

Prayas Site Visit

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Background:

Prayas (Centre for Special Education and Vocational Training) was started in 1996 by Jatinder Arora with help from her father. This is the first vocational training institute for the mentally challenged in Rajasthan. After starting with five children in a small house in Raja Park, Prayas now serves 454 children through its four centres and about 8000 families through different activities. Prayas has a team of more than 56 (supervisory and implementation level) – the roles include community workers, teachers, special educators, vocational educators, helpers and assistants, administrative staff and finance staff. The locations of the four centres are Raja Park, Jhalana, Sanganer and Amargarh.

More information is available here - <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=810>

I reached Jaipur on the morning of 26th November and was joined by a friend who was visiting India. We got a ride from the station and reached the Jhalana campus which had a guest room. The guest room was spacious and well maintained. It was more than what we needed. After freshening up, we met with Mohlal ji. He is the main co-ordinator for Prayas' efforts. He has been assisting Jatinder from the beginning and is a family friend. He gave us a background on how Jatinder's father had given the initial support for her to start Prayas. We also met Vineet, an Asha Atlanta volunteer who visited the efforts at the same time. We had a quick breakfast, briefly met with some kids at the vocational training unit and made plans for the day.

Visit to Rajapark: (Video of interaction with kids and teachers available)

The Raja Park School is the first campus where Prayas was started. Jatinder's father had given a single room for her to start the efforts near their home. It's now a complete integrated school. The building itself is old and is located in the urban sprawl. There are no playgrounds nearby and children get to go to a playground only in the weekends when they are driven down there in a bus. We first met one of the special educators teaching a group of 5-6 children. All of them were children with special abilities. He explained to us how an assessment is made about the progress of the child, what they were doing in class then and we also had the kids introducing themselves. We went from class to class interacting with the children in different ways. All of this has been recorded on video. In one of the classes the teacher seemed to be in a hurry to show what the kids knew and they went on and on with various questions on subject knowledge. We wanted to make it a bit informal and started playing games with some causal interaction. We played 'Pictionary' and this also gave an idea about the comfort levels of the children to face the class and strangers. There were also informal discussions on local geography and what Jaipur was famous for etc. It was quite evident that kids did not treat children from other backgrounds differently. The presence of children from diverse backgrounds – different religions, physically challenged, mentally challenged, underprivileged (I believe all children were from families living in difficult circumstances) probably breaks the stigma that is usually evident in mainstream schools. After discussions with teachers and interaction with children, it was kind of evident that the education system followed was largely formal and the state government syllabus is pursued. There are examinations, assessments relative to class etc. Alternative techniques and different teaching methodologies are pursued more in the context of aiding the special children to gain skills, rather than as an aspect of pedagogy in general. This is one area which needs to be further discussed and paid attention to in future volunteer visits as well. The younger kids rattled off rhymes and songs as soon as we entered the classrooms. There was a tendency on the teacher's part to lead the kids to do or say something, rather than let the kids be themselves. This tendency happens in mainstream schools a lot. Some kids also wanted to sing as they were part of the school band. Many children were confident in their demeanor and interaction with strangers.

Discussion with Jatinder

Jatinder has been facing serious health issues in the last few months. She has been bedridden and has not been able to contribute efforts. We decided to drop by only in the evenings so as to not disturb her. On both days, we spent a few hours discussing various aspects. Jatinder gave us a background about herself and how she got involved with Prayas. We also had a discussion on attitudes towards education. We discussed some of her experiences with private and mainstream schools where some of the children were integrated earlier. Some of the aspects we discussed also included the way kids are dealt with and the impediment to learning and development of the child by teachers themselves. There was an instance of a kid being insulted for not being able to pay for an excursion trip, instances of caste discrimination etc. When we discussed the aspects about alternative teaching methodologies, Jatinder mentioned that they had to focus on making the children adept at the syllabus and ensure that they had all opportunities open for them. We also discussed at length about what inclusive education meant and how such a model fosters holistic development of the child and breaks down various stigma prevalent in society. Jatinder described in detail her experiences with working in the Amargarh area as a community worker. She narrated the initial reluctance of communities to send children to an integrated school, the health camps organized by Prayas and how they won the confidence of the communities. We also discussed various aspects about the model Prayas was trying to espouse. Creating special educators, administrators who can add on to the fast declining resources in the mental health sector is an important aspect of Prayas' work. They are also planning to strengthen the existing infrastructure. For e.g. the school at Amargarh has a space crunch and children are huddled into small rooms with no windows (this is true with some classes in the other schools as well). The school was also running a free general clinic for the community. But, they have now shut down due to resource constraints. We also discussed the plans of starting a new effort in the Udaipur area. She mentioned that they have identified local partners in the region and have plans of working with slum communities there closely. We discussed briefly about working with children in juvenile homes and if there were any plans going further. We went over how Prayas identifies communities that they would like to work with – they figure out the most underdeveloped regions in the city and try to do surveys and health camps to figure out the state of healthcare and living conditions. Once they identify the area that needs most help, they slowly gain the confidence of the communities by providing reliable health care and awareness camps for free. They also work with communities in a holistic manner to ensure their basic survival is not threatened – They have worked on campaigns for right allocation of BPL (Below Poverty Line) cards, ration cards etc. Through the work with the communities they identify special children needing help and also gauge the access to education. The centres in the slum areas have come up based on this model. We also discussed the government involvements so far and the grants that was provided for the Jhalana campus. But, government support is not reliable or consistent. Moreover, they come with a lot of strings attached giving little freedom for Prayas' work.

Discussion with Trivedi

Trivedi ji is the first special educator who joined Prayas. He now co-ordinates and heads the special education team and is based of the Jhalana campus. After lunch with Jatinder, I found Trivedi ji at Jhalana to spend some time with him. Trivedi ji did a B.Sc in mental retardation when there were not many takers for the stream (even now special education is not a popular stream). His inspiration to get into this stream was a friend working for the Spastics society of India in Mumbai. In his final year, Trivedi ji was looking for organizations based of Rajasthan and eventually found Jatinder ji. He did his internship with Prayas and finally joined Prayas when it began in July, 1996. There were 5 special children with Prayas at that time. Jatinder was a great source of inspiration for him as they dealt with the children and went through struggles to keep Prayas' efforts alive. The plan for each child is made based on the child's background. As described earlier there is an effort to do an 'early intervention' by identifying children with disabilities at community health camps. He later explained how Prayas decides where a child should be admitted. When a new child is brought for admission, standardised IQ assessment tests are done (At this point, we had a short discussion on how such tests are really not a conclusive statement and are only a very initial indicator. They can be wrong too) and a detailed assessment is done as well. I requested for a copy of the applicaton/initial assessment and

got it. The assessment is made under different areas - daily activities, motor skills, academic skills, physical development, speech etc. After such an assessment is made, the child is under observation for about a month to better understand the mental condition the child suffers from. At the end of the month a reassessment is made to confirm where the child should be. Each child admitted to the school has a file. The file contains the history, plan for next 3 months, schedule for the child etc. Every three months, the development of the child is reassessed and a new plan is made. A copy of the therapy evaluation form used every quarter was also obtained. Later we discussed how the children are mainstreamed. While, working on activities of daily living and vocational skills forms one aspect, there have also been instances of the child giving exams under the NIOS - National institute of open schooling. Prayas has accreditation from NIOS - how a child's understanding is assessed is decided based on the needs of the child. There are different levels under NIOS - A, B and C. Its an open system in terms of curriculum and assessment and is based on the abilities of the child rather than the disabilities. The child is free to choose subjects and the NIOS certification is accepted by all government institutions and any school.

We then discussed about how Prayas is replicating its model. From the beginning Prayas has been finding it hard to get special educators and finally decided to partner with Manipal university and the government to start its own diploma program for special educators. There are 25 seats for a two year diploma course and students with +2 qualification from any stream are eligible. Trivedi ji heads the faculty and designs the program. There are also visiting specialists and lecturers. They also conduct a 3 month bridge course and have three batches every year. The bridge course is meant for regular school teachers to deal with special children. Its sort of a foundation course, especially for teachers at the grassroots level.

Prayas is also the SNAC (State Nodal Agency Center) under the National Trust Act, a program run by the ministry for social empowerment and justice. As a SNAC, Prayas networks with other organizations and government officials extensively. They do awareness programs, 2-3 day workshops for special educators, government officials, collectors, doctors, police etc. They have also worked in programs related to government run orphanages and remand homes. They are also in a good position as SNAC to push for policy changes related to the disabled.

In terms of specialists, Prayas has a resident hearing specialist. They also have loco-motor specialist, speech therapist etc. as consultants. Every second saturday there is a parent teacher's meeting where the parents are also counselled on various aspects and carrying on rehabilitation and therapy related activities at home.

Here is the National Trust related workshop schedule for special educators:

*Two Days Training Programme for Special Educators
July 10 & 11, 2008
Venue: Prayas, J-5A, Jhalana Institutional Area, Jaipur*

July 10th, 2008

Welcome Speech & Introduction about National Trust (10.00 am to 11.30am) Dr. Arish Kanwat

Tea Break (11.30am)

Understanding of child Behavior, different kinds of behavior, children with behavior problem (12.00pm to 01.30pm) Mrs. Renuka Joshi

Lunch (1.30pm to 2.30pm)

Autism: causes, symptoms & Management (02.30pm to 04.00pm) Mr. C.S. Trivedi

CBR- Home Base Management (4.00pm to 5.00pm) Mr. Sohan lal

Worksheets Distribution

July 11th, 2008

ADHD- Handling (10.00am to 11.30am) Dr. Madhavi

Tea Break (11.30am)

Therapeutic Intervention of CP, Cerebral Palsy (12.00pm to 01.30pm) Dr. Arish Kanwat

Lunch (1.30pm to 2.30pm)

Sensory Integration Therapy for children with Special Needs (2.30pm to 3.30pm) Dr. R.S. Agrawal

Curriculum & Instruction for children with Special Needs (3.30pm to 4.30pm) Mr. Suresh Sharma

OPEN DISCUSSION & VOTE OF THANKS Ms. Jatinder Arora

Here is the examination schedule for the diploma course. Gives an idea about various aspects they learn in the 3rd Semester:

Manipal University
Office of the Registrar - Evaluation
MU Examination Block, New Building, M.I.T. Campus, MANIPAL - 576 104

TIME TABLE FOR THIRD SEMESTER DIPLOMA IN SPECIAL EDUCATION (MENTAL RETARDATION)
DSE (MR) - DECEMBER 2008 (New Regulation)
THEORY EXAMINATIONS

Date	Time	Subject Code	Subjects
15 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR301	EDUCATION IN EMERGING INDIAN SOCIETY
16 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR302	PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
17 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR303	CHILDREN WITH MENTAL RETARDATION AND ASSOCIATED DISABILITIES
18 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR304	UTILIZATION AND MAINTENCE OF TLM
19 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR305	A). TEACHING PRE-VOCATIONAL SKILLS B). TEACHING SOCIAL/RECREATIONAL SKILLS

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REGISTRAR - EVALUATION
MANIPAL UNIVERSITY, MANIPAL-576 104

Here is the examination schedule for the diploma course. Gives an idea about various aspects they learn in the 1st and 2nd Semesters:

Manipal University
Office of the Registrar - Evaluation
MU Examination Block, New Building, M.I.T. Campus, MANIPAL - 576 104

TIME TABLE FOR FIRST SEMESTER DIPLOMA IN SPECIAL EDUCATION (MENTAL RETARDATION)
DSE (MR) - DECEMBER 2008 (New Regulation)
THEORY EXAMINATIONS

Date	Time	Subject Code	Subjects
22 nd December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR101	INTRODUCTION TO DISABILITIES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPLICATIONS
23 rd December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR102	CHILD GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT
24 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR103	CAUSES, PREVENTION, IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF MR
26 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR104	TEACHING STRATEGIES AND MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT
27 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR105	PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES AND LESSON PLANNING
29 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR106	A). TEACHING SELF HELP ACTIVITIES B). TEACHING FUNCTIONAL ACADEMICS

TIME TABLE FOR SECOND SEMESTER DIPLOMA IN SPECIAL EDUCATION (MENTAL RETARDATION)
DSE (MR) - DECEMBER 2008 (New Regulation)
THEORY EXAMINATIONS

Date	Time	Subject Code	Subjects
12 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR201	THERAPEUTICS AND BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION
13 th December 2008	10.00 am to 01.00 pm	MR202	TEACHING SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

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MANIPAL UNIVERSITY, MANIPAL-576 104

Jhalana school: (Video of interaction with kids and teachers available)

We were staying at the Jhalana campus. On the morning of the 2nd day after getting ready we went downstairs to go around the campus. By 10 A.M many children had arrived and the prayer had begun. The children at the Jhalana campus come in at 10 AM and leave by 3 PM. Children at all campus leave by 3 PM. So, we had to rush on the second day to visit all locations. Firstly, the physiotherapist who works full time at Jhalana took us to the physiotherapy section and demonstrated various therapies in session with a child. We recorded this on video and would not go in great detail about the information in the video. We later went to various sections on campus and introduced ourselves with the children. We still missed many classes as we were running short on time. We spent more time at the vocational units - candle making, bandej (rajasthani traditional art form - tie and dye cloth material), tailoring, catering etc. We spoke to some of the kids who were excited to see us there. The children are paid a fixed stipend which is deposited in their bank account. We also discussed how this is really not child labor. This is also an aspect of therapy (occupational therapy) and a very important means of equipping the child with skills to be socio-economically independent. The children working in the catering section, cook, clean up , pack and deliver the lunches to nearby government offices which place the orders. This section has been going on well and by all means the cook employed at the campus (she has been working for long now) is also an educator.

Visit to Sanganer School: (Video of interaction with kids, parents, communities and teachers available)

Sanganer school is quite far from the Jhalana campus and we reached the school in time. There were two teachers there and classes were run in a combined fashion - i.e. 1st and 2nd etc. It was a very small house with a couple of rooms. This is also an inclusive school and children from the nearby communities came here. The roads leading up to the school were narrow and bad. The teachers were enthusiastic and excited to have us there. There is only till 5th std in this school. After briefly interacting with the kids, we quickly moved out to meet the parents and the communities nearby. We wanted to concentrate on that aspect especially because we had not done it so far. We got an idea about the background of the families, their financial hardships, prayas role in mitigating education costs, the parents' belief in the school run by prayas etc. One interesting discussion with a family was related to the education of girl children and one of the girls was animated in her perspective on why she was not allowed to continue schooling. In general the communities felt that Prayas should keep adding levels (standards) each year. The area in general has a high population of minorities and is socio-economically backward. All discussions and interactions are captured in detail in the videos.

Visit to Amargarh School: (Video of interaction with kids, parents, communities and teachers available)

We then came back to the Jhalana campus, had a very tasty lunch cooked by the catering unit at the campus. The food during our entire trip was of exceptional quality. We had a very nice and comfortable stay the entire duration. After lunch we left for the Amargarh school and we were already a bit late with the kids waiting for us. The roads leading upto the school were dug up and in such a bad condition that even the auto couldn't go there and we had to walk. There were open sewer systems and cramped chawls every where. The school was situated in a cramped space and again rooms had no windows. It was kind of dark in the school and the lights probably had to be on always. We met with the kids from different classes and also distributed some chocolates. Some of the kids in the elder classes were very eager to show their paintings and drawings to us. There were also a group of teenaged girls who had come there to learn tailoring and sewing in the evenings. This is another program run by Prayas. We took a peek at the small one room clinic that has been closed now because they couldn't pay the doctor. We then met a family which had a couple of kids coming to school. We spoke about what their expectations from the school were, their backgrounds, what they thought about the school etc. Again this is a minority slum area which is socio-economically backward and regularly ignored by governments. We captured the various discussions and interactions on video.

We came back to the Jhalana campus in the evening and like the previous day, went out on a sight seeing tour before meeting Jatinder for dinner. We then took the night train to Kota junction on 27th November.