

# Asha Seattle Site Visit Report

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<u>Project</u>	:	<b>CENTER FOR LEARNING</b>
<u>Location</u>	:	Hyderabad, India
<u>Site visit done by</u>	:	Hareesh Veldandi ( <a href="mailto:harrays@yahoo.com">harrays@yahoo.com</a> )
<u>Site visit date</u>	:	Feb 26, 2009

## Before the site visit:

Two weeks before I visited India, I kept in constant touch with CFL members – Gurveen Kaur, Ramgopal Koneripalli and Anju Anand. We agreed upon a site visit date and I told them that I would be in touch with them right after I come to India. I called Ram a couple of days after reaching India and took the directions to visit the school.

## Day before:

The day before the site visit, I called Ram again to confirm the directions. The site is located in Secunderabad, the twin city of Hyderabad. The directions seemed little confusing, but as the location isn't far from the heart of the city, I didn't find them real hard to follow.

## Day of the Site visit:

I started my journey to the school around 9:30 in the morning from Himayatnagar in Hyderabad. To my surprise, Ram's directions turned out to be pretty straightforward and I reached the school by 10:20 AM. I spent at the school up to 2:20 PM –in total a 4 hours of stay at the school including lunch at the school.

## Initial Impression:

As we know, the first impression is the best impression. As soon as I reached the school, I saw a couple kids playing outside, a couple of kids doing home work and a couple of teachers helping students. It wasn't a typical school atmosphere where all the kids are heads down in class rooms. It was a great learning atmosphere! It was indeed a pleasant atmosphere at the school, except for a little noise in the nearby construction site.

## Who were there at the school?

Kids – around 60-70 kids

Teachers –Subitha, Sangeetha, Glory, Jayasree, Jaya, Gurveen, Ram and Anju

Housekeeping lady - Laxmi

Ram came around 10:30 – he informed me the day before that he would be coming late.

Anju stopped by around 11 – originally she wasn't supposed to come to the school on that day. But, she did so to say hello to me.

### Quick tour, introductions:

Ram informed me the day before the site visit that he would be coming late to the school on the day. He came to the school five minutes after I had reached there. He introduced me to all the teachers and showed me around the school.

What impressed me the most was - during the quick tour, a couple kids came to Ram and called him “anna”, instead of “sir” or “teacher”. “Anna” in Telugu means brother. It was very pleasing to see that. The students told me that Ram asked them to call him brother since the beginning.

CFL owns the school building and there were 6 class rooms. 4 class rooms were on the ground floor - one for kindergarten, one for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> classes, one for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> classes, and one for special students education. 2 class rooms upstairs are used for higher grade classes.

There was also a library. It was small, but has a decent number of textbooks and other books.

Ram showed me the toilets, small kitchen and other playing areas of the school. All the facilities were very decent.

Ram showed me the surroundings of the school as well. There is a small playing area on the side of the school. Also was a small fencing around the school – Ram and 10<sup>th</sup> class kids were planning to place some new plants in there.

### Photos and interaction:

Then I spent some time taking pictures of some of the students, class rooms, wall hangings, nearby surroundings, crafts made by kids etc.

I did say hello to some teachers and students again.

Students were very happy to be at the school. They were all enjoying their activities – listening to the teachers or playing in the kindergarten class room or doing home work or playing outside.

Site visit photos can be seen at <http://picasaweb.google.com/veldandi/CFLSiteVisitReport#>

My favorite photo is this one -



### **Chat with Ram:**

After taking the photographs, I met Ram in the library upstairs and we had a chat about the school.

Most of what we talked is pretty much familiar to me. Number of students - 70-80, teachers – 7, school timings - 9 to 2:30 PM, grouping of class rooms etc. We talked about how Ram ended up in CFL and how much he has been liking being with CFL.

### **Chat with students:**

I spent almost 20 minutes in talking to a couple of 7<sup>th</sup> grade kids. They were doing their homework upstairs in the corridor. They said CFL started using NCERT books from this year. I asked them a couple of simple questions from their books. They answered them correctly, but more importantly enthusiastically. I also asked them about their parents, location where they came from etc. Their mothers are housemaids and fathers are daily wage workers. One of the kids was really happy that he was able to study in English medium school after he had studied in Telugu medium school up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade or so. He proudly said he was the topper of his school before and now in CFL he was happy that he was learning so much.

### **Chat with Gurveen:**

Gurveen and I then met in the library for a few minutes. We talked about the school in general. I asked about the long term plan of finding the principal teacher who can run the school by herself/himself. She immediately talked about Ram being a potential candidate, but also said that as there are some very experienced teachers in the school, Ram will take little more time to get the respect from them and so it might take some more time. She also talked about planning to take a break that hasn't been happening for the last 3 years. She hopes she can have a break soon.

During our chat, a kid stopped by and Gurveen helped him in getting a book he had been reading in the library. He also asked a question from the school after a while and Gurveen answered it.

We talked about which teacher teaches what subjects. Ram, being an engineer, usually takes care of Mathematics for higher grade classes and other teachers teach other subjects. Medium of education is English, but teachers do interact with students in English, Telugu and Hindi.

Gurveen told me about how teachers left the school after spending 3-4 years. She said salaries weren't the primary reasons, but she thinks better salaries will probably help.

### **Lunch and chat with teachers:**

Apart from funding teachers' salaries, Asha provides funding for mid-day meal at the school. The lunch is cooked by a nearby lady and usually has a curry, rasam/sambar, and rice. I asked the usual menu, but forgot other details as I was distracted by another talk. They served a potato curry, rice and rasam on that day. The curry was delicious. Rasam was my favorite. Rice was of a good quality.

All the teachers and I sat in the kindergarten classroom and had the lunch. The conversation with the teachers was very colloquial. One of the teachers who came from Chandigarh was telling her stories and childhood quarrels with her brother. Some of the teachers brought their own food, but all of them ate the food served to the students and they also shared their own food with each other.

Lunch was served to the students by Laxmi, the housekeeping lady and a couple of elder kids (7<sup>th</sup> grade +) helped in serving. A kid or two also made sure that nobody was wasting food, everybody was eating food and everyone was properly cleaning their plates after the lunch. Another kid was making sure that nobody was dumping waste in the wash basin to avoid clogging. It looks like these activities are usually shared on scheduled/turn by turn basis.

### **Chat with Gurveen and Ram:**

After the lunch, kids were disbursed from the lunch gathering to attend their post lunch classes. I had a quick look at some of the class rooms. Most of the post lunch class rooms were arts and crafts related as the students learned stitching, painting and other crafts making.

I went upstairs to the library to talk to Gurveen and Ram.

Ram showed me some pictures of their recent student trip.

<http://picasaweb.google.com/CFL.Secunderabad> Ram and Gurveen talked about different kinds of activities – both indoor and outdoor – that CFL conducts.

Gurveen showed me some financial documents and said she would send me the copies later.

Both Gurveen and Ram said that their biggest concern is regarding the funding of the school and keeping teachers in the school.

Gurveen, Ram and I talked in detail about school's funding situation. It is kind of in dire state. CFL's annual budget is around 8 Lakhs and Ratan Tata Trust funds about 60% of the funds. But if the trust stops funding next year, as per the schedule, funding situation will be very bad for CFL. I didn't promise any increase of funds to CFL, but I promised I will look for alternatives and help CFL in any way possible, especially bringing in funds from other Asha chapters.

We discussed different components of the budget. We talked about the possibility of Asha funding entire salaries piece down the line. But, I clearly told them that Asha Seattle cannot guarantee increase in findings in the near future. I said I would follow up and talk to other Asha chapters.

### **Things to improve/feedback to CFL:**

If there was an area where the school could improve is probably finding more teachers and retaining good teachers. Otherwise, the school is doing a phenomenal job.

Also, as per Gurveen's concerns, the school will need a principal teacher who can take over it and run it in the near future. Gurveen is at the brink of retiring after her 25+ years of service to the school. Ram is probably an ideal candidate.

### **How we can help them:**

Funding situation with CFL is kind of in dire state. CFL's annual budget is around 8 Lakhs and Ratan Tata Trust funds about 60% of the funds. But if the trust stops funding next year, as per the schedule, funding situation will be very bad for CFL. I didn't promise any increase of funds to CFL, but I promised I will look for alternatives and help CFL in any way possible, especially the possibility of bringing in funds from other Asha chapters.

### **What we can learn from CFL**

CFL provides education in the right mix of formal education and learning. Other Asha projects and organizations can surely benefit from CFL's activities. Gurveen also has good experiences of teaching

teachers. So, Asha can definitely keep her in mind in any such future India activities. We can also invite Gurveen for a talk to discuss her experiences in running the school and to provide inputs to education in general. If this is not possible, we can definitely ask her to record a talk for us.

### **Overall Rating:**

I must say I was thoroughly impressed with the school. Teachers are dedicated. Students respect the school. There were almost no negative points about the school that I could point out.

#### ***Organization & its mission, short and long-term goals***

The school's mission to provide quality education that is filled with learning to the fullest extent is definitely being put into place. It is a combination of education and alternative education with the right proportions. The school doesn't have any long term goals of increasing the number of students. The long term goal is to keep running the school with the same quality and with the same dedication.

#### ***Perception of organization, facilities, and teachers***

Organization is splendid indeed. Facilities were adequate, if not the best. Teachers were very dedicated and pleasing to interact with.

As far as the school's facilities are concerned, they are good enough for a small school. School doesn't have a play ground and cannot fit more students, if there were any in the future. A couple more rooms could be built in the future. Finding the play ground in the vicinity is a very difficult choice now as the land prices have sky rocketed.

#### **Organization statistics**

Number of students – 70

Number of teachers – 8

Annual budget – around 8 Lakhs

#### ***Perception from children's point of view***

During my interaction and chat with kids, I could only say that the kids loved the school to the best. They loved the fact that they get food, they get to play, they get to learn formal education and they get to indulge in other learning activities.