

Site Visit Report

Project WHY – Delhi

Date: 16.4.16, visit done by Ravi, Asha Delhi

Project WHY is a very old one, dating back to around 2000 or before. Anouradha Bakshi has been with the project as one of the founders of the trust that is running the project. As I understand, today, the lead people that are running the project are Anouradha, her daughter Shamika, Mr. Satish Chandra who is a trustee and also takes care of the finances and accounting, Dharmender and Rani, besides several teachers and employees, who are all drawn from the community itself in most cases. The project is spread over five sites, Govindpuri, Giri Nagar, Okhla, Madanpur Khadar and Yamuna. The first three are within a couple of km of each other and the last two are about 4-5 km away from these. All in south-south-east Delhi area. I visited all but the Giri Nagar site, and spent half a day with them.

As per the details given by Anouradha, Govindpuri has about 160 children, manned by 8 teachers, 1 cleaning staff and 1 help. Early Education, Primary and Secondary school level outreach and a Special children centre are in this site. I visited this first. On the attic of a 3 storied building that the trust owns is the field office of Project WHY, where I met Anouradha, Shamika, Dharmender and Rani. The early education and primary / secondary sections are in this building. I visited the classrooms when classes were in progress. All children of primary and secondary sections go to Government schools, which run in shifts. So, the remedial sessions of Project WHY are also in shifts: Boys come in the morning and girls in the afternoon. I found that although some children are bright, some could not even read what they were writing on their notebooks, at secondary level. On the top floor of the opposite building is the special needs section. I was told that some children were coming there for over 10 years, while one had joined just a couple of weeks before my visit. These children are trained in etiquettes, communicating and some skills. In addition to the salaries of staff, which I could not cross-check with staff during the visit against the claims, the expenses include lunch for the crèche children and transport for special children. I was told that salaries of staff ranged from 6-10 thousand Rupees.



Creche and Special Children Centre, Govindpuri site

Okhla centre has a small building that has been raised to a single storied structure now, starting from temporary jhuggi structure. It is built bang on top of a garbage sorting area, on the land spared by the

community with permission (notional, nothing written: they were told that when they are asked to vacate the area they should be prepared to) of the local police. In this building the ground floor had the primary and computer sections, and the secondary section was on the roof, protected from the scorching sun by some temporary walls, partitions and a temporary roof, with a water-less desert cooler creating some draft. The community lives in jhuggis around the centre. The computer centre is open to the community when Project WHY students are not using it. This centre caters to about 350 children in 2 shifts. Most people of the community are from Bihar, UP, Nepal and Bundelkhand, and do miscellaneous unskilled work: rickshaw pulling, household work, casual labour, factory work, etc.



Okhla Centre: front view of building; makeshift classrooms on roof terrace

Madanpur Khadar centre houses the centre for women as well as children in 2 shifts. The centre caters to more than 300 children, and is attended to by 12 teachers, 3 staff including a guard, a cook and a supervisor. When I visited this centre, there was a sewing machine mechanic who was teaching the women minor maintenance and repairs of sewing machines: this was a weekly exercise for women undergoing sewing classes. This centre was started in 2007. It was also bubbling with activity with secondary school children of various classes working with their teachers on classroom activities of different kinds. Soon after we reached there, it was around 12.30 p.m., time for the children and women to leave, and the centre was mostly empty after this, waiting for the afternoon shift to start around 3 pm.



Madanpur Khadar centre entrance

All the above sites cater to children admitted to regular schools, so the role of the Project WHY centre is of remedial education. I was told that from each centre there were children who were toppers of the schools after they began attending classes in the centre. However, the Yamuna centre is peculiarly different. The population that lives in the flood plains of the river and cultivates vegetables there as labourers for their livelihood, have no papers whatsoever, and the nearest school is some distance away: a couple of kilometers or more. So, none of the children could be admitted to school, and Project WHY centre is their school. There is a local donor, who is a caterer, who has volunteered to donate mid-day meals every day for this centre, with the same quality of food that he serves his clients: good quality food arrives every day in his vehicle on time for mid-day meals here. This, I was told has a substantially positive effect on the attendance and retention of children in the centre.



Yamuna Centre, called Madanpur Khadar Extn: children lapping up the last bits of lunch.

Recommendation:

Overall, the profile of work being done is impressive, and a single project catering to over 900 children in five centres is managed very efficiently. Most teachers in the centres come from the communities themselves, except in the case of Yamuna. This is a plus, since they seem to have no problem of teachers leaving frequently, which is a major problem with many projects of similar nature. The people managing the project are very dedicated.

Looking at the budget, it is huge: nearly 7 lakhs a month: 84 lakhs a year. The excel sheet attached with this report shows that in each centre, salaries constitute a smaller fraction than other expenses, which is a matter of concern. They are partly funded by Project WHY UK and Germany. Asha Seattle / Canada funds have also been given in the past, though I could not find updates of how much and when in the project pages. Overall, it is an excellent project and should be funded.

Epilogue:

This said, my personal view, also reflected by some of the Asha Delhi members in the past in context of other projects, is that Asha should examine whether putting up parallel infrastructure to the Government in such large scales is a good idea. While I do acknowledge that the Government schools are not effective in helping children learn, is the solution in abandoning it to its fate and supporting parallel infrastructure, or is it in taking on the Government by engaging with the parents of the children as well as with the teachers in the schools in various ways. Spending nearly a fourth of a crore on one such project a year, in this context, seems difficult for me to digest.