

Site visit report for Apna Ghar (Ek Kadam) in Kanpur.

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I visited the residential home for migrant labor boys started by Mahesh near IIT Kanpur on February 18th and 19th. I spent a day in Apna Ghar with Mahesh and Vallabh. The ghar is located in a small town very close to one of the gates of IIT Kanpur. It has a high gate with a small open courtyard with one living room, a narrow room that is used for dining, a kitchen and two rooms. The toilet is outside in the courtyard. The size of the house is just right for holding 9 kids and I don't think any more kids can be added to this house without making it cramped. It is really nice that Mahesh has thought out the residential aspect as a house rather than a hostel. Even the way the residence is constructed matter, since if it is more hostel like with separate rooms from a corridor it does not give a feel of a regular family home. Going forward if there is a need to expand to include more children we should make sure that the new construction is also house like and not hostel like. The outside neighborhood is not particularly pleasant, with an open drain immediately in the front.

When we reached the house there were already two students from IIT Kanpur interacting with the children. It was their first visit to the place too and they were getting to know the children. The children were very lively and inquisitive as any normal child would be. What I found amazing was these were working children, children who have been working in the brick kilns. I have usually found working children jaded and more adult-like lacking the natural curiosity and freshness of a young child. It seems they were like that initially and this change has happened over the course of their stay in Apna Ghar. Even if we set aside their academic achievements, this simple thing of providing them an environment where they can once again be children is a great contribution. Pradip is the person who helps to cook, he is married and has a child but his family is staying back in the village. Pradip is a very kind and affectionate person and he is very ideal for this job.

From the academic records I can see that the children are making steady progress and while interacting with them I can already see that they are way above the average children I interact with (4th students I teach in a government school in Karnataka). They are very bright and energetic and pick up things in a jiffy. For the benefit of the visitors the children did a play that had a message on the how the netas take on the roles of leaders of people and do nothing for the people. They acted very well, especially Gyan he was excellent. The children seem very happy acting and also singing other revolutionary songs. These are definitely the results of Mahesh's effort, that the children not only have a good learning environment but also are exposed to social issues and human values. Even the code of conduct in the ghar is expressed in very innovative ways. The commandments go like "Thou shall not kick thy neighbor and if they do the punishment is a week of helping out with the homework of the other". All punishments are positive in nature. Mahesh encourages the children to keep a complaint book. The last complaint was that one kid had said to another "You are under arrest"! When we asked them if they knew what it really meant they did not know but nevertheless knew it was something bad ☺

The ghar has a nice set of books for the children to read and they are organized neatly in the living room. They also have some play material. Since they were excited they took a while to go to bed. The next morning it was really amazing to see how disciplined and well behaved the kids were. They had a bath, ironed their clothes, got dressed and combed their hair and sat down for breakfast. They have a very nice combination of discipline as well as energy and cheer. They go to school (a private school run by a NGO) and then they go for tuitions in the evenings.

In the morning we (Mahesh, Vallabh and myself) went to the brick kilns to meet the parents of the children. We met parents of Gyan and few other children. They seem very happy that their children have this kind of environment and want to send their other children too. Since the brick kilns are not very far from Apna Ghar (probably with the radius of 15 kms) it is easy for the children to go back home like during Holi celebrations.

Summary, Findings and Recommendations

- This is one of the best residential environments I have seen for underprivileged children. Not only are the children bright, cheerful and academically well performing but they are also getting awareness of social issues and good humanitarian values.
- These children are workers in the brick kilns who migrate from other areas and states (Bihar) and they are under immense stress. But the ghar proves that if they are provided a caring and cheerful environment they can flourish
- It would be good if the ghar is located close enough to where the parents are as it will help the children maintain continuous contact with their parents and their environment
- There is no AfE project for this work yet and as I understand it most of the monies come from Mahesh's fellowship and also funds raised locally. I would highly recommend a proper funding for this project. I don't see AfE money being better spent.
- It is undeniable that the success of this ghar depends almost entirely on Mahesh and that is where the concern lies too. Mahesh is valuable for Asha and is required at various places. The more he is away from the children it is worse for them. Pradip (the cook) is very nice but he cannot play the role of an adult mentor in that house. We need to figure out ways to address this concern (training a new person perhaps?).
- Asha should seriously consider setting up more such ghars for children who are under immense stress. Just providing a school will only have a limited impact as long as the home environment is terrible. Apna Ghar would provide valuable contribution. There should be an Apna Ghar in each Asha Center. This would mean that we require more people like Mahesh who are very good with kids. I think spending some time in Apna Ghar and getting trained by Mahesh is a good option.