions, because of interactions for development with Vishwa Mandal Sevashram, is not in the least forthcoming. As an undertaking requested by Asha Zurich in this regard, I will categorically state that our educational and whatever other development services or programmes have a secular and humanistic character. They include the best traditions of religious tolerance and positive values of fraternity, social justice and equality.

Question: How has the situation changed in the Shirpur area over the last 12 years of intervention, in terms of development, local involvement, and taking up of responsibilities by the locals?

Answer: 12 years ago we began the children's educational programme imagining that Zilla Parishad schools would retain more students and achieve their goal of imparting formal education; therefore, we were pursuing supportive educational systems. Today, the govt. schools have not kept their promise. We are generating answers to the questions of rural & tribal education. We are developing a new syllabus that relates to the environment and the skills required to improve living conditions. We are also introducing to the learners community programmes such as sustainable agriculture, watershed (micro) development, credit unions, and health (traditional & modern). The outcome of our 12 year old efforts on the one hand is to find some learners making progress in formal education – but more, we have now communities

involved in developmental activities such as: credit groups, micro-watershed, organic compost, seed treatment & pest control, health awareness, AND literacy.

If tribal and mass education is not to become a hopeless task today and into the future, I would also state the positive signs of community growth in self reliance over the years of our association with development issues. The tribal community contributes towards any service or activity; in the beginning it was perhaps the hand-outs that enticed participation. Today, they reason out their own benefits and agree to make appropriate contributions.

We have active support of the Government machinery and the banks in working out our present-day development strategies. We have also linked with the expertise of NGOs like AFARM-Pune and AFPRO-Ahmednagar, with media professionals and other field-based NGOs to keep our strategies up-to-date and closely adapted to people's lives. (CHIDU: The answers are not exactly as written by Fr. Godfrey; I have edited them for brevity)

Question: What happens after 3 years?

Answer: Some children will proceed with formal education. Most children are first generation learners, but the hope is that with the support of the learning in our programme they will be better citizens of their villages and of the world. ASHA's help will not have gone in vain. (CHIDU: I think it has to be looked at in the longer context. If the only effect of education for a tribal is to then leave his village and go outside in search of jobs then it is not of much use. The overall situation for the tribals should improve and a sustainable economy with fruitful exchange with society at large should establish. In the case of the Shirpur region, this process can be expected to last one generation. In other words, the broader context has to be born in mind.)

Question: The salary for the teachers is very low (Rs. 525/month). Will it be enough to motivate them?

Answer: Teachers salary is low but compares with the Govt. rate for auxiliary teachers who are hired on contract. Moreover we cannot sustain teachers only on this stipend which depends on whether or not we get annual funding. Our teachers must retain their traditional occupations along with their teaching commitments so if the project stops they will not be stranded. Motivation does not depend on salary alone. What we can do for our teachers is to provide them with facilitating assets like a bicycle for commuting, rainproof clothing, a tape-recorder-radio for self-learning.

Other points

- Contact lines with Fr. Godfrey are good. There is no doubt in my mind about his dedication to the cause.
- One important thing to be kept in mind is that this is a first contact with learning for a community; education by itself is not an end. It has to help them find their place in this world, give them freedom to choose and take decisions, and to come out of exploitation when necessary.
- Site visit will have to be done soon. Arvind has volunteered to do one during the last part of this year. Longer term, I can take up the responsibility of a visit when I visit Mumbai.
- Since it is an on-going programme, partial funding to the whole project can be considered, so as to gain confidence in working with VSD.