



*Asha For Education
Detroit Chapter*

Purna Pragna Trust (PPT) Site Visit Report

School: Purna Pragna Trust (PPT)

Project Type: Alternative Education

Primary

Focus: to go to formal school

Area: Rural

Address: Location 404
Alanahalli, Mysore District
Karnataka, 570011

Project

Leader: Tara Gopinath
Email: tara_champu@yahoo.com
Phone: 01191-8212471569
Address: same as school

Visit Date: 1 July 2005

Visiting

Volunteer: Deepak Aswani

Project Summary

The Purnapragna Shishu Vihar at Alanahalli in Mysore is better known as Tarakka's school. Tara Gopinath, her sister, Malathi, and a friend pooled in their resources and started a school to cater to the needs of needy children in their neighborhood. Tara Gopinath was a teacher in a formal school for 13 years. The concept of education advocated by David Horsburgh, hailed as the father of non-formal education held her interest.

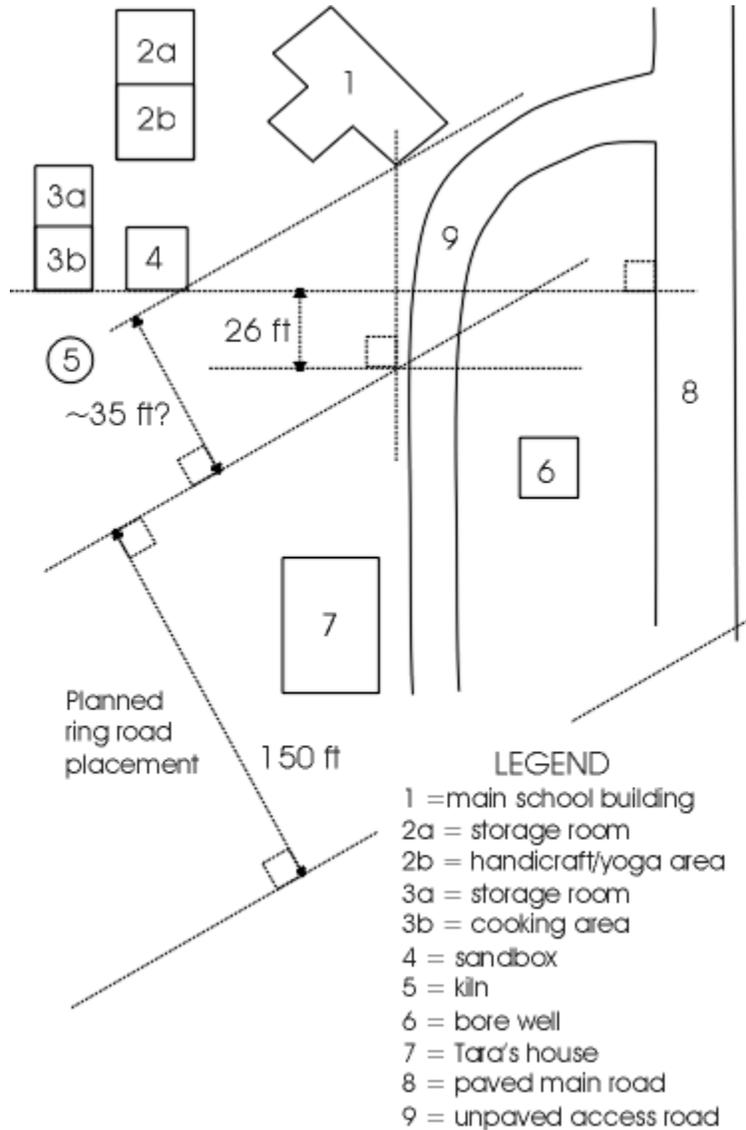
Tara's school follows its own syllabus. The students range in age from four to fifteen and all study in groups. Each study group is comprised of seven to eight students. The regular government syllabus is introduced only when the student is mentally prepared. Even then the subjects are mostly treated as simple stories or games.

Every child here is given due importance and is encouraged to learn things at his or her own pace. What is more, there is no tuition fee and uniform too. Food and books are both provided at school. In the school

year beginning in 2005, there is a total of 38 students and 4 teachers.

Purna Pragna is an alternate education school that addresses the special social needs of underprivileged children and offers an opportunity for high quality education. Alternate education schools assist children in taking the main stream government exams.

School ground Layout (1.4 acres, surrounded by farmland on all 4 directions, not to scale)



Project History

Tara and her sister Malathi had acquired training on non-formal education from David Horsburgh in 1983 and appreciated the techniques over those used in government schools. In 1984, two schools were initiated

through the pooling of resources from Tara Gopinath, her sister Malathi , a friend, and Action Aid (a non-formal education organization based in the UK with a branch in Bangalore). Tara managed the PPT School in Mysore and Malathi managed the Vikasana School in Bangalore. Both of these schools were part of a network of roughly 30 non-formal education schools that were supported by Action Aid. Although Action Aid no longer has responsibility over these schools, this network of schools continues to have conferences annually every November to share techniques and learned lessons in non-formal education. 17 of the original member schools are still part of this network and the remainder are more recent entries.

The funding of PPT has evolved over time as detailed here:

Action Aid –	6 years
Private individual from Indian Express Newspaper –	1 year
A UK based Yoga instructional group (name not recalled) –	1 year
CRY –	6 years
Radhantata Trust with continued support from CRY –	2 years
Asha for Education –	4 years

PPT has also been involved with several unique non-profit partnerships. In 2004, PPT received a Rs. 25,000 grant from a non-profit grassroots education organization funded by Green Hotel where PPT allows other teachers to attend PPT to observe the teaching process and learn from the methods of non-formal education. PPT also supports the non-profit group Pratham by having it's older students teach the handicrafts classes in the summer vacation time.

Daily Schedule

- 8:55 – School begins with morning exercises and singing in a circle outdoors
- 9:15 – Music class or quiet time for yoga (depending on day)
- 9:30 – Self study time and porridge for the youngest children
- 10:00 – Class scheduled by day
- 11:00 – Break
- 11:30 – Class scheduled by day
- 1:00 – Lunch break (students bring own or go home)
- 2:00 – Class scheduled by day
- 3:00 – Non-academic activity (handicrafts or other skilled work practice)
- 4:00 – Students clean up and go home or stay behind for special paid classes scheduled by day

Standard Subjects Taught

- Music
- Yoga
- English
- Science
- Social Science
- Mathematics
- Hindi
- Kannada
- Handicrafts

Optional Subjects Taught at a Fee

- Tailoring (not available in 2005)
- Carpentry (not available in 2005)
- Mushroom farming (not available in 2005)
- Spoken English (first attempt in 2005) Rs. 50 for 3 days a week of 3 months. To be taught by Tara Gopinath. 12 students have signed up so far.
- Computer skills and internet exposure (first attempt in 2005) Rs. 500 for 3 days a week for 3 months. Plan to enforce Rs. 300 minimum and requiring a deposit/registration fee of Rs. 100. To be taught by teachers from the company Vaishnavi Infosys in Mysore that normally charges Rs. 1200 per student for the identical program, but will be teaching at a discount for PPT. 6 students have signed up so far. Asha-Detroit allocated about Rs. 24,000 in 2005 for the initial computer purchase for this program. The initial computer cost roughly Rs. 20,000. PPT plans to purchase 2 more used computer expected to cost Rs. 10,000 each. Internet setup is expected to cost Rs. 2,000 and the monthly access fee is Rs. 500 (offered at the government discount rate) Tara will update Asha-Detroit on the final specific needs once specific hardware and other donations are finalized. The yoga group from the UK who has funded PPT in the past is offering roughly 100 pounds as a donation to the computer program.

Current Teachers

Tara Gopinath – Administrative head for PPT (in mid 60's). Tara has been with PPT since its inception in 1984. Tara is present the whole week of school. Tara has discontinued teaching the standard subjects since 2003 to help strengthen the other teachers which will have larger roles when Tara plans to retire. Tara is married and has 2 sons – one in Bangalore and the other in Detroit.

Rajlakshmi – Teacher (in mid 40's). Rajlakshmi has taught at PPT for about 17 of the 21 years that it has been running. Rajlakshmi now teaches 2 days a week as needed per the class schedule. Rajlakshmi's younger sister, Kumudavalli, had taught at PPT for about 14 years, but now is a lecturer at a college. Kumudavalli still regularly visits PPT. Rajlakshmi's specialty is teaching Kannada. Rajlakshmi is married and has 1 daughter.

Gayatri – Teacher (in mid 40's). Gayatri has taught at PPT for 7 years. Gayatri is present the whole week of school. Gayatri's husband is also involved in an NGO. Gayatri's specialty is teaching science and mathematics. Gayatri's daughter is a former student of PPT (studied there for 3 years) and is now in mainstream school.

Kirithi – Teacher and student (18 years old). Kirithi teaches the youngest group of children between 3-5 years old. Kirithi is a 10th standard student. 2005 is the first year she has been involved in teaching at PPT. Kirithi is a very loyal to PPT. Kirithi is from Bangalore but shares residence with Tara Gopinath in Mysore due to family issues. Kirithi helps cover the headcount loss that resulted from one of the long time teachers, Mary, leaving in 2004. Mary left PPT due to the limited pay and job security inherent to non-profit schools.

Current Students

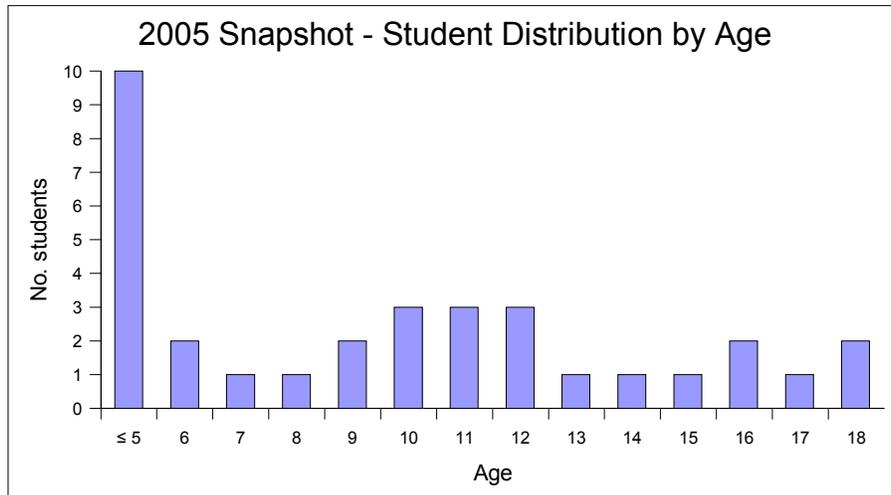
Total students: 38 (following statistics fail to account for 5 of these)

Male: 15/33 = 45%

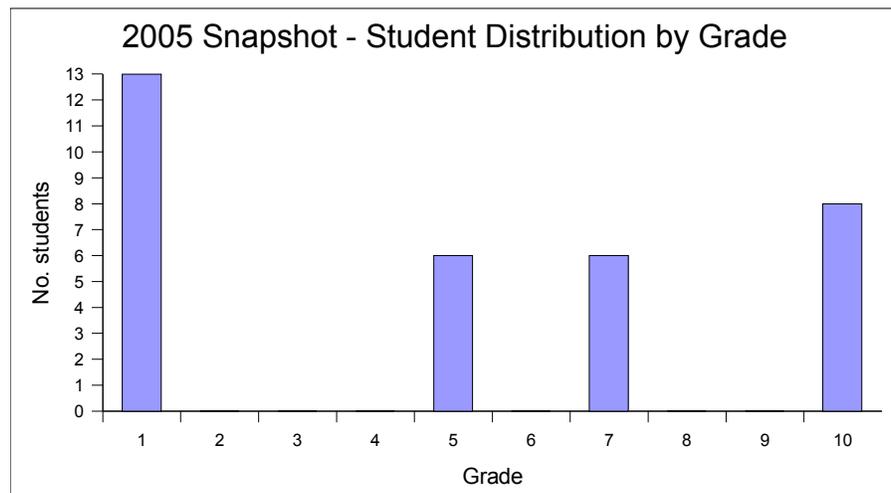
Female: 18/33 = 55%

Full time: $18/33 = 55\%$

Part time: $15/33 = 45\%$ (supplemented by government schools so in case PPT becomes unavailable, students can fall back on government schools)



The student distribution by age shows a fairly consistent spread among ages.



The student distribution by grade shows that although there is a consistent spread among ages, the students are grouped in only a few grade levels so that teaching at different levels is containable. However, as part of the non-formal education, each student is given special attention to reflect their individual level.

Project Progress with Respect to the Students

Many of those students that successfully complete the 10th standard exam continue with 11th and 12th standard education. Some of those students that successfully complete the 12th standard have continued with college. Some successful stories narrated by Tara conclude with computer engineers (IT) and teachers who teach at universities or have become well recognized for their accomplishments in local newspapers

(one case of a student taking an ambitious initiative in support of education of girls).

PPT provides extensive support to students to succeed with the 10th standard exam. A number of students may be in the 10th standard group at the school, but they may not all take the 10th standard exam together. With the cooperation of each individual student, PPT continues to coach and build academic skills until both the teacher and student feel ready for the exam.

Although statistics in student retention, graduation rate, and post graduation accomplishments are not tracked, Tara assures that exposure of even 3 or 4 years at PPT produces a benefit for the students. It typically takes 1-2 years to build up trust from each new student and familiarize them with a social atmosphere which they have limited exposure to due to their backgrounds. Aside from the academic gains, the students gain valuable social skills. Tara acknowledges that those students who continue with formal education past the 10th standard typically don't end up in the head of the class, but rather in the middle. Nevertheless, they almost always manage to succeed and do not have trouble fitting in.

PPT, given its non-formal education style, can handle only a limited class size. PPT targets a class size of around 35 students. On average, 3-4 students graduate per year, but this does not match the number of requests for student admission. Annually 5-10 students or their families request to be admitted to the school. Admittance to PPT is judged by interview of the candidate student and his or her parents. Student skills, interest, and motivation are judged along with the level of commitment indicated by the parents to select students. The goal of this evaluation is to minimize the risk of the student not completing their studies at PPT and to maximize the chance of a successful and positive experience at PPT. Admittance to PPT is not consistent on an annual basis since graduation is not at a consistent rate of 3-4 students per year but rather in batches.

Project Progress with Respect to Community Involvement (in interest of self sustainability)

The local village community of Alanahalli has a very positive perception of PPT. This is apparent from the large number of requests to admit new students to the school (5-10 per year). However, there is no local financial support to the school. Students seem to take some form of ownership in the school since they enthusiastically clean up the school at the end of each school day. Graduates frequently visit to support the teachers or to seek a position as a teacher. The teachers show great dedication as they work for substandard salaries and extend their job responsibilities beyond the classroom when students have voiced a need in cases of domestic disputes or abuse, forced early marriage, or child labor. Tara regrets some failures in intervention over the past 20 years of PPT, including 2 students who resorted to committing suicide.

Project Progress with Respect to the Asha Basic Objectives

Tara Gopinath provided some commentary on PPT with regards to some of the Asha basic objectives proposed in the 2005 Asha National Conference:

- Health and hygiene – PPT is very critical about students understanding the necessity of this.
- Literacy in local/national language – PPT teaches Kannada and Hindi.
- Civic and political structures – Tara feels that this topic can only be subsequent to understanding human rights and establishing self importance and priorities. Furthermore, according to Tara, teaching this topic often runs the risk of bringing in religion into the classroom. The problem is that some of India's political parties are religiously influenced and hence maintaining a strictly secular discussion among different

students and teachers becomes difficult. Although discussion of such topics are never initiated by teachers at PPT, they are openly discussed whenever the students pose questions.

- Right to information – According to Tara, this topic can only be taught in conjunction with “civic and political structures”
- Land rights – PPT teaches this topic, but Tara concedes that her students have a difficult time defending themselves when an inappropriate land acquisition or transaction takes place by the government.
- Human rights – PPT focuses on this topic at the high school level (teenagers). This topic also gets exposure through intervention cases where students struggle with domestic disputes or abuse, forced early marriage, or child labor.
- Leadership development – PPT tries to teach leadership, self-confidence, and mutual respect. The latter enforces the caveat that everyone should be treated equally.
- Gender issues – PPT pushes for an equal attendance between boys and girls. Tara feels that PPT is able to accomplish 90% of its goals in fighting gender issues.

Short term Challenges

- 1) In late 2005 or early 2006, it is expected that the Mysore Urban Development Authority (MUDA) will start construction of a ring road through the school grounds of PPT. The projected placement is depicted in the school ground layout drawing. The ring road will occupy roughly 40% of the school ground area and split it into two portions. Tara Gopinath's house as well as the bore well that serves as the school water source will have to be replaced. Furthermore, the ring road passes about 30-35 feet away from the main school buildings which poses a safety hazard to the children and a significant source of noise pollution.

During the construction process, Tara plans to temporarily relocate to a nearby home and continue running the school. An immediate need during the construction process will be some means of protecting the students from the construction and subsequent ring road traffic. A wall type fence would be preferred although this offers virtually no sound insulation. Planting trees/bushes along the perimeter is not expected to yield any noticeable noise attenuation.

MUDA has offered compensation in the ballpark of Rs. 12 Lakh for the land loss and the home loss. Tara maintains that this compensation is below the market value. Rs. 12-13 Lakh can cover only the reconstruction of a home comparable to what currently exists but not the construction of a protective wall fence. Also MUDA has offered access to the government water system to compensate for the loss of the bore well.

Potential solutions:

- a) MUDA relocates the road construction so that it does not interfere as severely with PPT. This is not out of the question according to Tara. In her last meeting with MUDA on June 30, 2005, Commissioner Mr. Pankaj Kumar Pandey was showing some sympathy with reference to petitions had been received in the mail from the Asha-Detroit chapter and the yoga group from the UK that had funded PPT for one year in the past. Furthermore, Mr. Pandey gave a less certain impression of the exact details relating to the ring road construction. Further persuasion through wider spread requests for compassion to PPT, either through a more suitable compensation (monetary or adjacent land) or a less obtrusive placement of the ring road with respect to PPT.
- b) It is not practical for Asha to assume that MUDA will give an improved offer as above, so Asha and

PPT has to consider how to deal with the ring road as if construction were to continue as planned. The first priorities are the construction of a protective wall for the school and the successful relocation of Tara to an intermediate house. The latter is something that Tara will be able to handle herself. However, the protective wall may require some emergency funding from Asha-Detroit, depending on the timing of the government's monetary compensation and what the immediate needs are for the home reconstruction. For the long term there are 3 options:

- The replacement home can be reconstructed on the current school grounds, on the side of the ring road where the school buildings exist, in which case the area will become congested.
- The school can purchase adjacent land to build the replacement home. This also leaves the possibility of rebuilding the school buildings at a more distant position if the noise pollution from the ring road traffic becomes too disturbing to the school's activities. The problem with this option is that the adjacent farmers are not interested in selling any land, which means that acquiring any adjacent land will come at a high price premium.
- New land can be purchased at a more appropriate location for PPT to eliminate space restrictions and disturbance from the ring road. Government compensation is only sufficient for a replacement home construction. This requires the purchase of a new lot of land and new school buildings. The current school grounds can be sold to cover a portion of these expenses, but this can only occur after the replacement school is in place so that the school operation is not interrupted. This is the most costly option, however, one benefit is that the current school ground's land value will be slightly inflated as it will now surround a ring road.

2) India is considering some new national standardizations in their educational system. Among this includes administering a national test in addition to state tests. Furthermore, the requirements for what qualifies a school is under discussion. The proposal for 'school' title qualification is similar to that currently enforced in Tamil Nadu. In addition to administering the proposed standard exams, there are requirements about periodic testing. Unfortunately, the proposed form of periodic testing does not fit the structure of non-formal education used at PPT. Under this new criteria, PPT would no longer qualify as a school but rather a 'learning center'. As a result, if this standard is approved, PPT would have to adjust their education format to continue with it's school status. Tara indicated that this task would be taken on with help from the non-formal education network that meets annually.

Long term Challenges

- 1) Tara has intentions of retiring from PPT in the near future. A reliable administrative replacement for Tara is needed at PPT. A number of hurdles exist in finding an appropriate candidate for this position:
 - a) In addition to having a strong background in education, the administrative head should have faith in non-formal education and be able to earn the approval of the students and their families, teachers, community, government, and non-profit donors (Asha as of recently) without disruption to the education process. Most of the candidates who have shown interest in this position are former students of PPT who wish to help other students out of affection for the school. Unfortunately, few of these former students have had any diverse exposure outside of PPT such as with college or held any work responsibility, which are critical to successfully filling this position.
 - b) The risk introduced to the school is higher than by someone in an equivalent position in a government school. The administrative head has no higher supervision and hence nobody to maintain and monitor policies, controls, or standards. One example Tara gave is that PPT has to be careful about who they accept money from. For example if PPT had accepted donations from

illegitimate non-profit groups that flourish through political connections or bribery, it could have disqualified PPT from being offered support from certain non-profit groups, such as Asha for Education, that are cautious in their affiliations. This responsibility has intimidated some candidates who don't feel politically savvy.

- c) Working at PPT in any position requires a large dedication to seva, or volunteerism. The pay is lower than a teacher would receive in a government school (approximately 1/3). Also, there is relatively less security than a government school could offer since it is not dependent on annual donation support. Lastly, there is no opportunity for advancement as the administrative head at PPT. These factors deter candidates from taking serious interest in the position. Tara encourages all her graduates to continue with their studies after PPT and to follow ambitious goals. But unfortunately those who do follow Tara's recommended course are often able to find careers with a more inviting future.

Tara seriously plans to pursue one particular candidate – Lakshminarayan. Lakshminarayan is another student of David Horsburgh who is familiar with the non-formal education style of teaching. Lakshminarayan is in his mid 40's and currently lives in Bangalore. Both Tara and her sister Malathi are hoping that he takes over the administration of both of their schools. This means that he would not reside full time with either school and half of his responsibilities will be dealt with remotely. Tara and Malathi have mentioned this possibility to Lakshminarayan and he has not declined his acceptance as a possibility.

- 2) In the interest of self sustainability, PPT needs to have a some long term guaranteed source of funding and personnel. The most practical approach to funding sustainability is to find a group that can take ownership in the success of the school. This could be a corporate organization, community organization, or government. Asha-wide has experience with government taking over schools. PPT poses a a unique challenge to gaining acceptance by the government due to it's non-formal style of education. Deviating from the non-formal format, however, is not an option. All the teachers at PPT are firm believers in non-formal education. It has already been proven to be effective for teaching a small class of students of different ages. Successfully integrating government support into PPT without disruption necessitates the following steps: (This effort should not be initiated until the short term challenges are overcome – ring road construction issues and administrative head replacement.)
 - a) Find the appropriate parties to handle the negotiation process to make sure both the school and the government are happy with the conditions -- This discussion would involve Asha, PPT, and a government organization such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). SSA is a government run program for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), as mandated by 86th amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory education to the children of 6-14 years age group, a fundamental right. SSA works with various non-profit groups/NGOs and communities in support of elementary education. Advice or direct support from groups such as Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK)/Karuna Trust could also prove to be helpful. VGKK/Karuna Trust is based in Karnataka and has experience in adopting existing government schools and improving school conditions and performance.
 - b) Take steps to ensure that PPT has sufficient appeal to the government representing parties – In favor of supporting the minimum government requirements, PPT may have to modify some of their practices such as their testing process (which already is likely to be adjusted due to changes in 'school' title qualification). In order to maintain the overall non-formal education structure and maintain transparency at the highest level administration, it may be necessary to make PPT cost and

performance competitive with government schools. The performance of PPT already exceeds that of many government schools. Part of this comes at the expense of a teacher to student ratio that is 4-5 times larger than that in a government school. At government salary rates, this leads to a significant cost disadvantage for PPT. As a result, it may be possible that Asha will have to consider another source of long term partial funding for this excess teacher cost. One option would be to rely on Asha funds and gradually shift this funding responsibility to a corpus fund that can be continually grown. Both of these steps would be considered depending on the results of the negotiations between all parties.

Pictures



PPT main school building front exterior wall depicting the Pied Piper with rats following in a line (artwork has been weathered over time)



The students standing in a circle doing the morning exercises and singing.



The students sitting in a circle doing the morning yoga exercises.



The part time students whose education is supplemented by government schools.



The newest students (all 1st standard)



The newest students (all 1st standard) again.



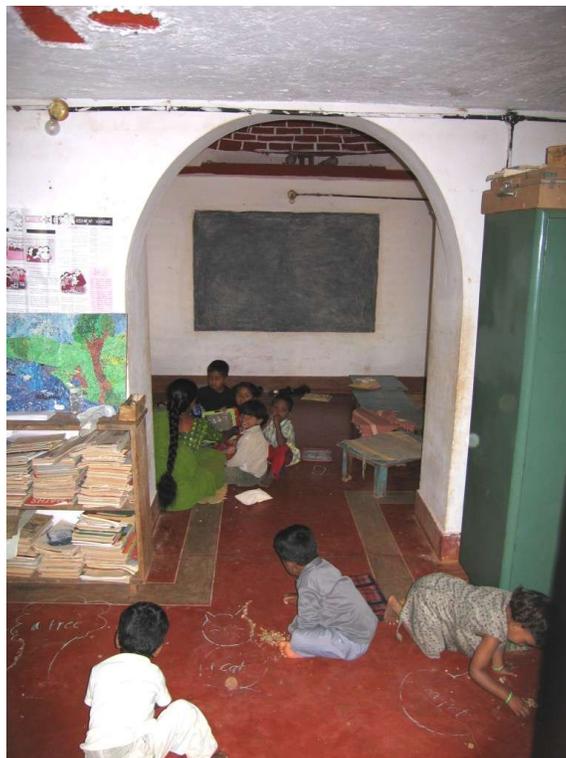
The kiln used to bake the clay handicrafts made by the students.



The room used to cook the porridge for the students.



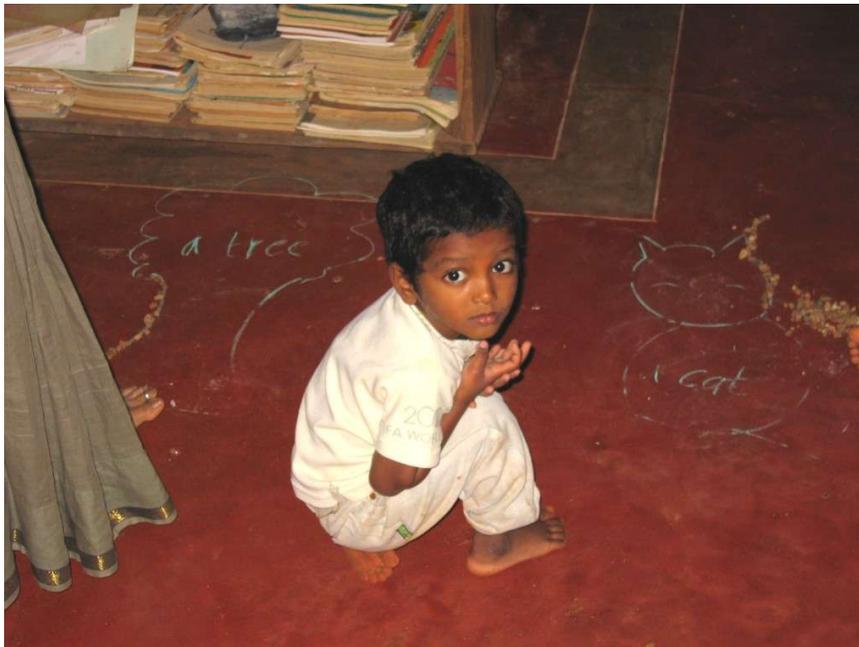
Another picture of the room used for yoga, music class, and handicrafts.



A view of the main school building while class is in session. The youngest children are tracing drawings made in chalk on the floor with pebbles. The middle aged student groups interact with the teachers. The eldest aged student group studies alone.



Two of the youngest 1st standard students in the main school building.



Another 1st standard student in the main school building.



The middle aged students studying with Rajlakshmi.



The eldest group of students studying.



The youngest group of students (1st standard) interacting with Gayatri.



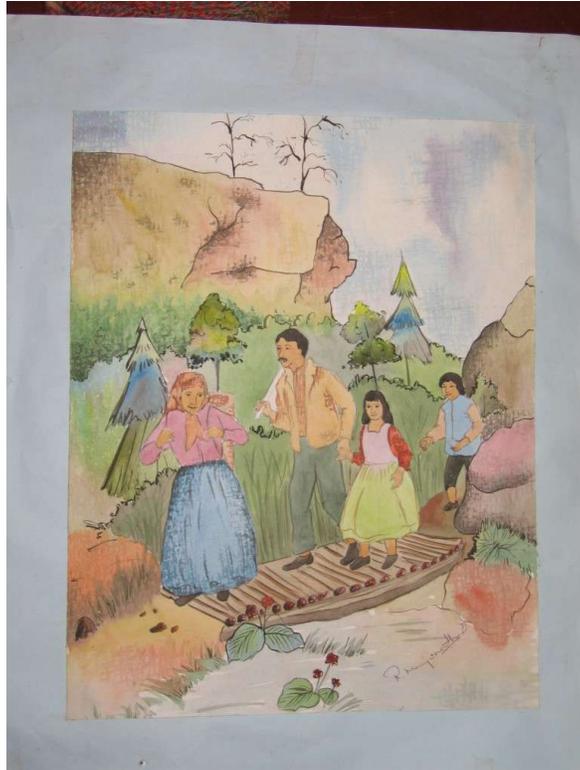
One of the 1st standard students smiling for the camera.



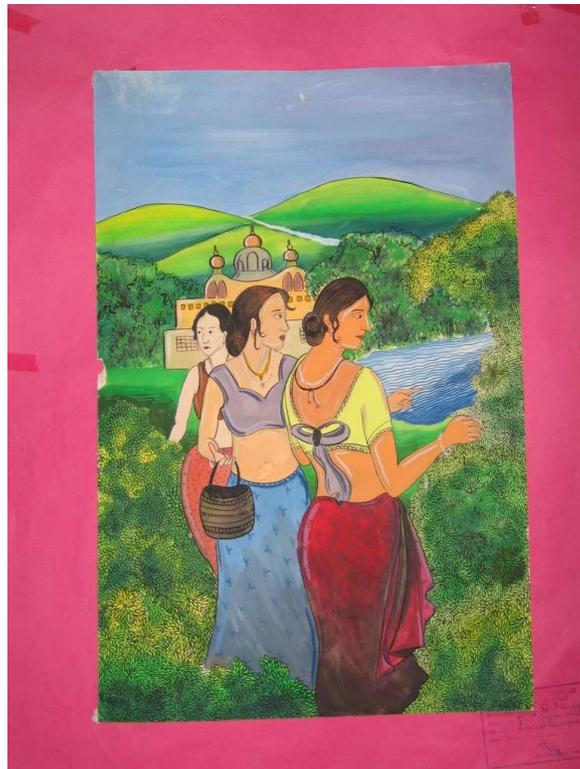
Tara Gopinath, school administrative head, demonstrating some of the teaching aids used at PPT.



One of the wax carved artworks done by a student at PPT.



A painting by a student at PPT.



A painting by a student at PPT.



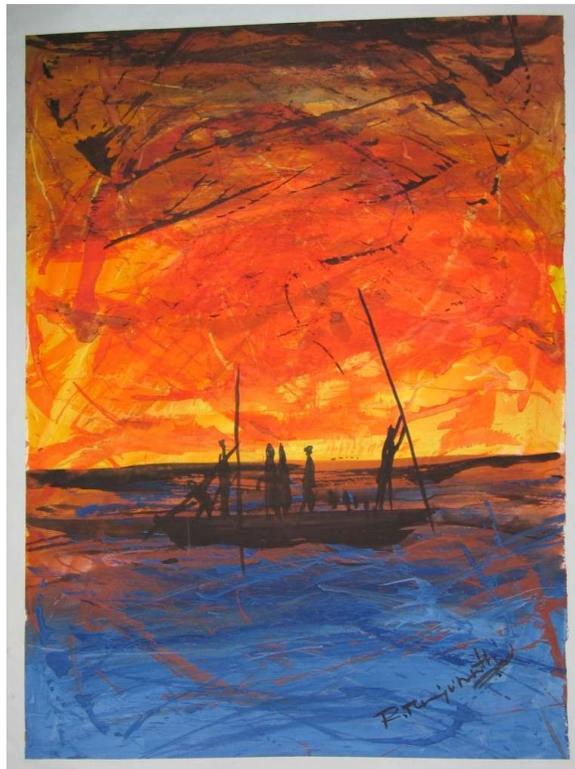
A painting by a student at PPT.



A pencil sketch by a student at PPT.



A painting by a student at PPT.



A painting by a student at PPT.



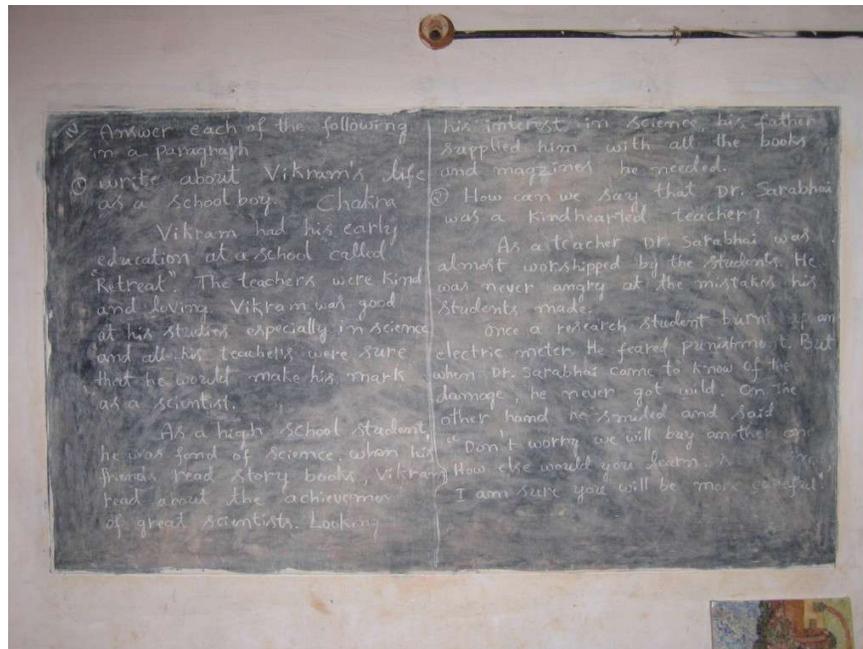
Various handicrafts made by the students at PPT.



Some of the clay work made by the students at PPT.



Some of the clay work made by the students at PPT.



The chalkboard at PPT.



A view of the main school building.



A view of the two school buildings down the path to Tara Gopinath's house.



Tara's house.



The school grounds as seen from the path connecting the school and Tara's house, facing away from the main road.



The school grounds as seen from the path connecting the school and Tara's house, facing toward the main road.



Two graduates of PPT, now studying in the 12th standard, making a visit to PPT.



A view inside the large storage room.



Tara reading the list of current students.



A picture of Kirthi, Rajlakshmi, and Tara along with some of the students of PPT.



Teachers Rajlakshmi and Tara.



Some clay tile work done by students attached to the exterior of the school building.



Dog.



The farm land directly behind the main school buildings.



The gates to PPT.