

Khushboo Welfare Society – site visit by Saurabh Goel.

My visit to the Khushboo Welfare Society (Gurgaon, Haryana) December, 2007 was a unique experience. I was told that it was their own building, 3-storied, with about 4-6 rooms in each floor. It was based in a middle-segment residential locality in Gurgaon. They further had 2 school buses and 1 school van for transportation. The premises included a lawn-cum-play ground, approximately, 15m by 20m in the front of the building. The ramp from the second floor leads to the lawn. Frankly speaking, I never expected the infrastructure setup inside the building for I never realized that special education involved such huge infrastructure. Some of the rooms were class-rooms, and some were dedicated to therapy, like physio-therapy, multi-sensory stimulation unit, etc.

Upon arrival, the Vice-President of KWS, Ashok Gupta talked to me about their efforts at Khushboo, as an organization to cater to the needs of the mentally challenged, and as to why they do what they do. I was expecting a regular school consisting of students who couldn't afford normal education, along with a few challenged children. What I saw was a totally different experience and was completely surprised to see as to how tough special education can be. He further introduced me to the office staff that included an accountant, as we walked inside. He also talked about their donor base of the present and past. Further, a few of the corporate houses, had donated a few machines, computers, physiotherapy machines, raw materials and stationery, etc in kind. One of their school buses was donated. I requested Ashok to give me a tour of the building and show me what a typical day in the school looked like. He readily agreed to do the same. The premises and the building were very neat and clean. I had been to one of the rest-rooms on the second floor during my visit, and it was very clean and well-maintained.

As we talked, we started to walk towards the common kitchen. In the kitchen, I saw 2 students working with the guidance of a helper. The helper was training them to do some basic work in the kitchen and was also teaching them, the way to serve food, arranging the dining etc. The kitchen was pretty big, and extremely clean. As we were walking around, one of the students walked up to me with a tidily arranged serving tray with a glass of water. Her hands were shivering as she stood there with the tray held tightly. Guptaji asked me not to help the girl as they had trained the student to carry out this task independently. I picked the glass of water and thanked her for it. Further, she asked me if I would like to have some *chai* (tea). She walked her way back into the kitchen with the empty glass. Guptaji told me that all the children were made to work in the kitchen in turns. This was done to help them do things independently and to take care of themselves. There was a poignant touch to the situation...a feeling hard to describe in words. Nevertheless, I admired the dedication and patience of the staff who worked so hard to train these children to do things that most of us take for granted.

We then moved on to see some classrooms. In general, the rooms were tidy; and each of them had one or two round tables with chairs for the children. On an average there was one teacher/ instructor/ helper with three to four students in each class. I learnt that the children were grouped based on the tests that had been conducted and assessments that they had received from the doctors while admitting them into the school. I was told that because of the varying needs of each group, they had to have a dedicated assistant at all

times. Further, depending on the profundity of the challenge, some class-rooms had 1-2 children. Amongst the classes that I had been to, I observed that it was a healthy boy: girl ratio.

For a group consisting of well-behaved children, they are given a certain level of independence too. For e.g. they are given a fixed amount of time, say 30 minutes, to do that activity on their own, and the teacher finally inspects the work at the end. For cases, where the children are not so well-behaved, they are made to sit in groups of 2-3 in a single round table, and the teacher is constantly with them, along with an assistant. The tasks that the children were supposed to do were well-planned, with each task leading to an advanced task. The teachers knew what they were doing keeping the expected outcome of each task in mind. It didn't look like that any task was out of reach for the children or were forced upon them. The teachers had the confidence in the children, and felt that the children could do it, given time, patience and love. The kids were very much interested in doing the tasks.

Each room had some sort of an activity going on. Some of the activities were stitching, painting, candle-making, gardening, music classes, yoga, and sewing. I think there were other activities too that I can't recollect now. Teachers seemed to be patient in their approach and were very interactive with the students. Children seemed to be totally engrossed in the activities and looked like they were enjoying learning to do these things. Some of the children were also planting seeds in the garden. I had a close look at how they received training and interacted with some of the students in the class. I also took a look at some samples of their work, like the candles, greeting cards, etc in the class. It was nice to see the way the teacher gave personal attention to each and every child in the room.

As we were walking out of one of the rooms, we saw a child getting violent. The instructor called two helpers to help him control the child. Together they held the child and tied them to the chair there. This was done in order to keep him from hitting others and throwing about the things in the room. The helpers and the instructor were very careful in the way the child was made to sit on the chair and the way they handled the situation. A few children, often, one in 20-30 or so, prepare for the National Open Schooling exams. It is an extremely difficult challenge for the child and the teacher, and only, when the child is comfortable with that process, is he/she encouraged to do the same. Again, there was no pressure on the child to perform, and the teachers were extremely patient. We then walked to the room where physiotherapy was done. The room had some equipment and an instructor was helping two kids do some exercises.

Around 50 children were at the school during that time. To ensure that the children get some fresh air and some physical activity, some instructors took the children outside to the lawn. A group of children started to play cricket. It was wonderful to see the kids play cricket in the lawn. To me this was a team of winners...these children had won the game even before the game had begun. Further, I was shown the various awards, trophies (15-20) and shields won, in the Special Olympics events. I stayed there for about 3 hours and spent most of that time in interacting with Guptaji, teachers and kids. Overall, it was an eye-opening experience for me, and I was very happy at the end of the day.