

Can You Help This Village High School Survive?

It is now 15 years since my wife Shabnam and I set aside our careers and began an attempt to live out our convictions by creating learning opportunities for disadvantaged children who are denied advantages that benefit most of us as a class, & which our children continue to enjoy. It is thus that '**Jagriti School**' was born as an idea. Begun in 1990 from a small shanty in a central Delhi slum, **Jagriti** grew from a single class of some 30 children to a school offering primary education to over 500 students. Then the Delhi government demolished Motia Khan (and our school) to reclaim valuable commercial space, and taught us two things. One, that since we could hardly hope to change the system, our small efforts would possibly have greater and more lasting value in some rural backwater rather than a city. (To some extent, the poor of our cities are still able to wrest earning opportunities, access some education and health facilities. In the villages, there is precious little to trickle down). And two, we also needed to *own* our school's land – again something that was only affordable in a village.

It is thus that in January 1998 we took **Jagriti** to Katna - a faraway Bengal village where Shabnam was born, in the district of Murshidabad. It is from there that the magic of education had once transported her father to Calcutta to become a doctor. For Shabnam, boarding school followed and a new world opened out, a feat that had never been replicated since. Our return brought this wheel a full circle.

With little resources (our regular funding dried out at much the same time), we began small. A half-acre piece of land was bought and our new home was the school itself, where we lived and worked. We set about offering sound Bengali-medium, elementary education to poor out-of-school children. Five years on however, down our new road to life, newer lessons were learnt.

LESSONS

First, to make a lasting dent in an unfair system **Jagriti** would have to go all the way to high school. While in itself our basic education model had worked perfectly well, we found our student graduates struggled against impossible odds after making lateral entry into nearby mainstream high schools. The schools were over-crowded and mismanaged, our students economically disadvantaged. Few managed to survive beyond a couple of years. Most dropped out, bringing our longer-term objective of higher achievement to nought.

Second, Bengali needed to be replaced with English as a *medium* of instruction. We found students here paying a very heavy price for the absence of effective English teaching in their curriculum. For example, as many as 38% students in Bengal failed to clear the 2004 Class XII exams *because of ENGLISH!* Not only had this set parochial limits to intellectual ability and particularly disadvantaged rural children in negotiating cross-cultural contexts; this absence of a language link with the rest of India contributed much to a widespread inability to create productive alternatives for gainful self-employment both in rural Bengal and elsewhere. Youngsters remained cut off from several new and growing job areas including indispensable fields such as information technology.

Third, Jagriti needed to change from *interesting* “project” into “Institution”. We needed an enduring structure, systems and financial sustenance by charging moderate fees on a no profit-no loss basis. Although there was a time when we were relatively better off financially, never in the last 15 years had any funding agency committed to more than one year at a time. If anything, our final choice of a remote rural location had only made matters worse. We were alive to tell this tale only because a small corpus income still combined with a precious trickle of individual contributions to miraculously keep us going. Clearly, in this now-or-never situation, the time had arrived to make a grandstand.

THE WAY FORWARD: JAGRITI PUBLIC SCHOOL Two years of solid effort later, **Jagriti Public School** is now ready. This new generation institution for rural learning is set on a new two-acre campus adjacent to the nearby all-weather road, amid the rice paddies of Kuli in the Kandi subdivision of West Bengal’s Murshidabad district. In design and intent, it seeks to correct the prevalent and glaring imbalance wherein rural children across India lack access to quality learning facilities that students in our bigger cities readily benefit from. Great care and attention has been paid in designing bright and friendly learning spaces which encourage creative interaction between teachers and students, as well as between the learners themselves.

Starting with the academic session of May 2005, it offers education in the English medium, with Bengali as a vernacular, second language. Students admitted into its fold from the primary level upwards will be prepared for higher secondary board examinations under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

Quality is to be ensured through the introduction of a team of carefully selected bi-lingual teachers, fluent in both English and Bengali; a teacher-student ratio that encourages intimate contact; rigorous teaching-learning practices, including the use of audio-visual aids; and an on-campus culture of English-speaking and learning to compensate for the students’ lack of such an environment at home and elsewhere. All teachers will be required to reside on campus in free accommodation being provided.

This year, four classes (i.e. Nursery, KG, Class I & II) are being launched. Each subsequent year, one class will continue to be added, with the incremental cross-over to middle school classes from VI to VIII occurring in the session starting 2009; and to the high school, by 2012. To enlarge our catchment area to nearby towns within a 30km (where no such high school exists) a service of chartered buses will be arranged and charged for, on actuals.

The project shall be built in stages extending over the next few years. With a second floor to be added in this first School Wing, its total planned area of 18,700 sq ft is designed accommodate up to Middle School, i.e. classes from Nursery to VII in two sections each. From middle school on, we would need to add hostel facilities for at least 25% (i.e. 10) students in each class; and by the time we reach high school, a second wing to accommodate the remaining classes (IX to XII), laboratories, library etc.

Jugnu Ramaswamy
Katna Murshidabad
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