Asha for Education

Site visit Report for Partirodh Sansthan

Bhadesar Block Chittorgarh Rajasthan

Teesta Bharti & Amit Sharma

April 1st 2010

Pratirodh Sansthan is a NGO that focuses on tribal rights empowerment, and education in tribal regions of Chittorgarh district in southern Rajasthan. Pratirodh Sansthan has its roots in Prayas, a tribal rights organization working in the region. AfE-SV has been working with Pratirodh Sansthan since 2008 in running a residential school for tribal girls – a one of kind facility in the tribal belt. The organization leverages its deep roots into tribal community to bring education to the first generation girl students. With AfE-SV support the school has been running since 2008 with 54 girls enrolled in a non-formal school with aims to bring quality education to tribal girls, and continued education for such girls by securing admissions in KGBV scheme.

We started at 6:30 AM from Udaipur for Bhadesar, Chittorgarh, and arrived at the school at around 8.00 AM. Our arrival was fairly early for the residential school, and as we walked on unpaved road off the main road towards the school building, we saw the girls congregating outside the school building, an early start to the day, I presumed. There were a few girls in the open compound, behind the school building, washing their clothes. A generously sized compound has a small orchard, that provides a steady supply of seasonal fruits, a set of washtooms, and most importantly a tubewell. The compound also houses a school kitchen, and we could see a few girls lining up for the breakfast. As we stopped in front of the school buolding, Sumanji, Harlal ji and Khemraj ji along with Shyamlal and a few other workers took stock of our arrival, and came out to greet us form their office/residence which is right opposite to the school building. As we exchanged greetings, Sumanji told us that due to drought like situation and intense heat wave prevailing in the region the girls bathe and prepare for classes early in the morning. They are also trying to preserve as much water as possible bu storing more water than using running water out of tubewell.

We went on to hold a meeting with Harlal, Khemraj and Suman ji in their office, as the children prepared for the school. We spent some time discussing the state of the project, and current engagement with the children and families of the girls, and their challenges/issuees.

At roughly 9:30 AM we walked over to the school, in the main hall where all the girls were congregated, and sat with them as they recited their morning prayers. The school has two full-time teachers, however, one of the teachers, Ajampa, whom we had met when we visited last year, was on leave due to family emergency. There were 49 girls in attendance at the school. The schoolteacher, and Harlal ji dir a round of introductions with the students, followed by some icebreakers that I always use to start an open dialogue with the children (a learning some my training as a social worker, I presume). What was exciting this time round was the remarkable confidence that most of the girls exhibited as compared to when I met them last time. A lot more girls were excited to talk, share opinions, and show their singing talents in front of the entire class. The highlight of the entire session, without doubt, was the duo folk song recital by Manju and Meera. And when asked about to explain the meaning of the song, Manju, quite eloquently stood up and described the gist of the song in very good spoken Hindi. I was quite happy with what these girls have been able to achieve in short time, and felt a moment of pride as a AfE voluneer. We took a globe and asked the children to point their location on the map and then find out where ‘United States of America’ was on the globe as a little game. It wasn’t a surprise at all, when a few of them, after diligently reading through the country names (labeled in Hindi) were finally able to spot the US.

We decided to close our little session at around 10:45 and let children break into their respective classes. We took a walk into the classrooms, and sleeping rooms, taking pictures, and Suman ji & Harlal ji answering our curios questions. The school building has one big hall (where we had our morning prayers and interactive sessions a while back), and three adjoining rooms. The biggest of which is the sleeping quarter, the other two are classroom with storage facilities; while one of the rooms double up as storage and sleeping quarter for the teachers. We saw the cots in sleeping quarters, for which AfE-SV released emergency funds last year, and it was also heartening to see the iron grills in the windows finally. The rooms felt more secure, and relatively better from last time. I spent almost 30-45min in the classroom, with 12 girls who are in upper levels, preparing or the state school examinations. These girls would be enrolled into KGBV if they were to crack the state examination, a handful of them already made it to the KGBV this year, and these were the new toops in training. Manju and Meera still attending as a part of this class, have already passed state exam (and will be attending KGBV), and stood first and second in school respectively – no small feat given the challenges they face.

Back from the school, and into the office next door, we spent a few minutes discussing some of the issues in the region specifically around community support. We quickly decided to take a ride to a nearby village and meet some of the parents, and get their perspective. I, being from Udaipur, am fairly well conversed in Mewadi, the local dialect turned out a little of a challenge though. We took a 15 min. ride to a Bheelon ks Kheda, a small 40 family village of Bheels in Bhadesar block. A few of the girls in the school are from this village. This village has been bearing the wrath of the drought (which the Government declines), and has seen death of a farmer, who was from Rajput clan, due to hunger. We were told that Pratirodh Sansthan reported this as a hunger related death and demanded, and were subsequently denied, any state support or help. The water situation in the village apparently is quite poor.

We were joined in our journey was Shyamlal, besides Sumanji and Harlal ji. Shyamlal, himself a Bheel, is from Bheelon ka Khera, and works with the school and Pratirodh Sansthan in general. As we walked the small lanes amongst the mud houses, Shyamlal went on to describe the state of parched farms and absence of any irrigation water in the area. A small village of 40 families with 46 begha land amongst them cannot afford two meals a day and are solely dependent on grain form open market for food!

We spent the next two hours meeting the families of two of our students. I spent about 30 min. taking to Rukmini Bai outside her house about her daughter, and her interaction with Pratirodh Sansthan in general. The rapport that the organization, and Sumanji in particular has with the villagers was quite apparent as I spoke to Rukmini Bai. She was quite glad with her girls attending the school, especially the fact that she doesn’t need to feed or care for her, and showed deep trust in Sumanji. We moved from Rukmini Bai’s small hut to Narayani Bai’s home, whose daughter is also our student. Narayani Bai is also quite happy with the school, but was quite vocal about her dislike for the government school. She was also quite keen for her child to continue her studies and not to get her married at an early age. It was a very interesting, and encouraging discussion with Narayani Bai and her family, and it was quite apparent, that the organization has the right community support necessary to bring about the kind of change it charters to. Form Narayani Bai’s home, we took a walk to the local primary school. I met with the government schoolteacher, the sole teacher in the school that has enrollment of 35, and attendance of roughly 30. All children assembled into a single group in a large room. I was told that some girls have gone to attend the residential school from there. For all it’s worth, it was encouraging to at least to see a government school in such a small village with a pukka building, and attached washrooms, and a teacher in attendance along with 30 children. Improving and capacity building of government schools is something that should be encouraged more I guess!

On our way back, I met Devkanya, a former student of our residential school who dropped out and doesn’t want to study anymore. Devkanya is Shyamlal’s sister, and despite much persuasion is still not willing to go back to school. In her teens, probably it’s her age that is discouraging her. Challenges to bring children to schools some in many forms, psychological to socio-economic.

We walked backed to our ride and got back to the school around 3:30 PM, the day was at its warmest, and we had a 2 ½ hour journey back to Udaipur. We spent some more time talking specifics of the project, teacher training, and study material with Harlal ji and Suman Ji. Overall, very satisfied with progress, and impressed with our students in the school, we finally bid farewell at 4:15 PM.