

Asha Darshan: ***Pazhassi Raja tribal school***

Duration: 7PM, 9th Sep - 1:00PM 10th Sep 2010

Asha Representatives: Rakesh Taranath and Sourab Shukla

Details of the Visit:

Myself and Sourab Shukla reached the project site by 7PM on Saturday, we stayed until noon of the next day.

Below are the facts and findings to the best of our knowledge, hope this helps;

We met Dr. Nambiar as soon as we visited the site. We spoke to him for sometime, later we met the children in the assembly hall, the kids were watching a movie on the TV. We got an opportunity to interact with three teachers Sujatha, Nikhila and Harshana who are resident teachers. We had difficulty in conversing with any of teachers as they knew to speak only in Malyalam. To our luck we were able to get hold of a kid named Manish who could speak in Kannada. We tried to ask him a couple of academical questions, he was able to answer a few basic questions on Math and Science. We could not probe him further as it was time for dinner and there was a general restlessness among the children who had gathered around us in the staff room.

The dinner was served in the dinning hall which can accommodate approximately 200 children, We ate along with the kids. The food was tasty and nutritious, this is evident by the fact that the all the kids appeared to be healthy and also because we thoroughly enjoyed the dinner, likewise breakfast.

The number of children studying in the school as claimed by the authorities is 278, the ratio of boy to girl is 2:1 and the ratio of student to teacher is ratio is 21:1. The facility is big enough to accommodate 500 children as claimed by the Trust, this claim to us appeared to be a valid one.

We could find that there are only 100 odd children in the school.

We were told that few students who are down with chicken pox have been taken home. Few were taken home for the weekend. We were informed that 30 students are day scholars. One of the chief reasons for drop outs among the children is that the kids are taken away to the neighbouring state Karnataka for Ginger cultivation.

Three languages taught in the school are Hindi, English and Malyalam. However most of the students cannot speak or understand any language other-than Malyalam.

Yoga is taught once in a week by the teacher - Srinivas.

Below are the only Vocations the kids are trained on;

1) Stitching and Tailoring - There are 6 tailoring machines (1 part time teacher - Geetha M.R. of non-teaching staff is assigned to the task of imparting the training to the kids)

2) Book Binding - All the books are bound by the students

3) Agriculture and Cow rearing - chiefly Banana plants,Paddy, Tapioca and Cereals are cultivated all the teachers are involved in this activity

The other vocations which the school used to train the kids on are now discontinued due to lack of funds. Earlier the school used to conduct training on carpentry, paper bag making, Bamboo craft, clay modeling, etc.

The kids were being trained in Kalaripayattu, this got discontinued due to lack of funds.

There is a Hospital building located within the school campus, the hospital is dysfunctional because there are no doctors since 2003, this is again attributed to the lack of funds.

The School building which is funded by the ASHA Foundation is on a separate plot which is approximately at a distance of 300 meters from the hostel building. The Asha building has not been used for class room training this academic year as there were only 120 students this year and because of the 6 to 9 month long rainy season the school authorities felt it convenient to conduct classes in the class rooms which are located within the hostel campus.

Needs of the Vanavasi Trust:

- 1) Funds to meet expenses towards the honorarium to the teaching and non-teaching staff. Estimated amount is 300,000 Rs.
- 2) A vehicle preferably a SUV (Jeep), a used vehicle would cost 3 lakhs and a brand new one would cost 600,000 Rs. approx.
- 3) The School requires 300 fiber chairs amounting to the total cost of 125,000 Rs.
- 4) The school needs a bigger TV, the TV being used now is on a brink of going for repairs.

Daily Schedule:

6:00 AM : Wake up bell
6:20 AM : Morning Prayers in the dorms, separate for boys and girls (Self conducted)
8:30 AM : Breakfast
9:50 AM : School Bell
10:00 AM : Classes
1:00 PM to 2:00 PM : Lunch
2:00 PM to 4:00 PM : Classes (including vocational training)
4:00 PM : Evening tea and snacks
4:00 PM to 5:30PM : The kids are taken to the playground. At this time they are also involved in the activities such as agriculture, yoga, dancing, meditation, etc.
6:20 PM : Evening Prayers
6:30 - 8:30 PM : Study time
8:30 PM : Dinner, soon after dinner study time continues
9:30 PM : Bed time

Teaching Staff:

1. Siju N S - Principal, BSc, BEd
2. Sujatha K K - Secondary Teacher, Malyalam
3. Priya M V - Social Studies for Secondary School

4. Harshana Raj - Science for Secondary School, Bsc, BEd
5. Suja P D - Hindi for Primary School, Language Trainee
6. Souwmya M - All Subjects for Primary School
7. Nikhila E K - Physical Education (Physical training course)
8. Geetha C (ex tribal student of the school)
9. Nabeesa P A - Social Studies for Primary School, BA BEd
10. Sreenevasan - Computer Instructor for primary school
11. Bindu C - All subjects for primary school, BSc BEd
12. Chandran C K - Subjects for primary school - Was a teacher with the school till September of this year

From September 11th this year there are 11 teaching faculty members, prior to which there were 12 teachers. The School has 17 members who constitute the non-teaching staff.

All the non-teaching staff including the warden are members of the tribal communities

We had an opportunity to interact with Madan who is the father of Geeta, an 8th std student at the school. Geeta stays in the Hostel, Geeta's parents had come to pay her a weekend visit. To our luck Madan could speak in Kannada. Madan is a member of the Kuruba community which is identified as Scheduled Tribe. Madan is very happy that his kid is with the Pazhassi Raja school. He says that there are no such schools nearby, according to Madan he prefers his kid to study in a residential school as the parents are assured that the kids will attend classes regularly. Madan says that this education for the kid is important, even if it dose not necessarily materialise as a means of finding employment for the school educated kid. Madan believes that this education leaves a marked difference in kid when compared with their peers who do not have any formal education. Madan strongly believes that the kid who is educated would always try to give a better future to their progeny, Dr Nambiar also subscribes to this opinion. Dr. Nambiar says that most of the kids in the school are 1st generation school students, he warns us against harbouring expectations from the kids to make tangible use of education by getting a job based on it or by pursuing higher studies, he strongly believes that these kids will

go on to be responsible citizens and would definitely engage their children in a more intense formal education.

The school is not restricted to the 6 tribal communities that finds a mention in the website of the Vanavasi Trust, Madan's family is a point in case. The kids of different communities in the confines of the school learn to live together with a feeling of fraternity, this is not the case in the outside world, where each tribe community live in different pockets of forests, they harbour a general dissent towards the member of a different community.

Let me try to Field the questions raised by ASHA in a Q&A format;

1. What do the teachers feel about sustenance? How long can they work without salaries if government funding always gets delayed?

A. Dr. Nambiar says the teacher have faith in his ability to find a way to bring in funds. The teachers have continued without pay for the past 3 months. However we do not have any information regarding this from the teachers themselves.

2. Is anybody from the trust ready to take up the role of Dr.Nambiar after his retirement?

A. Sujatha and the principal are projected to take up the role of Dr. Nambiar. we could not meet the principal as he was not in premises during our visit. Sujatha is a Malyalam teacher, she is a resident teacher, a very dynamic person. As informed by Dr. Nambiar, Sujatha comes from a relatively well healed family and she is unmarried, Sujatha has committed herself to the school. Sujatha can speak only in Malyalam, this is a serious drawback considering the fact that constant interaction maybe be required with the non-malyalam speaking world to run such an institute. Dr. Nambiar was mentioning the need of a youth with imagination to take over the NGO from him, this indicates that he is not clear as to who will succeed him as the care taker of the school.

3. How did you guys meet the parents of the girl? Was it a genuine example? Do you think all the parents feel the same way? Is there community support?

A. It was genuine, if we were tricked, then they are so clever that they deserve spot funding. We spoke with only one parent, however I believe that most of the parents feel the same way. The community around the school was initially un-supportive. During the nascent years of the school the thatched building was burnt to ground by anti social elements, allegedly by nearby hooch peddlers who sensed the increasing presence of police because of the school activities (the police payed a few visits to the school because they received complaints from the neighbours, mostly non-hindus, who feared the Sanskrit prayers chanting kids as religious fanatics affiliated to radical groups like RSS, VHP, etc.). At the present the community is not anti-school. Few of them actually welcome the existence of the school as it has brought to them good roads and telephone lines.

4. How good is the government school in Periya? Why are there day scholars when there is a government school?

A. I don't have a very good answer for this. One thing is assured, on our way back we saw the government school building which was very small when compared with the Vanavasi school, I am not sure how this reflects on the quality of education given in the government school. Vanavasi school is exclusively for the tribal community and we feel that there is a need for such a school.

5. How is Dr.Nambiar planning to cope with other expenses even if Asha funds the teachers' salary?

A. His main concern is the honorarium to the teaching staff, the rest can wait for the government funds to be allocated.

Dr. Nambiar says that he might wind up the school within a couple of years if no funds are received. Anyway we don't expect Dr. Nambiar to continue running for more than 2 years, we sight old age and ill health as the reasons. The future for the school is

bleak without Dr. Nambiar running it, as we don't see a capable successor in anyone we met.

It would be unfortunate to see this school close down because we truly believe the wonderful kids we met need this school.

ASHA could extend its responsibility towards the school by trying to chart out a path for the school to a brighter future.

Myself and Sourab will always be available for talking on our visit to the project site, feel free to phone or chat to draw from us as much information as you can.