
Pratirodh Sansthan

Aadharshila School for Tribal Girls

Site Visit Report

Amit Sharma - December 29, 2014



Introduction

Aadhrshila Vidyalaya is truly a unique place. Nestled in the remote tribal belt of semi-arid district of Chittorgarh in southern Rajasthan, a small residential school for tribal girls. Chittorgarh is predominantly tribal, with marginalized Bheel tribe making up a significant population, relatively better positioned are the Rajputs. Aadharshila

The social oppression of Bheels has been well documented and continues to be a norm, denying the tribals some of the most basic survival needs. Bheels, traditionally are hunter gatherers and have limited, if any, landholdings, often as small as 1.5 acres or less. Whilst Bheels have some of the most vibrant cultural heritage that is much celebrated as well as documented, they are also a party to some disturbing social norms that continues in practice.

Child marriage is a norm, most girls are married at a tender age of 4 or at most 5. Generally a girl, while are married at an early age, continues to live with her parents tending to house, siblings, cattle [if any] and only move-in with the husband's family at puberty in a ritual called *Gauna* ergo it education or schooling is not perceived as a priority.

Also prevalent is belief in witchcraft and blind faith beliefs are prevalent amongst the tribals. It has been argued that some practices are ritualistic elements of the cultural fiber that Bheels have carried over generations, but, such beliefs so take shape of oppression and exploration at the hands of upper cast who often use these beliefs and practices to subjugate their tribal subjects. An instance is denying Bheels to wear footwear, or in some cases carry footwear on ones head, when passing a Rajput house or farm owned by an upper cast person. Invariably, women bear the brunt of such oppressive practices and are prone to, often physical, exploitation.

Finally, there is sufficient evidence apathy towards tribals in general. Tribal land rights continues to be a subject of great debate both locally and nationally, access to irrigation water, rights of water bodies, are all issues that play a direct role in social well being of the tribal community. Lack of access to quality education, deep financial distress, and cast socio-economic subjugation creates a vicious cycle that Bheels continue to suffer through. In context of literacy, it must be noted that literacy rates continue to be abysmally poor in southern Rajasthan and have shown little improvement over time, especially amongst women.

Amarpura School

Pratirodh Sansthan is a NGO that has been working with Tribals of Chittorgarh for over a decade. The founder of the organization, Khemraj Choudhary, is a seasoned tribal rights activist. His vast canvas of social activism spans Narmada Bachao Andolan to Khat Andolan, RTI, MNREGS enforcement, and RTE. Khemraj Choudhary is joined by Suman Chouhan, who has been working with Tribal women in the region. After years of tribal advocacy and social work with Prayas, Khemraj Choudhary and Suman Chauhan thought of addressing the social issues plaguing the community through education. The choice of working with girl child was to directly address the issue of child marriage and marginalization of women in the community. They believed in girls being the change makers who will change the shape of the community over the generation. In 2008 Asha for Education Silicon Valley seeded the Aadharshila Balika Avasiya Vidyalaya (Aadharshila School Residential School for Girls) with 70 first generation students and has been running with remarkable success since then.

Amarpura School acts as a bridge school, it enrolls first generation students or school dropouts, and gets them educated to grade-IV by state syllabus. And attempts to enroll motivated students into a Kasturba Gandhi Balika Avasiya Vidyalaya. KGBV is a Govt. of India Tribal Welfare scheme under Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan to open residential schools for tribal girls in all tribal blocks across India. Since early millennia, hundreds of such schools have been opened with very low to no enrollments. The scheme, whilst good in thought had problems in its implementation.

First, a residential school is upwards from grade-V because children younger than 10 are not well suited for residential learning besides the prevailing policy doesn't allow that either. Now a residential school in a tribal region with low primary school attendance and high dropout rates doesn't produce enough students eligible for enrollments in a KGBV school anyways. This coupled with apathy towards educating girl child makes KGBV a mere government scheme with little or no impact on ground. Aasharshila School is in-part bridging this gap by motivating students and enrolling them into a Government residential school.

Since 2008, over 90 students have graduated from Aasharshila school and enrolled into Nahargarh, KGBV school. Two students have moved to Jaipur to pursue high school on a state scholarship. The school is a shining example of how a well thought out intervention can make a government program effectively reach its target audience. Instead of operating and running a senior secondary or a high school themselves, Pratirodh Sansthan instead bridges the gap between the need and a hard-to-reach solution offered by the Government.



Site Visit

I started for Amarpura by a taxi around 9:00 AM on a rather warm morning for winters on December 29th. Its a little over 2 hours of drive from Udaipur to Amarpura, near Bhadesar town. I arrived a little over 11:00 at Pratirodh Sansthan's office which doubles as a residence for Khemraj and Suman, as well as residential quarters for the students and teachers. I saw Khemraj, Suman, Khemraj's mother, and few others were bathing in the warm sun outside the office, I presumed, in anticipation of my arrival. We exchanged pleasantries, and here I first met Sita, latest addition to Pratirodh Sanstan family. I had known about her from my phone conversation with Khemraj ji and it was a real pleasure meeting her in person.

Sita, is a 20 year old Bheel girl from Amarpura village. When she was 19, late October '14, one afternoon Sita was abducted by three Rajput men from the fields where she was at work and gang raped. The men subsequently threw her in front of a moving train after committing the crime. Sita lost both her legs above knees, although the train driver made much attempt to stop the train in-time. It was too late. Her rehabilitation both physical as well as emotional, got her in touch with Suman Chouhan and Khemrak Choudhary. Due to the good will and stature they have in the community, Sita was sent to them for help with further rehabilitation and support. Sita has been with them since then. Pratirodh Sansthan has helped in the police investigation and pursuing the criminal case against the culprits, who are now in life imprisonment. But, more importantly they have helped Site in moving on from her ordeal. Sita is now enrolled in Nahargarh, KGBV school and is a part-time helper at Aadhrshila School a new member of Pratirodh Sansthan's family. Sita is am a graceful 20 year old, confident, chatterbox, and has a tinkle in her eye. Perhaps she is slowly relearning to be a 20 year old.

The school is a small walk away from the office. A quick walk through the trees on the edge of the fields we get to a gated premises of Aadharshila School. I have been here many times in last 6 years and every time I appreciate how basic there needs really are, and in how little this school achieves so much. Nonetheless, we entered through the gates into a large courtyard. We were in Aadharshila.

Classes were on when we entered, a large group of students were congregating around their teacher, Pramlata, to get their notebooks checked for an assignment. And a smaller group were girls were in a group reading session with Kusum, the other teacher at Aadharshila. I have known and have met Kusum for a long time, she has been a part of this school since very early days. Pramlata is a new teacher who joined late last year, as one of the teachers secured a government job and quit at a rather short notice.

I also met the family of the caretaker who manages the kitchen and stays in the school with his wife and a 2 year old son. One coordinator, Suma Chouhan, two teachers, one cook and one support staff is effectively all that Aadharshila has in terms of people who run this school of 58, often noisy, girls.

All the girls attending the school are married, some of them are orphans or abandoned with no place to live except for Aadharshila. In more than one way, this school is not just a school rather a place some children call home.

The school is essentially an open courtyard with reinforced mud floor, tin shades that run the boundary on three sides and a room in the corner for kitchen and material. Classes are conducted under these tin shades which has a blackboards and charts plastered on the wall, or often in the open courtyard, weather permitting of-course. Diagonally opposite from the classes is a washroom and water supply area with drinking water and place to keep mats and other material. Its a beautiful place and whilst at first look it doesn't look much like a school, one eventually realizes that this is how schools should really be. Open. in midst of nature, not artificially crafted gardens but in the real surroundings that tribals really live in.

I spent some time talking with Khemraj and Suman ji about operations and how school is running. This is a rented place and ever since the school started getting a lot of external visitors, the landlord has been trying to raise the rent on them. A latest series of negotiations saw the rent increasing marginally to a royal Rs. 2000/month. I agreed to meet the landlord if that would help in reducing or retaining the rent but it seemed that the rent issue had, albeit

temporarily, reasonably resolved itself. The classes were dismissed and it was time for a group session. We all sat down in a big circle, rather a semi circle or some shape like that. Khemraj and Suman ji were flanking me as I [re] introduced myself to the children. Being a frequent visitor, I'm known to quite a few of the students and I always had a great dialogue with the students. They presented me with a beautifully crafted hand made greeting card decorated with rose flowers, it was a huge card that every student and both the teachers had signed. It was an amazing honor and I thanked every one of them for such a beautiful gift! It was 1:30 PM and it was late for lunch, the minister of food, was quick to standup and declare lunch time and the place quickly burst into a loud cheering voices, children were hungry! So was I.

The school has a students body and students nominate themselves to what they call ministries. There's a ministry of food, ministry of cleanliness, ministry of timekeeping, and of-course a prime minister. The minister of responsible for running and ensuring proper working of ones ministry; Food minister coordinates the lunch hour (mats, utensils, serving food etc.) while the Cleanliness minister ensures everybody main tine hygiene especially amongst younger girls (washing hands before and after food etc). And ministers rotate overtime so everybody gets to participate. According to Khemraj ji, this is the only way government functioning can be introduced to children, who otherwise grow of thinking go government and its functioning is some mythical set of babus who show up once in a while and wield power being measure over their lives.



A few elder girls carefully placed the mats in two parallel lines, and three of them went on to help the cook with serving the food. The rest beelined to way their hands and feet. And as I was watching this milieu, a few girls together in one voice cheered "*Aap hamate swath khan khao*" - come eat with us. I was invited to eat with them. The food was quite healthy and nutritious, basic, but, good. Every child were to get a serving of *lauki ke sabzi* (bottle gourd curry), *roties* (wheat flour bread) and *gur*

(jaggery). A few girls were on a rotation duty to serve food, while others were on rotation duty help organize and prepare for lunch. We finished lunch, and I took leave from the school. I had to continue my dialogue with Khemraj and Suman about the school operations, besides I was looking forward to talking to Sita.

Meeting with Khemraj, Suma, and Sita

We walked back to the office and sat down in the courtyard for some food and a cup of Chai. I have always loved the food here. A basic thali, with tons of mirchi, and a sugary cup of tea. They grow their own vegetables and perhaps that flavor reflects in the food. Over chai we discussed the current political climate, issues with MNRGS in the region, land grab for cement factories in the region (Chittorgarh has the best limestone in India and illegal mining and land grab is not new to the area). We discussed possibility of introducing students to computers since they have two desktop computers (technically one, since the other one is broken) in the office. I took notes on getting a laptop or maybe a few tablets for the girls.

At around 3:00 we decided to take a tour or a few villages behind Bhadesar to meet a few families of students. I was particularly interested in meeting family of Meera. Student of first batch of Aadharshila school who I had met thrice after the school started running and before she won a state scholarship and went on to study in Jaipur! She's the north star to a lot of girls in Aadhsrahila and is a great story of how little one needs as help to reach their potential. She's on an amazing journey and I am happy to be a small part of it!

We decided to take the taxi I drove in for our Bhadesar trip, it would be a little over 40min ride, partially on unpaved road. I asked Sita if she would be interested in joining us. I could sense her excitement to join us so I prodded her a little and helped her get into the front seat of the car from her wheelchair. Khemraj, Suman, and I squeezed into the back seat and we were off to Bhadesar.

We stopped outside a small Bheel hamlet 5km past Bhadesar. We walked around a bit and were finally able to locate Meera's house. Unfortunately nobody was home. I did instead meet a few children from the village who had gathered looking at the car. One of them was a alumnus of Aadhsrahila. As we moved around the village, the respect for Suman and Khemraj amongst the community was palpable. People stopped by to which and ask for his eel being, and children seem to know Suman ji quite well. We finally managed to meet family of Geeta who is another first batch student attending high school in KGBV. I spoke to Geeta's grandmother, her mother, and saw her toddler brother. There seemed to be great respect for

Pratirodh Sansthan and Suman ji and Geeta's grandmother seemed particularly proud of her granddaughter being in high school, a first from her village. At around 4:45 after spending nearly an hour walking around and talking to the families of students, we sat for a return journey.

Notes

- School operates on minimal budget and has shown tremendous results
- Teachers are involved, well respected, and understand the local language and culture
- Teacher training continues to be a concern, although informally some expert visitors some and help with teacher training. Its not formally a part of their budget, besides its an operational challenge if one teacher were to stay away for extended period of time on training with 58 children in attendance.
 - Open, healthy environment for children
 - Children seemed happy, and healthy, and how children should be really.
 - Pratirodh Sansthan has been getting volunteers for the school recently, who help with school functioning, teaching etc.
 - There's scope for improving the teaching methods of-course. Introducing more interesting group activities would be useful to improve their learning about come basic concept of science for instance.
 - Teacher/Student ration can improve with 50+ students. Although its very hard to recruit teachers in the region.
 - Organizationally, Pratirodh Sansthan has been involved in amazing array of advocacy work and its heartening to see how they have separated the responsibilities to keep the Aadharshila school separate from other aspects of their social work. Suman Ji is de-facto school coordinator and Khemraj ji pursues the social activism work of Pratirodh Sansthan
 - There is a desire to consider constructing a premises for the school. Renting is becoming difficult so there seems to be an appetite for constructing a school building. I have persuaded them away from that for now because of logistical and monitory challenges in construction.