

Questions-Answers about Akshardeep project in Pune

1. Why is the male:female ratio in the schools 1:3?

Akshardeep does not specifically target female children. However, in the areas in which they operate, the male children are encouraged to go to the local governmental school while female children are supposed to take care of younger siblings and essentially act as surrogate mothers while their parents are out working. When the female children go to the NFE schools run by Akshardeep, they often bring their siblings along, viz. they do not neglect the duty assigned to them by their parents and get an education at the same time. Therefore, the gender ratio in Akshardeep schools is skewed without any specific efforts.

2. Only 400/1408 children have made it to the mainstream schools (numbers from section 18 of original proposal). Why? How are the mainstreamed kids doing?

Mrs. Bapat gave me several reasons for why the number of kids getting into mainstream schools is low:

- a. Children's parents are migrant labourers and do not stay in one place for long
- b. Some of the children can't cope with regular school at all
- c. Women children are not encouraged by their parents to go to the govt. school
- d. In some of the areas that Akshardeep operates in, there are no govt. schools that are close by. Akshardeep is talking to the local authorities to start a school in that area.

Of the 400, she feels that about 50% drop out of regular school after some time. Some of these return to Akshardeep schools, and some of them discontinue any form of schooling. Right now, they do not track *all* the children that they have mainstreamed, but have data on some of them. Mrs. Bapat said that the ones that remain in the govt. school have done well. She had mark sheets etc. that she said that she would mail (I'll scan it and send it to you once I get them).

This line of discussion led to a few other points:

How is a 4th or 10th std pass certificate going to help the children? There are no jobs even for people with bachelors degrees; those who have only a 10th pass certificate won't get anywhere on the basis of that qualification. How will schooling help if it doesn't help the prospects of the students? Why would people remain motivated to send their children to school if their education does not fetch them anything tangible? Mrs. Bapat told me that Akshardeep was exploring the possibility of vocational training for the children in their schools (including those don't manage to cope with the mainstream schools). They have initiated dialogue with some people from Gnana Prabodhini who have some experience in such training. Several questions remain to be addressed: what kind of vocational training, how intense should the courses be, what areas should they focus on etc. – nevertheless, it was nice that Akshardeep had already started thinking in this direction. Mrs. Bapat felt that they would first try a 25-children vocational training pilot programme (including lectures on career options delivered at the level of the children, workshops to determine what the children were good at etc.) at the 4th std level. She insisted that they would ensure that the kids who underwent vocational training were educated to some

minimum level. A model for vocational training that they currently have is the school for adolescent women (8th std level) that I described in my initial site-visit report.

3. School timings: 5 days/week; 3 hours/day

4. Duties of the full-time coordinator:

- a. Random site visits to the schools
- b. Plan short term (weekly) and medium-long term (monthly and quarterly) school activities
- c. Monitor teacher absenteeism. If a teacher is absent, substitute for her so that the school does not remain closed.
- d. Coordinate with Mrs. Bapat (weekly reports to her) and the Swadhar committee (monthly reports)
- e. Coordinate with the local municipal teaching board (PCMC Shikshan Mandal)
- f. Visit local govt. schools to follow up on the children who have left Akshardeep for mainstream schools
- g. Develop rapport with the local community: visit them periodically.
- h. Some level of fund-raising

5. (Part II, 7) NFE centers in PCMC:

Funding from Mahatma Phule Shikshan Hami Yojana for 10 schools – currently only 6 are operational, but there are plans for 4 more. (Funding from Mahatma Phule Yojana is erratic) Current schools located at: Bhosari (2 schools), Kheralwadi/Gandhinagar (2 schools), 1 in Phule Nagar and one in Morewadi. Funds are being solicited for the schools in PCMC – for a brief summary of Akshardeep’s current finances, what projects are funded, to what extent and what they are requesting funding for, please refer the document that Mrs. Bapat had mailed me and that I had posted on the Asha Pune web site.

6. If they don’t receive funding from the Tata Foundation,

They do not plan to shut down any of the schools. Swadhar has a corpus from which they can borrow money (they will have to repay the loan to Swadhar). This can keep them running for 6 months, during which time they will look for alternate funding.

7. (Part II, 14) about computers:

Akshardeep now has 4 computers. They have obtained local language software free of cost from Vijay Bhatkar and have got a volunteer who has said that he will teach the kids about computers.

8. Gender disparity in schools (explained in point 1).

Female teachers are hired because:

- a. several trained female teachers (balwadi courses) are available; very few men apply for teaching jobs; Akshardeep has not received any applications from male teachers.
- b. there are several women children in the schools. The parents feel safer sending them to a school where the teachers are women.

9. (Part II, 18) many children who do not pass the 4th remain in Akshardeep classes – how are these accommodated?

Mrs. Bapat said that there are a large number of children that come from families of migrant labourers – hence, so far their class sizes have remained at 25 despite the number of children who have been unable to pass the 4th and have returned to Akshardeep.

10. Closest govt. school

on average is 2km.

11. Systematic study of the reasons due to which children drop out of school

Not carried out by Akshardeep – Mrs. Bapat had heard that Pratham and Doorstep had collected data on this, but she did not have further information.

12. How will Akshardeep ensure that they will have premises for schools for the next three years?

The original proposal mentioned that the schools have class rooms (typically sheds or garages or temple premises etc.) donated by the local community. Akshardeep does not *own* any of these buildings – however, they feel reasonably confident that they can depend on the support of the local community to get premises for their schools.

13. References from Tata:

Mrs. Bapat suggested that we could call and talk to Tara Sabawala or Pooja Roy (phone: 91-22-22049131 or 91-22-22047358, fax: 91-20-22826092). Funding from the Tata foundation is for the PMC schools. It looks like Asha Zurich is interested in funding the schools in PCMC.

14. Akshardeep project in first page it is specified for commercial sex workers, but in page 3, they the children of mostly construction site workers ? why this contradiction?

Their initial proposal was for both - however, they have obtained funding from the Times Foundation for the balwadi for the Commercial sex workers' kids. So, the funding proposal is now only for the schools for drop-outs in urban slums. I keep appending documents on the Asha Pune web site as and when things change - but I do not go back and modify previously uploaded docs since then it is tough (for interested Asha chapters) to keep track of what has changed. There is a Word document from Mrs. Bapat that spells out her revised requirements. Please take a look at the latest version on our web page.

15. Swadhar concentrates on helping women in distress and the Mohur Balwadi is part of this effort. The Mohur Balwadi is specifically run for the children of commercial sex workers and includes supplementary meals (twice a week). The other NFE centers can be considered to be part of the Akshardeep project (which does not necessarily focus on women in distress). Is this a correct summarization or would you like to add anything here?

Exactly right!

16. The Akshardeep NFE centers do not include a supplementary nutrition programme. Do you think such a programme should be included also for these centers?

This is not necessary as the children are quite adult

17. If the quality of the education in government school is a important reason for the high dropout rate, how the teaching by 10th pass students (as done in this project) will improve the situation? How a 3 day training program can transform a 10th pass student into a good teacher?

If you don't go through the government school system, then you don't get your SSC/HSC passing certificates. Not passing 10th/12th automatically closes many doors. The govt schools are not the best, and there are several reasons for that, but that is a different issue altogether. It makes more sense for an NGO to work within the system and improve what already exists rather than duplicate the entire school system. The schooling received by the children in Swadhar schools helps them shed their fear of school, cope with the learning process and prepares them for the environment in a govt. school. Now, as far as the teachers are concerned, I don't think that teaching such small kids how to read, write and add/subtract is really a very difficult task. What is probably more important is the right attitude, learning certain basic teaching techniques and the ability to deal with a classroom full of kids. The training programmes are not aimed at teaching the instructors language, math and science - they are aimed at giving them a feel for the techniques they might use to teach children and keep them motivated. For example, if you want the kids

to pick up a language, one of the things you might try is to get them to first pick up and use simple words rather than get them to rote learn the alphabet (this is something that one of the Swadhar teachers told me she had learnt at a training programme).

18. It seems that teachers in this program rarely leave the job (even after having a very low paid job). Is it a sign of dedication or professional inefficiency? It is hard to imagine why a good teacher in Pune will continue for 4 years with such a low paid job.

I'll hazard a guess as to the possible incentives for these teachers:

- a. they are from the local community (typically from the same slum area) and feel a sense of involvement
 - b. they are trained but not qualified (viz. they don't have B.Ed.s or such degrees, so cannot teach at govt. schools
 - c. the job market isn't great - they might not have too many alternate opportunities
- Having said all that, at least the teachers that I met appeared to be very dedicated. One of them was even using part of her salary to pay the rent on a shed in which she was holding classes.

19. Do they have large number of volunteers or is it just a group of a few dedicated people?

They seem to be mainly run by a few dedicated people. These people employ full-time or part-time social workers for the day-to-day running of some programmes. However, there are relatively few people who appear to run the show. These are full-time unpaid volunteers.

20. Funds from Asha should be used only for the PCMC classes:

Akshardeep says that they will be willing to maintain separate accounts – they don't want to maintain a separate bank account, but are willing to do the accounts for these schools separately. They will also provide audited reports for the funded PCMC schools also, as required by Asha Zurich.

21. Tata funds are for PMC schools;

Asha Zurich is proposing funding for PCMC schools – therefore, even if both funding comes through, there is no overlap. If Akshardeep is unable to raise funds, they will borrow from Swadhar's corpus and will pay the money back once they have been able to raise funding for their schools