

Vidya's Bal Vihar

A site-visit

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July 29, 2002

Last updated: September 10, 2002

Site Visit - in a nutshell

Date of visit:	Monday July 22, 2002
The School:	Vidya's Bal Vihar School, IIT Delhi
Number of Students:	About 350
Student Age-group:	About 5 - 15
Classes:	Nursery to class V
Education:	"A combination of Montessori Methods and NCERT syllabi"
Organization:	Part of <i>Vidya- Integrated Development for Youth and Adults</i>
Funding Request:	For Nursery to class I; Rs. 6,02,000 per year
Impression:	Well-run. Capable team with a wider vision. Part of a holistic programme for women and children. Calls for prompt and serious consideration by Asha.

Acknowledgments and Disclaimers

This is a report on the preliminary site-visit conducted by the author on behalf of Asha Princeton, at the Bal Vihar school of Vidya, located in the IIT Delhi Campus.

The report was compiled on the basis of the interaction with the different people at the Bal Vihar school— notably the Principals Mrs. A. Parashar and Mrs. Promila Kataria, administrative volunteers Ms. Alpna Manchanda (fund-raising), Ms. Asha Mirchandani (administration), Ms. Malavika Goyal (volunteer co-ordination), Vidya vice chairperson Ms. Rekha Chaturvedi, and a short-term volunteer Apoorva Mallya. In addition I met other volunteers and teachers, with whom I didn't get a chance to talk at length. Also I had the opportunity to sit through a few classes and talk to the students in private. I would like to thank all the staff at Bal Vihar and Vidya who facilitated the site visit. Special thanks to all the children who made the visit a memorable occasion for me.

Thanks are also due to my colleagues at Asha Princeton.

There may be some (hopefully minor) inaccuracies in the facts and figures. The information provided here is not meant to be complete, and must be supplemented by Vidya's official statements. Finally, the assessments and impressions provided are subjective. All the views expressed here are solely mine, and may not reflect Asha's or Asha Princeton's official view.

The preliminary report was sent to the Vidya team. Certain updates have been (are being) made to the report based on feedback from Ms. Mirchandani.

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1 Bal Vihar

The Bal Vihar is a primary school for the underprivileged children of Delhi. The school functions from the green-rooms of the Open Air Theater of IIT Delhi, improvised into class-rooms and office space. It is not a government recognized school, because they don't have a building of their own.

The school runs in two shifts- the morning session, from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM for classes II to V, and the afternoon session, from 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM for Nursery, Kindergarten and class I. The morning session has about 150 students, and the afternoon session almost 200.

The students come from the poor families in and around the area. Unfortunately I don't have any detailed demographics. Some of the students have to work as house-servants or take care of the household chores and their younger siblings, when they are not at the school. The school also has a few physically challenged students. Ms. Asha Mirchandani, an administrative volunteer, adds that the school integrates physically challenged children along with the normal children. These special children are helped with physiotherapy, corrective surgery, counselling of parents/children. They are given tricycles, wheelchairs etc.

The staff consists of the two Principals, Mrs. A. Parashar for the morning session and Mrs. Promila Kataria for the afternoon session, about a dozen teachers for each session, and some helpers/peons, all women. They are paid 'honorariums'. In addition to this, they have a few drivers for the school buses.

The Bal Vihar began in 1985, starting off the organization now called Vidya (it used to be called Prayas). The Bal Vihar got registered as an organization in 1991, but according to Mrs. Parashar, it is only in the last 6-7 years that the school has become what it is now. Apparently the initial educational efforts of Vidya were not immediately as successful as expected, prompting the founding team to address the wider and deeper problems of the communities they were trying to help. Only after the awareness programmes for women took shape did the educational efforts start working. Today Vidya has a large number of programmes focusing on women. A poster in the Bal Vihar office with the much quoted words "You educate a woman and you educate a family" reflects their philosophy.

According to the Vidya annual report for 2000-2001, 15 years of Bal Vihar (probably including the other educational programmes of Vidya which initially functioned along with the Bal Vihar) saw around 6000 children educated.

The funding for the Bal Vihar comes from "The Monsoon Trust, a registered charity supported by UK fashion retailers Monsoon and Accessorize Ltd." IIT Delhi provides them with the rooms where the classes are held. In addition, Vidya has contacts with some high profile agencies like the French Embassy, the Natasha Foundation, Rotary Inner Wheel Club and GE Capital.

The students are charged a token fee of Rs. 25 per month. According to Mrs. Parashar this encourages the parents to ensure regular attendance of their children. Those children who subscribe to the school's conveyance service pay a further fee for that (Rs.30 to Rs.50 per month).

Though I didn't look at any official documents like the FCRA clearance, or the detailed account statements, I have been assured that any such document can be made available at short notice.

Part of the Whole

Vidya, or *Vidya- Integrated Development for Youth and Adults* was started in 1985, by a team of IIT faculty wives at IIT Delhi. Vidya is an extensive organization with a vast programme. Education is just one aspect of it. In fact, the Vidya charter puts down as their tasks “To educate, empower and uplift.” Vidya’s activities are almost entirely focused on women and children.

The Bal Vihar is an integral part of the Integrated Development envisaged by Vidya. In fact it constitutes “the core of Vidya activity.” Apart from the Bal Vihar, Vidya’s educational initiatives involve creches and “Bridge Courses” (for helping students clear the class X and class XII exams).

The annual report mentions the ambitious plans for building and starting another school called the “Vidya Comfort Academy,” sponsored by the Comfort family’s Natasha Foundation. It would be a permanent school for the underprivileged, with a building of their own, and “a total academic infrastructure . . . and inspiring people.” The academy is planned for children aged 5-18 and for classes from nursery all the way to class XII. A first phase for Nursery to class I is expected to start by the next academic year. I have been told that a Vidya Comfort Programme has already started functioning at a school in Gurgaon, with about 50 students in the Nursery and Kindergarten.

For women, they have health and awareness projects (Ekta Mahila Kendra), adult literacy programmes, income generation (skills training) projects and a micro enterprise scheme which gives loans to women to set up their own businesses. Each such programme has its own separate co-ordinator(s) and team, but the co-ordinators of the different programmes share the Vidya identity and seem to interact with each other quite closely.

I had the opportunity to listen to the different co-ordinators (who came to the Vidya office at Bal Vihar which often serves as an office for the other organs of Vidya too) talk about their respective projects. But to keep the focus on the Bal Vihar, I wouldn’t go into those details here; some details of all these projects are available from the Vidya website or annual report. ¹

2 Funding Request

Ms. Alpna Manchanda, the volunteer in charge of fund-raising, handed me a funding request of sorts, for the afternoon session of the Bal Vihar. Apparently the morning school takes up much of the funds available from the Monsoon Trust. Below I’m reproducing the table in Ms. Manchanda’s proposal:

¹A note on the income generation project: they are trying hard to locally market their ‘eco-friendly’ products, like jute folders and bags. They would like to know if anyone could help them to sell these products elsewhere, for instance in the US universities.

Item	Amount	
	Monthly	Annual
Teachers', Drivers' and Staff salaries	Rs 25,000	Rs 300,000
Nutrition	Rs 5,000	Rs 60,000
Stationery and Books		Rs 50,000
Uniform (summer+winter)		Rs 70,000
Transport	Rs 6,000	Rs 72,000
Sports and Cultural activities		Rs 50,000
Total		Rs 6,02,000

Ms. Manchanda emphasized that some of these items are more urgent than others, and even a partial funding would be very helpful. At the moment, she said, the priority is to acquire funds for the winter uniforms.

3 The Education

The Bal Vihar is not a recognized school. But the education in Bal Vihar is pretty much like in other recognized primary schools, except that the age of the students in any class vary substantially. I met students of age 13 and 7 studying in the same class.

The teachers are qualified to different extents and their salaries vary accordingly. Mrs. Parashar estimates that about 60% of the teachers are graduates (BA) with BEd or Nursery Teacher Training; about half of the rest are graduates, and the others are not. Bal Vihar encourages their teachers to study on their own and get better qualifications (leading to a raise in pay, or job opportunities elsewhere). In addition Bal Vihar conducts teacher training workshops.

Creative Learning

The syllabus and the methods of teaching are meant to be innovative. The Vidya annual report mentions the “intensive teachers training . . . undertaken with the help of professionals” and the revamping of the syllabus and schedules “to provide academic and creative education . . . and to address the concept of the ‘total child.’ ” This creative education is “provided through a combination of Montessori Methods and NCERT syllabi.” Mrs. Parashar talked about how they use flash-cards and other teaching/learning aids (which by itself is innovative, at least when I look back at the school that I went to). She showed me a notice-board with paper-clippings, and boards which decorated the walls, full of interesting things, like for instance, a stylized map of the city. (Much of this is due to the teachers.) They also have a library with a substantial number of books (I didn’t get a chance to take a closer look at the books, but I guess they are children’s books of various sorts. The annual report mentions that the *GE team of mentors* have “donated more than a 100 Hindi story books” to the library). Yoga and music are taught as part of the curriculum. Also the children get to fiddle with the PCs and the educational CDs. Though not everything is absorbed by the children, I feel that all these do provide an interesting environment for the children.

Despite the ambitious aims of providing a holistic education going beyond the ‘three R’s,’ there seem to be some limitations. Mrs. Parashar agrees that the focus of the education is still on clearing the exams. The justification is probably that the Bal Vihar students have to go elsewhere once they complete the fifth standard. Though the students are considered good at studies, the teachers admit that in general they are not as good as the more privileged students attending the public schools.

The teachers’ workshops may be making a difference, but from the few classes I sat through, it is not clear if the elaborate plans and creative methods of teaching have actually reached the class-rooms. The teachers often stopped shy of explaining what they were dictating. But on the other hand they were quite sincere about checking the notebooks of the children and ensuring that everyone took down the notes properly (the notes on the right hand pages, and the pictures on the left hand pages). The yoga class closely resembled the physical training classes I had at school, except that they had a ‘theory’ section to it: the students had a yoga notebook, in which they had taken down questions like “How should a place for doing yoga be like?” and the answers. Clearly they were dictated to the students from a ‘text book’ on yoga that the teacher was carrying.

Facilities

The class rooms are in fact dressing rooms of the IIT Open Air Theater and are available to the school through out the year, except for one week when IIT uses the Theater. The lack of a building of their own prevents Bal Vihar from being a recognized school (but this ‘unrecognition’ is apparently of little consequence).

Mrs. Kataria told me that on usual days the class-rooms are crowded and overflowing– the first standard has about 60 kids packed into a room that has probably half as many seats. But on that day the rooms seemed just big enough for the classes.² The afternoon classes are much more crowded than the morning classes. In the morning some of the rooms have two classes (the third and the fourth standards) running together.

The Bal Vihar has a few vehicles for transporting the kids. Probably three– a bus, a van and a “Tata Sumo.” Conveyance to and from the school is available to kids within and outside the IIT campus for an extra fee.

I don’t know if the school has facilities for outdoor activities. The yoga class was held in the open (in the Open Air Theater, in the sun). There is some space around the school building which may be used as a playground (this is where the children line-up for collecting and eating their lunch), but I am not sure if there are any sports programmes currently. (A “comprehensive and holistic sports programme” features in their future plans as of 2000-2001. I don’t know the current status, but I suspect that much of it is still in the wish list).

After the classes, students are allowed to stay back for a while and play around with the computers. There were a few ‘educational CDs.’ The text and description in the CDs are in English, but Apoorva, a volunteer who helps the children with the PCs, believes that they– at least the older kids– are comfortable with that level of English.

²The day I visited, two of the school-bus drivers were taken ill, and a single vehicle was made to make multiple trips to fetch all the kids. As a result the bus was running late, and apparently many kids went back after waiting for the bus for some time (As I was talking to Mrs. Kataria, a parent who came to meet his child’s teacher complained to her about the bus running late).

Bal Vihar gives one set of uniforms to the students every year; some students may get another set by themselves, Mrs. Parashar said. Also they provide the stationery. In the Nursery and KG, the kids had drawing/colouring books, and I presume they get crayons too.

‘Lunch’ for students is provided once during each session (around 11 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon). The food comes from an IIT mess which makes ‘holistic food.’ The staff also shares the same food.

4 The People

Ms. Rekha Chaturvedi is the Vice chairperson of Vidya. She is one of the founding members of Vidya. I had the chance to meet her in the morning. Her expertise is in the medical field, and shares the vision of empowerment of the underprivileged. She also feels strongly about the way the city has grown and literally crushed the neighbouring villages into what might be taken for slums now. She seeks to bring medical help and awareness to the people there – especially the women, through Vidya’s various efforts, often in association with other organizations and companies (later in the day she left for a meeting with *Ranbaxy* executives).

Ms. Rashmi Mishra is the chairperson of Vidya. She visited Asha Princeton earlier this month. (Unfortunately I was not able to attend her talk.) Currently Ms. Mishra lives in the IIT Bombay campus, and has started a Mumbai section of Vidya. A founding member of Vidya, she still inspires and motivates new and old volunteers. She has been able to draw more people into Vidya, and take Vidya out to more people.

Much of the original Vidya team is still active there, constituting the driving force behind the various organs of Vidya including the Bal Vihar. Ms. Mishra has been away in Bombay for a couple of years now. And at least one other member of the original team is about to leave Delhi (as her husband retires and they return to their home city). But a new generation of enterprising and enthusiastic volunteers are joining Vidya. Apparently, they share the original vision of Vidya to no less extent.

Mrs. Parashar, the principal for the morning sessions, is a retired principal from a Kendriya Vidyalaya. With her own children staying abroad, she keeps herself busy with the work at the Bal Vihar. How did she get involved with Vidya? Like just about every new volunteer she also mentioned Ms. Rashmi Mishra.

Mrs. Promila Kataria is the principal of the afternoon school. For about a year now she has been serving as the Principal of the afternoon school. She has been with Vidya (teaching in Bal Vihar and elsewhere) for about 9 years now. She says she plans to continue as a volunteer even after retiring (currently she gets an honorarium which she finds helpful).

Both Mrs. Parashar and Mrs. Kataria talked to me (separately) at length about their experience at Vidya. And both of them sounded sincere when they said how good they felt trying to make a difference to the otherwise underprivileged kids.

Mostly, the teachers seemed more or less earnest in their efforts. Some of them have been with the Bal Vihar for 7-10 years now, and have no plans of leaving.

There were a couple of volunteers from the US, who were providing one-on-one tutoring to some kids. They sounded happy and excited about their experience. They are given a busy schedule, and seem to enjoy every bit of it. Also, I met a volunteer in the well-equipped office, who helps maintain a database for Vidya.

5 Impressions

Mobilizing Resources

Vidya is by no means an unnoticed NGO struggling to make its mark. They have managed to make some high profile contacts and put such resources to good use. At Bal Vihar they have PCs for administrative purposes donated by Ms. Hilary Clinton, while she accompanied President Clinton on his Presidential tour of India. Four PCs for students were donated by the British High Commission. They have forged links with international agencies which help them with getting volunteers. A significant fraction of their funds come from the Monsoon Trust. The annual report for 2000-2001 mentions a 'French Embassy Project,' which I am told is in relation to Vidya's Income Generation Project for Women. Also the report talks about the ambitious plans for a new school - *the Vidya Comfort Academy*, whose running costs for the first 20 years will be provided by the *Natasha Foundation*. The *GE Mentoring team* is involved with the Bridge Course (at Vidya's Sainik Farm centre) and has donated PCs for that programme.

The office at Bal Vihar has, apart from the PCs, a printer and an old photo-copier, which were also, I am told, donated to them. According to Ms. Manchanda though their fund-raising efforts have met with very little success, they do manage to "mobilize resources," and procure donations in kind. She told me about a van for the conveyance of the children, donated by an organization called *Savera*, while the Bal Vihar was struggling with expenses on auto/taxi during the CNG crisis in Delhi³.

The Professional Feel

They have a very professional looking team for administration. (Just about every volunteer in the administration has got their own visiting cards.) The team has volunteers in charge of various departments. For instance Ms. Malavika Goyal takes care of co-ordinating the volunteers. She must be doing a good job, for Apoorva Mallya, a volunteer at Bal Vihar who has dedicated his one year to serving at various NGOs in India, feels the difference: according to him Vidya takes care of the volunteers much better than any of the other NGOs that he has encountered. As soon as he reached the school they had a complete program to keep him busy. Now he spends almost the entire day in the school teaching Sunil English, and helping the kids with using the PCs.

Ms. Manchanda is a freelance advertisement professional in the afternoons. Earlier in the day she works as the Fund-raising volunteer, adding a touch of professionalism. She handed me a folder with some information booklets and the tastefully laid out annual report of Vidya, along with a short funding request printed out in colour. Going by the quality of the brochures, reports and other publicity material produced by Vidya (including a catalogue for marketing the goods produced by Vidya's Income Generation Project), they do have the volunteers and resources to impart a feel of professionalism.

Some of this might leave one wondering if the funds are spent in the best possible way⁴. It

³Recently the Delhi government, in an effort to control the serious pollution in the city, required the buses to use natural gas instead of diesel. This led to wide-spread strikes and frequent break-downs in public transport. Buses with diesel engines were not allowed to run, until they modified them to CNG engines.

⁴Ms. Mirchandani assures me that Vidya did not incur any extra expenses for either designing or printing the above mentioned material

is beyond me to make any such evaluation. But as Ms. Manchanda pointed out (in a different context), quality does not come for free. Probably the price paid in putting together the brochures, in terms of both the money and the volunteer time and effort, is worth the quality that it brings with it. The publicity material and well brought out annual reports go beyond just impressing potential donors. It makes the volunteers feel more responsible, being part of a professional set-up.

The honorarium paid to some of the staff is not high enough to be called a salary. But it ensures a quality one cannot expect from someone volunteering their spare time for no pay, but taking no responsibility either. Indeed, the qualified teachers are not exactly volunteers. Notwithstanding their attachment to the kids, and their appreciation of the the self-less nature and the ideals of the Bal Vihar, they work there for the money. Some of them do manage to get better-paid jobs, thanks to their qualifications which they need to join Vidya, as well as the degrees or diplomas they earn since then and the teachers' training they get at the Bal Vihar. But also there are teachers who have been there for a decade or so.

Like the Public Schools

The *Public Schools*, I gather, set the benchmark for quality in school education in the minds of the 'public.' Mrs. Parashar is proud to say that the quality of education provided by Bal Vihar is on par with some of the public schools, and definitely far better than that offered by the government schools (where ironically, the teachers are better qualified and better paid). According to her, the students of Bal Vihar who join the government schools after the fifth standard usually perform very well, sometimes topping their class. They do not go to the better public schools, even after clearing the 'entrance examinations' only because they can't afford the expenses.

The students are taught English right from the lower classes. Mrs. Parashar said that they are hoping to change the medium of teaching mathematics to English. She also proudly shows how well-disciplined the students are. In the classes the students were far from unruly. When I went around the different class-rooms, accompanied or unaccompanied by the Principal, the students would get up and say "Good Morning, Sir," and when asked to sit down say "Thank you, Sir." In the classrooms some kids were very quiet, and some very noisy. Some children, mostly the older boys, tested the nerves of the teachers. Though sometimes the teachers shouted and scolded the children, I didn't notice any corporal punishment. When I talked to a few students in private they would first deny being even scolded by the teachers, but on insisting, some said that the teachers do punish them, but only "*galati karne par.*" But overall, corporal punishment doesn't seem to be common.

In one class I saw the teachers getting vexed when they found some kid writing in the 'Social-sciences notebook' during the 'Science period.' The students all seemed to have detailed notebooks, one for each subject, much like what I used to have in school. (The stationery is provided free of cost by the Bal Vihar once every year.) The teachers have apparently taken pains to ensure that the students keep their notebooks neat and tidy. Just like in the public schools, I guess.

Relevant Education

Is the focus on an examination-oriented education appropriate for the underprivileged children? Does it make sense to teach them the NCERT syllabus? Do they have a real chance of continuing

the education to a level that can make a difference to them? Or are they better off spending their childhood joining their parents at their work?

I feel that this education makes more sense in a city like Delhi than anywhere else. The basic education provided here is vital for earning a decent living in the city. More than anywhere else, the city provides the underprivileged with a semblance of real opportunity— opportunity in that sector of economy which looks for skills of the 3 R's.

The debate may be going on, on what is appropriate education in an economy where the organized sector provides only a small fraction of the employment opportunities. But for a city and for the times, the relevance of this kind of schooling is probably less controversial.

Stories of courage and success

Mrs. Parashar and Mrs. Kataria both mentioned to me the story of Mamta, a physically challenged girl, who got an opportunity to fulfill her promises through the Bal Vihar. Mamta's heart, I was told, is not grown fully. She was kept at home like an invalid by her poor parents, until she was 'discovered' by Vidya and enrolled in the Bal Vihar. Mrs. Kataria recalls that Mamta was one of the brightest of her students. "If I didn't find her in the class, I would be restless that entire day," says Mrs. Kataria. "When you come across such a clever child and get an opportunity to make a difference in her life, you feel really happy!" Despite her good academic performance, Mamta is still struggling and needs help, medical and otherwise.

Mrs. Kataria also told me about Bhadra Sen, a deserving student whose story appeared in CNN and helped him get a sponsorship for higher education. Now, I was told, he works in the US in the software industry.

6 Following Up

Being in IIT-Delhi campus the Bal Vihar is very accessible and easy to monitor. Further site-visits can be easily conducted. Such visits are, I believe, always welcome, and one can double-up as a one-day volunteer at the school (I went around with Apoorva, helping the kids with the PCs in the afternoon, and teaching Apoorva's student Sunil for about half an hour in the afternoon).

I was invited to visit the students' families at the nearby slums. Only then can one appreciate the difference Bal Vihar makes to the lives of these children. Unfortunately a one-day site-visit cannot accommodate everything. A longer site-visit may be helpful.

I was planning to talk to Mr. Gulati, the person in charge of keeping the accounts (Incidentally Mr. Gulati is the only male in the Bal Vihar staff that I met, apart from the drivers of the school vehicles). Unfortunately he had to leave before I got a chance to talk to him about the finances. But I was assured that the accounts of Vidya are available digitally, and any documents that Asha or anyone else needs can be delivered on very short notice. Also Vidya can and will provide all necessary *official* documents when necessary. So I leave it to other Asha sections/volunteers to check the finances of Vidya.

This report lacks a detailed demographics of the students. I believe almost all, if not all, of the students come from a poor background and cannot afford a more expensive education. But a closer look might be useful. Also no immediate figure was available on the girls-to-boys ratio. The girls do form a substantial fraction, though there are probably fewer girls than boys.

Vidya has a website at <http://www.indiasites.com/vidya> and can be contacted at the e-mail address vidya_ngol@hotmail.com.

7 Conclusion

Vidya is a remarkable organization. Older than Asha, it has been able to make a difference in many lives. The organization is run by a dedicated and mature team with a solid vision and incredible energy. All of us at Asha have something to learn from Vidya.

Bal Vihar is one of the central activities of Vidya. It brings together imagination, innovation and dedication of the Vidya team, the staff, volunteers and other well-wishers of Vidya. A current proposal from Vidya requests partial support for this endeavour. It matches Asha's vision, is easy to monitor, is part of a holistic programme for uplifting the underprivileged and is in the hands of a capable team with a reasonably successful record behind it.

I believe that Vidya's educational efforts, and in particular the current proposal, calls for immediate and serious consideration by Asha.