

Site Visit: Lodhar School

On 17th of May, 2014 I visited the school, Swami Vivekananda Vidyalaya. The activity of the school is partially funded by the Asha (Seattle Chapter) and below is a report for the Cornell Chapter on the site visit.

The school was started by a group of volunteers (including faculty and students) at IIT-Kanpur in 1996, with an aim to create interest and awareness for education among children and locals around the IIT campus. Accordingly, the school has a campus (built on land donated by villagers) in Lodhar and is running classes from KG (kindergarten) till eight standard with a current strength of 264 students.

Along with Prof. Anurag Gupta, Prof. Mahendra Verma and a group of IIT-K student volunteers we reached the school campus around 11:00 am. Though a Saturday, it was a regular school day with classes running during our visit. We therefore got a chance to see various aspects of the school functioning, including interaction with students, teachers and non-teaching staff.

One of the first thing that appeared striking to me is the location of the school: in the midst of a village that is still so underdeveloped that there is hardly a proper approach road to the school. Students come from far-off places, sometimes walking for hours and it gets particularly hard during monsoon. There is electricity and water in the village. But as is true for all villages around the IIT campus, these basic services barely work. Furthermore, I have been told that the village of Lodhar is largely composed of backward and marginalized castes and as a result is neglected even further.

The school campus is strikingly clean and of decent size. There is a playground (which I was told is also used for various school events) with the building surrounding the ground. Most of the class rooms are equipped with simple but functional tables, chairs and black boards (old ones donated by IIT). There is a nice KG class room in the ground floor, with paintings of animals, birds, fruits and flowers on the wall, all done by the students. All the rooms are large, spacious, well-lighted with posters and paintings of various topics of general knowledge, with signs of thought and creativity. A room in the first floor, for example, has a large printout of a snap-shot from Google Earth showing the Lodhar village together with the school. On it, the students have meticulously noted down every street name, houses and other landmarks.

Besides the usual class rooms, the school also has a library and computer room in the ground floor and a science lab in the first floor.

The library is spectacular, with a decade long collection of donated books (including various encyclopedias and dictionaries), maps, charts and models. It is the biggest room downstairs, with space for the students to sit down on the floor and read or work on projects. It appeared that the library is the primary meeting room in the school, with students eager to be there.

Through the library room, one can access the computer room: it hosts several terminals and around 10 students can work there at a time. The teachers have access to some of the recent teaching packages. They also use video CDs to explain concepts, show movies and educational videos. It was nice to see few of the AKAASH tablets around (donated by a faculty) and the students getting awed by the touch technology. I was told that the computer room is really unique to this school. The private and government schools around cannot even think of such a facility yet, due to poor maintenance of their existing infrastructure.

The science lab is the place I spent most of my time and I strongly feel that this initiative should be highlighted in a larger forum for the benefit of many. It is a laboratory build up with minimal gadgets. All most all the models and projects are home built with things around us. There are locally collected and preserved insects, an entire human skeleton, working models of JCB machines (the mechanics controlled by medical syringes and tubes), tractors, rockets, igloos and much more. There are live experiments going on: for example, a small enclosure had a caterpillar that made a cocoon in front of us. The most striking aspect of the lab was the sheer enthusiasm, spirit and creativity it generated among the teachers to show something new and the students to build new things. One can easily spend an entire day there going through the various little experiments build over years. It was amazing to see the strength of rational thinking and use of logic by the little kids at the heartland of Kanpur Dehat, UP: it is indeed making a difference where it matters most.

We met the students and talked to some of them. They seemed excited and had a sense of belonging, eager to show their work and explain concepts. The girl students study free of cost here and so, are larger in number. I was curious to know what their plans are after school: many of them had independent thoughts and aims. While most wanted to be teachers, many aimed for engineers, doctors, bankers or social workers.

Towards the end, we had a meeting with all the teachers. There are 11 teachers and all of them were enthusiastic. They seemed to be thinking constantly about the curriculum, teaching methods and their role in making good citizens. Their general social awareness regarding complex issues of caste, class, gender and poverty and their commitment to implement certain values in curriculum were educative for me.

Overall, the visit lasted for about 4 hours. Overall, it was a new and nice experience to see a highly functional school with several innovative techniques used to teach and overcome various social, technical and financial constraints.

Please feel free to contact me for any further details.

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[About Me: I am currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physics, IIT-Kanpur. Before joining Kanpur, I did my PhD from Cornell University and worked a post-doctoral fellow at MIT and Cornell University. I worked as a Asha volunteer at Cornell .]

