

Site Visit report

NGO: Society for Promotion of Rational Thinking (SPRAT) Ahmedabad,Gujarat, India

by Sandhya Govindaraju (sandhya.govindaraju@gmail.com)

Visit dates: 19, Jan to 21,Jan, 2005.

SPRAT background: SPRAT was established as an organization by Mr. M.H. Jowher in the wake of the communal riots that rocked Gujarat in Feb-Mar 2002. SPRAT worked for immediate relief by providing clothing and construction materials to the riot affected people. Later, Mr.Jowher started conducting the Nai-Suhbah campaigns with muslim community as confidance building measure. The caravan centers are established as focal points for various activities aimed at improving the relations between hindus and muslims, to provide education and to provide career and networking oppurtunites to all, irrespective of religion.

SPRAT contact: Mr.M.H.Jowher - info@mysprat.org

Role of AID: AID had funded \$5000 from the Gujarat pool in 2003. The funds provided working capital for one caravan center for an year. Continual of funding is necessary to continue the initiative and expand it.

Visit Details:

I reached Ahmedabad on 19th, Jan 2005 night and stayed at Mr.Jowher's place for the night. We discussed about the ideas and motivations of SPRAT, how it is working and various initiatives that are being taken up.

Next day, we left for SPRAT's HQ and meet the staff. A lot of books have been collected for distribution among various caravan centers. These books will be sent after careful selection for their quality and condition. Also, a lot of mateial for Tsunami relief has been collected.

SPRAT is building Muskaan, a park at the Ekta Maidan in Juhapura-Vejalpur area of Ahmedabad, infamous as "border" because of its communal sensitivity, and the existance of a huge wall clearly demarking the muslim and hindu areas. This park, which will be built out of recycled material will serve as a place where both the communities can meet. Various toys are being made using recycled material at the temporary site in the campus of a local school. The land for the proposed Park is allocated by AUDA (Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority). The scrap for recycled toys is donated by several Govt bodies such as BSNL, electricity board, etc as well as private companies and individual scrap traders.

We then left off for Himmatnagar, about 2 hours drive from Ahmedabad. The caravan center here has been particularly successful in attracting a lot of people and offering variety of programs. We spent the rest of the day there. SSC, spoken english, mehendi and embroidery classes are being offered here. In fact, the usage is so great the the center is being continuously used from morning 8 to evening 9. The center manager had to give up his room to accomodate classes. Some of the instructors whom we met were people who took the classes and have benifitted from it and have come back to instruct more batches. Students from mehendi classes were hopeful to make anything between Rs.300 to Rs.12,000 per ceremony. There is also a plan to form cooperatives of women of embroidery classes under SPRAT's Azmat program. SPRAT will then facilitate them to talk to dealerships and get them started to have a business of their own. The students who are attending the SSC and english classes were hopeful in faring better in exams , thus improving their chances of a good career. Discussions were also being conducted to improve the confidance of people. Some basic literacy programs "Taleem" batches were also being conducted here. A lot of other batches were conducted at various localities in Himmatnagar. A notable achievement has been that in Hajipura area of Himmatnagar, this program helped achieve 100% literacy. These batches are being attended by people of all ages the oldes lady I met was 65. It seems (her batchmates told us this) that she said "I never thought that I'll die after reading and writing".

Good book keeping procedures have been established to keep track of the beneficiaries and the usage of funds and facilities at the center. A lot of discussion centered around how to make more hindus utilize these resources. Currently the general user ratio is 70% muslims and 30% hindus. All the courses are being charged for, and the center generates about 20% of its expenditures. The center will become self-sustaining in a couple of years. The plan is to charge the users on a no-profit basis, and if anyone is not able to pay the fee, a local donor will be contacted to support the difference between what the student can pay and the actual fee. The center enjoys good popularity in the community and good donor base. Some people come from a distance of 2-3 kms to attend the classes. Steps are being taken to involve more people in discussions in Gujarati and Hindi too. Space is a huge problem for this. They are planning on getting more space.

A novel idea of public boards is being introduced to publicize the various activities of SPRAT and other NGOs. Black boards will be paintes at various busy junctions and along with listing the activities of the caravan center it also lists job positions local businesses are offering, listing of articles for sale and for buying. These will be maintained by a local person but will be inspected by SPRAT for content.

Next day, being bakrid, caravan centers were closed. It is interesting to note that SPRAT has only 5 holidays a year and the facilities will be open all the other days of the year. I visited the Vatwa caravan center and the Shah-e-Alam center. Both had good facilites. Vatawa center was facing problem because the

premises was a little removed from the community. Shah-e-Alam center was recently inaugurated and still has to become popular among the community.

We then left for the Nadiad caravan center in Kheda district. Here premises was built specially for caravan atop a school by the local community. Money for renovation and fixed assets have been committed by others. But this center is not yet started for the lack of working capital to employ managers, instructors, and pay for electricity, telephone and other expenditures. But some batches for ssc have been started. The amount of the local support SPRAT enjoys is evident by the fact that the local advisory board members, a majority of them muslims came to meet Mr.Jowher, even though it was namaaz time on bakrid. They were very enthusiastic about improving the center. They also showed us various places where the boards were being put up.

On the way back stopped at the Shedi river. Had awesome tea.

Left Ahmedabad early on 22, Jan 05.

Impressions:

A dedicated group, with a lot of vision. Enjoys a lot of support at both donor level and the beneficiaries level. They have good book keeping and are very transparent. Also, very frank in their appraisal and are forthcoming in discussing their problems, both within and externally.