Site Visit Report

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Navsarjan Project

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On November 17, 2015, I visited a BhimShala in a village about 50 kilometers from Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Working for Asha for Education’s Boston chapter as the project steward, I wanted to understand the operations of a BhimShala with an intent of a possible recommendation to fund BhimShalas.

Navsarjan arranged for transportation along with two volunteers to visit the Dodra village. As we were driving towards the village, these volunteers informed me that:

* most Dalit families in that family earn a daily wage by working as farm laborers;
* the social structure of the village was set on caste lines.

These volunteers also stated a BhimShala is normally organized either in the household of a BhimSewak (an adult volunteer) or in the community open space. BhimSewak has a lot of autonomy in running the BhimShala.

As we entered the village, our group was settled in the household of a friendly village family. The 2 Navsarjan volunteers requested 2-3 kids to assemble rest of the kids. As Diwali vacations were going on, many kids were out of town, playing or working in the fields. The Navsarjan volunteers interacted with kids on a first name basis. Evidently, the Navsarjan volunteers and the kids knew each other very well. Direct contact with the Navsarjan volunteers had a positive influence on children.

I suggested a town hall type meeting with the volunteers and the children in the household of the friendly village family. The children (around 20 in number from ages 8 to 18) introduced themselves one by one and mentioned their future career goals. When asked what they do in BhimShalas, children responded that they played various games and conversed school topics. In addition, the children discussed topics of community interest such as sanitation, livelihood and agriculture. The volunteers informed me that BhimShala was convened 2-3 days during the week and both weekend days, depending on BhimSewak’s schedule. The children were definitely curious seeking to know more about my background and life. Instead of me asking the questions to children, I encouraged children to ask the questions to me. Gladly taking this opportunity, the children tested my general knowledge by questions such as “where was magnetism discovered?”. Also, the children enthusiastically mentioned their participation in prior years in the *Chhote Bhim* drama competition. I also met alumni of the BhimShala who stated they go to a college 30 kilometers away or had taken courses at Navsarjan’s vocational school.

Hearteningly, I noted that the current BhimSewak, a student in 11th grade and a BhimSewak alumni, took up the role, when the prior BhimSewak started going to college and could not fulfill the BhimSewak role. BhimShalas definitely build a sense of responsibility in its students. The current BhimSewak spoke of his dreams of studying in a foreign university or taking up a job similar to another BhimShala alumnus who as a manager at a nearby golf course.

The 2 volunteers also informed me that they and the BhimSewak ask students about the quality of education and any discrimination or injustice they face in government schools. Also, the volunteers stated that BhimShalas lead to greater engagement of parents where they understand the needs, challenges and issues relating to children’s education. Also, on probing about the books library in the BhimShala, the volunteers responded that book library had deteriorated with use and lack of book replacement.



The volunteers mentioned that BhimSewak turnover is seen due to BhimSewak going to college or getting a job or getting married. Other challenges facing BhimShalas are its sustainability and being viewed as an “organization” driven program.

As I was being driven home, I summarized the benefits of the BhimShala:

* Provide an after-school forum for children for play and fun
* Foster peer-to-peer learning motivating children to continue school education and pursue higher or vocational education
* Engage parents and community more deeply in the children’s education
* Raise awareness in children’s minds of local issues such as sanitation and livelihood
* Act as a check against mal-practices in government schools
* Build confidence and communication skills

Overall, it was an interesting trip!