

Sri Ramanuja Vidyalaya is a private school located in Little Kancheepuram, about 5 Kms from Kanchipuram Bus Stand. I was received by Mr.Satagopan, a Trustee of Yatheenadra Educational Trust (YET). YET was responsible for setting up the school by providing an initial seed fund. Though there are a couple of other schools in close proximity to Sri Ramanuja Vidyalaya, this school has been attracting an increasing number of students each year. Mr.Satakopan, a practicing lawyer, is also acting as a mentor ensuring that the school accounts are proper and up-to-date.

The school is situated in a calm, clean locality. The school has classes from the pre-kindergarten level to Class 6. The classrooms are located in three different buildings in close proximity to one another. All three are rented facilities. A new building is being constructed for students of Classes 3-6.

We first visited the premise which housed the classrooms for the kindergarten and classes 1 and 2. I was greeted with a warm 'Namaste' in all the classes that I visited. The neat classrooms and the well mannered students deserve special mention – the neatly arranged footwear outside classrooms is just one example of the level of discipline that one can observe.

The kindergarten classes have a decent stock of play items and learning aids. The classrooms in this particular facility have asbestos roofs. The school management has provided false ceilings to prevent these classrooms from turning into ovens during summer.

I was then escorted by Ms.Chitra (who is handling class 6 as well as looking after the administration activities) and Mr.Sridhar (who is a mentor and who is also overseeing the logistics of the school) to the other facilities. Nearly 22 students of 3 different classes (4-6) are sharing the same classroom due to lack of classroom space. Mr. Sridhar explained that this is a temporary inconvenience and that the students would move to the new building which is nearing completion (estimated to be ready in a fortnight).

I spent some quality time with the children of class 5. The students were hesitant at the beginning and were not really eager to talk. But it took just 5 minutes for a section of the class to open up and it became difficult to control them. There was a Drummer, a budding Businessman and a wannabe Software Engineer among them. The students talked about their studies as well as activities that they were engaged in outside of school. In addition to academics, the students are also taught Sanskrit and Yoga. The school is trying to align its curriculum with the CBSE curriculum.

I then met Mr.Satakopan and Mr.Sridhar to talk about the school in greater detail. The school has seen a remarkable increase in the number of students over the years – from 24 in 2006 to 195 in 2009. At 22:1, the student-teacher ratio is healthy too (there are 9 full-time teachers). The school management also keeps regular track of student activities and are doing a good job in monitoring them and interacting with parents in case there are concerns with a child's performance. Students are provided with books, notebooks (of very good quality) and two sets of uniforms. The school's penchant for discipline and academic excellence were apparent from the conversations I had with the staff and the mentors. Teacher salaries range from Rs 1800 – Rs 6000 for scales 1 through 7 and an annual festival bonus depending on the scale.

The school is trying to balance its infrastructure needs and teacher salary payments with their current sources of income. Apart from school fees, the only other source of income for the school is donations which have been used to set up false ceilings and buy furniture for the classrooms (benches, desks etc). Teachers' salary is the biggest expenditure and funds routed through Asha can be best used to address it. The school also needs additional sports materials (footballs, rings, skipping ropes, board games etc). Additionally, the students are not trained on computers due to the lack of sufficient number of computers as well as qualified teachers. These would be the other areas that the school can look to improve in the future. The school has applied for FCRA online and is waiting for an approval.

A thing to note is that a majority of the enrolled students are from lower-middle/middle class income families. The school collects subsidized fees from students belonging to economically backward families and full fees from others. This year, a total of Rs 21000 has been provided in terms of monetary help to 21 students which is 10% of the total strength. The percentage of underprivileged kids enrolled in the school is well below that of other schools associated with Asha Chennai. Also, the school has a heavy Brahmin influence which can be attributed to the

location of the school (Kanchipuram is a temple town). Though I did not observe any religious affiliation/bias, I reiterated that Asha Chennai does not associate itself with schools having religious affiliations and Mr.Satakopan shared the same opinion and also mentioned that the school is actively encouraging parents from economically backward as well as diverse communities to enroll their children.

To summarize, the school is doing a very good job considering the resources available to them at this point in time. The School Management and Mr.Satakopan have been doing an impressive work which is reflected in the increasing student strength every year. Mr.Satakopan, in particular, is keen to see that the school continues to improve the quality of education imparted and given the interest the parents seem to show in providing education to their kids, I definitely see the school playing a bigger role in Little Kanchipuram.