7 January 2011, 4pm, Sargur

We arrived at Sargur from Bangalore and were received by Dr. M.A. Balasubramanya (MAB), the CEO of SVYM and one of its founding doctors. We had a brief meeting in his office. By training he is an anesthesiologist, and his wife is a gynecologist at the hospital. In his current role, he spends about 10% of his time doing medicine and 90% in management of the NGO.

We also met with Mr. Pravin and Mr. P. Mahesh. Pravin is a recent IIT-Chennai mechanical engineering grad who visited SVYM some years back. He became interested in the organization and thus joined for a two-year assignment to gain practical experience in the running of an NGO. Mr. P. Mahesh is the director of the VTTRC. Our discussion with him was brief as we would be meeting him at Hosahalli the next day to observe and discuss the VTTRC school.

In Sargur we set out with Mr. Pravin and Mr. Shekara to see and discuss the Mobile Science Van (MSV) project that is sponsored by Asha-MIT. Mr. Pravin described himself as the MSV manager, while Mr. Shekara is the MSV coordinator. Pravin spends about 1½ days per week on the Mobile Science Van and also has some experience in other areas of SVYM, including VTTRC. Mr. Shekara works full-time with the science van, mostly visiting schools and sometimes conducting teacher trainings. Both report to Dr. MAB. In talking with Pravin as we walked to the van, he expressed a long-term interest in running his own NGO that has emphasis in teaching of maths/sciences, thus his enthusiasm for MSV.

The van looks like a small truck with a cab and a small trailer with a colorful collage of SVYM’s activities in education painted on the left and right sides. It carries a mobile power supply because the schools themselves do not have reliable power. The van houses a rotating set of experiments that are determined based on the science topics being currently covered in the curriculum of the schools that it visits. The December-January experiments were currently in the van. We were shown two piston-engine models, a spark-ignition and a compression-ignition (diesel) model. The models have hand cranks which raise and lower the pistons and valves to explain to the students how the various strokes are combined to complete the cycle.
The van impacts about 6000 students in the 8th, 9th, and 10th standards. In the last year they visited 19 schools, up to a maximum distance of 60 km from Sargur. All the 19 schools’ science teachers were given a training session at the Viveka School of Excellence (VSOE) in Sargur. This school provides a top-notch education to children of hospital staff, some local children from Sargur, and other children coming from as many as 25 km away. Of the 19 schools’ teachers, Pravin indicated that about 7-8 were very strong in the teaching of science and were also very “warm” to the MSV, while the other schools’ teachers were not as strong in science education and were generally less “warm” to the program. Pravin also said that some teachers are wary of taking time for the Mobile Science Van activities because they want to prepare students for exams. For schools with teachers who wish to teach the MSV activities independently, the MSV simply delivers the equipment. At schools where teachers are not confident in using the materials, the SVYM staff (primarily Mr. Shekara) teach students using the equipment. Demonstration equipment can also occasionally be lent to the teachers. Some of the larger schools have manpower issues, and so next year MSV may visit them twice monthly.
instead of once monthly. Nominally the van is used for science demonstrations about 20 days/month, and drives 14,000 km in a year.

The 10th standard students that participate in the Mobile Science Van classes are the ones who will be SSC examinees. One feedback they received from the local science teachers and students in the first year was that initially they focused on teaching “beautiful” science but were not giving students practical information in passing exams. So there is now interest in giving them practical experience not just in science but examination-taking skills. They have introduced worksheets in math and science that review questions appearing on previous exams so that students get some test-taking preparation. Pravin showed examples of a math worksheet in English and Kannada.

Other activities include the SVYM science calendar, which does special activities on important science dates. One example includes a science fiction writing contest on Isaac Asimov’s birthday. The calendar also includes a celebration of India’s National Science Day (officially Feb 28th, but observed on Feb 18th). The event included a taluk-level science fair in Sargur (next one at Taluk HQ’s) with about 3,800 attendees, of which 1,200 students participated in some form or another. The fair included 270 exhibits by students as well as team math and science competitions.

Discussing possible future needs, Mr. Pravin showed a budget sheet for use of previous funds from Asha-MIT. We noted that all funds were not yet spent, partly due to the fact that certain initiatives were being processed on the SVYM side but were more slowly getting through the right channels within local authorities. Another investment that Pravin suggested would be in the establishment of the four science libraries located in the area served by MSV.

Pravin mentioned that because MSV has no official role in state-level science education, there were still challenges in getting the impact of their project in the bigger picture. Some schools were interested in the programs, while others less so. In the taluk, of a total of 47 Kannada-medium schools, not a single student passed their “+2” in science. Pravin wanted to put together a survey to understand why this is so. In a pilot survey of 30 students, about 20 indicated that transitioning from Kannada-medium to English-medium exams in +2 was a major challenge. Addressing these students’ needs is an area that may warrant some future focus. One idea mentioned by Pravin was to hold a one-month technical English course over vacation. Currently Asha-SV does support Vidya Kiran, which identifies promising students and gives them scholarships.

We discussed how the dismal taluk-level science pass rate in +2 might be addressed through some exposure to English for science during the MSV visits. It is a challenging topic. A similar trend of fear of English was mentioned by Pravin for the VTTRC students (though they are training for primary education, not the higher grade levels). Of the 48 year 2 VTTRC students, 21 have focus in English+Science and 27 have focus in SocialStudies+Arts+Maths. Only one of the 48 VTTRC students did +2 in science.

Other human resource issues for the MSV were also discussed. Specifically, Mr. Pravin noted that it was easier to find strong teachers in physics/chemistry than in chemistry/biology. They could probably support an extra person with the available budget, or with some additional funds, but finding the talent in this area is the real challenge. We discussed the possibility of using interns from different universities to fill this gap, but Mr. Pravin mentioned that even he himself,
after one year, is still learning the local issues. Kannada speaking skills would be a must for this type of position in order to work with the teachers and students.

7 January 2011, 7pm, Hosahalli

We drove to VTTRC/VTCL campus. There we met with Mr. Kumar, VTCL headmaster and teacher, Mr. Devaraju, VTCL assistant resource manager, and Ms. Premakumari, VTTRC administrative assistant. After dining in the mess hall, we retired to the guest cottage for a full next day.

8 January 2011, 9am, Hosahalli

We woke up in the morning and had hot water delivered to our cottage for our bath. After getting ready we met with Ms. Premakumari and took a walk to VTCL grounds where we observed students getting ready for the annual day celebrations. Students were cleaning the play fields and had set up a beautiful, hand-designed and decorated stage with colorful designs that would be used for the evening performances. Other students were painting lines on the paved footpath to guide visitors to the performance seating area.

Figure 5. Painting the road for annual day.

Figure 6. Decorated stage for the festivities.

Figure 7. More annual day preparations.
We also visited the girls’ hostel towards the far end of the campus. Girl resident students of multiple ages were getting each other ready for the day’s activities. We were invited into one of the dorm rooms occupied by girl students of all ages up to 10th standard. The entrance way was decorated by hand-drawn chalk designs made by one student, Asha. On leaving the hostel, we were also shown the part of the building where seven VTTRC D.Ed students were also resident.

We briefly met Ms. Triveni, English teacher, on the way back to VTTRC, along with two P.E. teachers and the art teacher (who was helping students painting the footpath). We came back to the mess hall and took breakfast at 9:30.

**8 January 2011, 10am, Hosahalli**
After breakfast we sat down with the staff of the VTTRC D.Ed school. In the administrative office were Mr. P. Mahesh (Principal, principal.vttrc@gmail.com), Ms. Prema(kumari) (Administrative Assistant), and four full-time staff teachers: Mr. Yeshwantkumar (Kannada), Mr. Keshwamurth B.C. (Math), Mr. Vasudevacharg (Social Science), and Ms. Svarooparani K.N. (Science Methodology). We met a fifth teacher, Mr. Srinivas (English) later in the morning.

Mr. Mahesh has been with SVYM for 14 years, the last five of which have been at VTTRC. Ms. Prema is on a six-month work program from Mysore, of which she has completed two months. All teacher educators had been with the D.Ed school for two to four years. The D.Ed school was now educating its 4th (Year 2) and 5th (Year 1) batches. They mentioned that their previous school calendar was slightly off-cycle with the state of Karnataka, beginning in August-September, whereas for the next year they intended to get on cycle with a June-July start.
The total enrollment is 88 students, 48 of which are Year 2 and 40 of which are Year 1. The students are +2 graduates, so their ages are usually 18-20. About 19 of the 88 are tribal students. It is a challenge to recruit tribal students due to their disadvantages at home, so the staff expressed that they spend quite a lot of time doing recruitment. Overall, due to a growth in D.Ed institutions in Karnataka, filling all 50 seats was a challenge in the past year, and they were only able to recruit 40 students. One of the solutions may be to start recruiting beyond the district level to extend their exposure and reach.

Students take 5 subjects in their training: English, Kannada, math, science, and social science. Additionally, they learn educational theory such as educational philosophy and educational psychology. The five full-time teachers teach the theory courses in addition to the regular subjects. Students must do practical teaching in both Year 1 (40 days, about 40 hours total) and Year 2 (30 days, about 40 hours total?). Additionally in Year 2 they do a 3-month internship at a school in Mysore district.

We discussed teaching challenges. Many challenges seemed to stem from student under-preparedness. Coming from a tribal or rural background means that most students did not have good preparation in past education (all Kannada-medium), and they were especially weak in math and English. In math the students were good at understanding and teaching geometry, but weak in the area of “problem solving,” i.e., how to solve math problems and then teach this to children. In English, all areas including reading comprehension, grammar, and writing needed help. Techniques to improve English comprehension included reading English newspapers and learning daily English proverbs.

Another major challenge for the school is in the collection of fees. Of the 50 places, 25 are considered government quota and are assigned on a merit basis by govt. of Karnataka. The other 25 are considered management quota and are selected by VTTRC admissions. Of the management quota seats, Asha-SD supports the tribal students whose Rs. 18,000 fees are subsidized by govt. of Karnataka. Still, VTTRC finds it difficult to collect the remaining Rs. 5,000 from tribal students, as well as the Rs. 18,000 that is to be paid by non-tribals. They have been looking into ways to break the fees into installments. The fees appear to present financial burdens, and they have to overcome this using SVYM educational general funds. Additionally, there are delays in the state’s paying of the Rs. 12,000 fees for the govt. quota students.
Other student fees include hostel (Rs 1,250 non-tribal, Rs. 500 tribal), excursions (Rs. 2,000/yr.), examination fees (Rs. 500/yr.), travel (Rs. 1400/yr.), and other (Rs. 500/yr.). Travel fees exist mainly for non-hostel students who take a bus every day from the taluk (90 mins each way, Monday-Saturday!).

An interesting discussion we had was the fact that VTTRC implemented a comprehensive student evaluation recently. Students were made to evaluate themselves and their teachers. A report of this evaluation will be provided in soft-copy to Asha-San Diego. We perused the hard copy and saw that the students evaluated themselves and teachers as being stronger in certain areas and weaker in others. Ratings were on a scale up to 10, with most categories coming into the 6-8 range. Teacher evaluation results were openly posted by the door to one of the resource rooms, telling everyone present that they are open to self-improvement. Additionally, suggestion boxes are posted on the wall so students and teachers can give feedback on the school.

VTTRC has also put an Alumni Association into place to keep data on all the batches that have graduated thus far. Alumni have come back to speak with present VTTRC students, and they have given positive feedback about the program. Many of the tribal students get placement in Ashrama schools, which are special tribal government schools. These schools have historically been weak, so populating them with D.Ed grads that focus on child-centered learning should have a very positive impact on tribal education. We briefly discussed Asha Central’s Quality in Education grant ($1200/yr. for 2 years) which may be an avenue to increase Asha-SD’s current support of $3500/yr. to $4700/yr. and support a couple more students. In additional to Ashrama schools, SVYM has placed D.Ed grads in the adjacent VTCL school and other SVYM projects. (VTCL gives first priority to graduates of VTTRC when hiring new teachers.) We discussed putting a formal job placement program in place, though no such program exists yet.

When we asked about needs of the school looking into the future, educational technology resources (computers and software) came up. Currently, VTTRC shares a computer lab with VTCL. They would like to have 5-10 computers of their own. They also share some teachers with VTRC, such as the drawing teacher.

After talking with staff we were able to meet the students. Being a Saturday, and perhaps due to our presence, we did not see a formal lecture--rather the students were assembled in class and were given the opportunity to ask us questions. We met with Year 2 students in one classroom first, and then Year 1 students subsequently. All students were in uniform, teal saris for the girls and blue shirts/pants for boys.

In each classroom the tribal students were asked to stand, and Asha-SD’s support of tribal education was noted. We felt it may be a bit awkward to point out which were the tribal students, but we assumed that since the whole purpose of the campus was focused on tribal education, this might not be awkward for them. We did get one question from a Year 2 female student that asked why we focused on tribal students and we provided our response that we felt all students were important but that SVYM was meeting a need that was not being fulfilled elsewhere. (Most questions were in Kannada, and all our English responses were translated). We got a sense that there may be some feeling that tribals were given preference, but in subsequent discussion we suggested to Dr. MAB that Asha-SD funds could be used for tribal students as a priority but extended to other students on a need-basis, and he was in agreement.
Other questions from students focused on the differences between the U.S. and Indian educational systems. We provided descriptions of our own educational experiences but emphasized that we did not know the Indian educational system well enough to always compare and contrast the two. One question asked was to describe why the U.S. is more developed relative to India – my answer was that it stems from our system of government (our constitution) and advancement in technology and public policy (including rights of more and more groups) over a long history. Amy pointed out that there is currently a shift back towards environmental awareness and that some in the U.S. are now more mindful of exploitation of natural resources that often comes with economic development, and trying to reverse past behaviors.

Amy also discussed teaching techniques with the students, for example, ways to teach grammar and vocabulary through reading of books (giving important vocabulary ahead of reading chapters) and also drawing or acting out the meaning of important vocabulary words. The VTTRC teachers also shared some of their techniques which appeared to be progressive. Additionally, we had earlier seen a resource room where there were numerous teaching aids made by the students themselves on display. These aids included tools to teach geometry, cell biology, photosynthesis, history/social science, and math, in additional to other resources.

After meeting with the students we took a picture with just the tribal students in the courtyard. We finished our D.Ed school visit after noon and had our lunch.
8 January 2011, 2pm, Visit to Kadukuruba Haadi

Being the school’s annual day, many past SVYM alumni were coming to see the school’s programs. We met with Ms. Mamatha after lunch and learned that she is now on a government commission focused on child rights. Due to conflict of interest she does not officially participate in SVYM activities, but she was there to see the children’s performances. She suggested that we’d get a better feel for the way tribal society works if we visited a tribal haadi (village), and it was arranged to visit one about 3-4 km away from Hosahalli. We were accompanied by Mr. Mahesh and a current VTTRC D. Ed student/past VTCL graduate who came from that village. The term Kadukuruba refers to ‘forest’ tribals, but this name was given by the government, and the group themselves used to come from hills. Today they are mainly involved in agricultural day labor, and their haadi has majority permanent structures, some constructed by the government. The location of the haadi has been there since 1972, when they were displaced from the National Park. Some of their group also resides in another colony set up by the government, so the current village had about 30 families total.

We met with the village head, who showed us the main central structure where ceremonies are held. It is an open-air, earthen raised stage covered by a thatched roof. The homes are around this courtyard and on another lane connected to the main road. Other structures that were hand constructed included the poultry shed and bamboo fences. The student showed us where he stayed. On the way back to Hosahalli we were accompanied by the village head, who was in attendance of the annual day festivities.
8 January 2011, 4pm, VTCL annual day

After returning to VTCL campus we walked back to our cottage to freshen up a bit before attending the school day festivities. On the walk back Mr. Mahesh took us to briefly visit a Jenukuruba (JK) haadi next to the road. These structures were simpler than the Kadukuruba (KK) haadi, with earth and bamboo with thatched roofs. The outside walls were painted with
nice designs. Mr. Mahesh indicated that the JK tribals were in general living in less developed conditions, that they were simpler folk.

After freshening up we returned to the VTCL grounds for the annual day festivities. We were pleasantly surprised to also meet with Dr. R. Balu (original CEO/President) and Ms. Malathi (former education coordinator). Dr. Balu is based in Sargur but also travels and teaches at Harvard, Cornell and U. Iowa. He has focused on the area of leadership and mentioned current work on anti-corruption and a book on leadership. Malathi is working for an NGO in Bangalore focused on quality of education.

The annual day festivities were a showcase of talent from the VTCL school, including students and teachers. Some VTTRC D.Ed students also performed. Discourse and skits were in Kannada, but there was also a lot of song and dance. One skit focused on corruption in politics, and showed the act of bribery using money and alcohol. The dancers showed real grace and coordination in certain choreographed pieces that involved girls hoisting each other up on their shoulders. Overall, it was clear that the students from the school excel in activities requiring physical coordination and aesthetics. Seeing the programs was a real treat, and Malathi, Mamatha and I discussed ways that some of these talents could be brought out. They expressed that Indian society currently undervalues the natural strengths of the children, and that formal education often teaches to their weaknesses in academic subjects. They have debated and discussed in the past how SVYM can help to overcome this. They mentioned that there are some arts- and sports- focused schools, but in general these are in cities. Moving to a city would be a difficult adjustment for tribal children, and it was also mentioned that there is ample corruption in the admissions process for such schools.
Figure 26. Village designs on stage.

Figure 27. Using colored powders to show off school-pride.

Figure 28. Physically gifted students showing their talents.

Figure 29. How many of us can do this?

Figure 30. A play about corruptions.

Figure 31. Singing and dancing.
8 January 2011, 9pm, During Dinner

Parthiv’s comments in red italics to Melli’s Questions on VTCL report – conversation with MAB

At the end of the night’s festivities I briefly chatted with Dr. MAB about some of Melli and Mala’s questions about the VTCL report.

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Hi Parthiv, Amy

I am glad you had a safe trip to India. I was wondering about your flights with all the snowstorm related delays in the news.

This might be too late (I think you are leaving for SVYM on January 6th), but here are the questions Mala and I had that are specific to VTCL’s students (in addition to the organizational questions we discussed over the phone).

- The good news in the report is that the attendance rates have gone up. That is great, and we wonder what reasons SVYM would attribute this to - is it increased parental involvement and outreach to the community (there was mention of this in the report)? We would like just like to understand reasons and hypothesis behind this positive development.

There was indeed an increase in attendance. MAB suggested several reasons for this: 1) the admission process was changed in that two parent representatives (1 JK, 1 KK) were included on the admissions committee, 2) they increased parent involvement through their Institutional Management Committee, including three parents with the responsibility to enforce attendance, 3) students were given responsibility to mobilize attendance, and 4) they incentivized 100% attendance through a “ceremonial” welcome in morning assembly given to classes that achieved this.

Dr. MAB did expect that this statistic would drop again in the November-January timeframe due to the season of harvest and village fairs.

- The report mentions a warm send off to class X students, which is great. A recurring question for us is what happens after class X. Do we know what jobs they get, what options they have? Do they have additional choices compared to their parents and does this impact their life positively? Are they tracking the data of what happens after students pass class X?

They have tracked students for 9 years. About 50% (estimate) continue in some form of education. Of the others, some work and some do not. In the 6th through 9th classes, they have also introduced vocational skills training that integrated into the curriculum. This included electrical, electronic, plumbing, etc. The aim is to increase the economic opportunity of those that don’t continue in education and the specific skills included have good wage earning potential.

- (This is more a question for Mala and me, to see whether the results match those in reports in previous years - to see whether they stay the same, or have improved, or have declined). Do the class X results match the previous years’?
This past year’s class X results dropped down – perhaps due to a weaker batch. It is expected to go up in the next batch where the students are quite strong.

- The report mentions two interesting meetings in May 12th and June 16th 2010. The June 16th meeting was with visiting MLAs and I believe one VTCL student spoke frankly and courageously to the visiting dignitaries. Do they have minutes of these meetings.

_May 12th was the Institutional Management Committee meeting of VTCL. MAB said he could provide minutes (someone should follow up on the request by email). The June 16th meeting was of a Parliamentary Committee on Tribal Welfare, made up of different political ministers. One of the 1990 VTCL grads, Mr. Manju, now works at the nearby “Orange County” resort and got up and asked some questions in perfect fluent English. This was seen as impressive because many of the ministers themselves did not know English – meeting minutes were not kept but Mr. Manju’s articulation was an education for the ministers. (Perhaps Dr. MAB could be contacted by email or call to expand on this event)_

- What is their teacher turnover, and is that a challenge?

_Very little teacher turnover. Most VTCL teachers have been with the school 6-7 years on average._

- We repeatedly see from reports that the children are generally good at sports. They win awards at local events. What are their thoughts on translating this into something - for example participation of children at national level events? Have thought of additional sports coaching, is that even a possibility? How do the children who do not win prizes feel?

_Five children have won awards at the state level. The children themselves are good sports and don’t seem to be concerned with winning and losing – Dr. MAB suggests they are spiritually more balanced than the mainstream in this regard. The current phys. Ed. Teachers are very committed, and MAB suggested having national level goals may be worthwhile. Recent announcements of the development of sports schools at the state level are a positive sign, but MAB suggests the actual implementation will take a long time for many reasons, including politics._

Melli