

Project Visit Report

Project: Langalberia

Project Steward: Aritro Sinha Roy

Location

Langalberia is a village near Baruipur in South-24-Paraganas district in the state of West Bengal. It takes about half an hour to reach to the place from the Baruipur railway station by auto-rickshaw. Langalberia Anil Smriti Girls' High School is located at a 10 minute walking distance from the auto-rickshaw stand. The school has started in 1994 at a different place. The land for the current building was donated by Mr. Jyotirmoy Ghosh who is currently the secretary of the school. He expressed his concern about the quality of teaching in the elementary schools of the locality. Thus, he wanted a good high school for the children of this area, specially, for girls as they already had a boys' school nearby. That motivated him to donate the land for the current school building. Right now it has around 480 students and 13 teachers, but the building has a capacity for much more. The medium of teaching is Bengali and they are following the educational structure as of West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

Problems

School authority told us that the student strength has been decreasing for the last couple of years as the school is not affiliated by the government of West Bengal. This means that the students have to appear for the board examination after class 10 (Madhyamik examination) through a different school which has the required affiliation and that requires paying the admission fee for that school too. It is needed to inform at this point that most of the students are coming from the families of land workers of the villages around Langalberia and thus, paying the additional admission fee is a huge burden on them. The problem is that they don't have much of a choice as they have to walk even farther to go to the other nearest school and that school is already having students beyond its capacity and the fee is also higher in that school. We talked to the students and got surprised to know that most of them have to walk everyday for more than

40 minutes to come to the school. Also a lot of them told us that they couldn't buy the text books on time because of their poor financial condition.

The teachers as we had found are trying their best to cope with these problems. Most of them are highly qualified for the job and that they are doing a really good work has been reflected in the results of the students from this school in the Madhyamik examination. The head mistress of the school, Mrs. Nilanjana Ghosh told us about many other difficulties they are having. One of the major issues is that some of the students stop coming to the school and start helping their parents in their work or sometimes they have to take care of their younger siblings while their parents are away. To stop this they are thinking of some kind of vocational training to start within the complex and they bought a few sewing machines for that. Also, the school authority has been trying to arrange for multiple numbers of teacher-parent meetings during each session, but a lot of the time parents don't show up as they have to escape a few hours of work and thus, invaluable amount of money for them. The building is in pretty good shape, but still it is having some problems as with moderately old buildings. The school has a field on one side and a big pond on the other side of it. The pond is nearing the wall of the building and thus, corroding the foundation of the building. As a temporary solution they put a lot of mud to decelerate the process of corrosion. The permanent solution would be to make a guard-wall which again requires a lot of money (near \$2,500). The president of the school, Mr Ranajit Ghosh told us that they are depending heavily on Asha for this issue. Earlier our project stewards had found that they were concentrating mainly on getting the government affiliation rather than looking for funding sources like Asha. It seems that their initial idea was to get the government affiliation which would have increased the student strength according to them and they thought the monthly fee could be a good source of funding for them. The only problem for not getting the affiliation yet is that according to the recent government rules, they need to construct one more staircase as a safety precaution and they have to pay a one-time deposit to the fire department to get a no objection certificate from them (total of \$2000 approximately). Therefore, now they are desperately looking for the money as getting the affiliation will give them some kind of a motivation to look forward as the current situation is really depressing and demoralizing. The fee is currently Rs 30 per month (less than \$1) and again most of the current students find it very difficult to pay even this small amount of money. So, right now the school authority is accepting whatever they offer as otherwise it could lead to situations like drop-out. While talking to Mr. Ghosh it came up that the teachers are hardly getting paid these days. Their salary is well below the basic salary given to the teachers in any government school. Also, the payment is becoming irregular as they are unable to find any regular source of funding. There are a few good-hearted people who donated to the school, but again those are usually one time or in an irregular basis.

Talking to couple of local people we realized that they are very sympathetic about the school and the staff. One such person from the locality, who is also a doctor, visits the school regularly for the health check up of the students and he promised to do this life long for free of cost. Asha has funded this project only thrice, but right now Asha is literally their only hope to get these things done and carry on with the dream of making the school a really good center for education.

Future Scope

My impression after the first visit is that this school has the potential to become a lot bigger than it is right now. The major reasons for this belief is that (1) they have a big building which will be in pretty good condition once the guard-wall will be made, (2) the students are coming from quite distant villages and from very poor families showing that there is an urge in the community to get at least a minimum level of education, (3) the teachers are dedicated to the institution as they are not leaving the school in this difficult situation even without getting paid properly. I talked to Mr. Jyotirmoy Ghosh personally about what they are thinking for sustainability once Asha decides to fund this project regularly for 3-4 years. He told me that they will introduce a proper admission fee for the students who will be able to pay it once they get the government affiliation and they are again very confident that the student strength will increase substantially after getting the affiliation. Since they have well qualified teachers, they are expecting a lot more students from a better economic class of the locality as well who will be able to pay the fee regularly. But, right now they definitely need the helping hands from Asha and other such NGO's to survive this critical period.