



*ZP School
Palavpada (Anantpur)*

and

suhrid foundation

Zilla Parishad Primary School, Palavpada (Anantpur) is a humble government school in a remote and almost inaccessible tribal area of Vikramgad in newly formed Palghar district (formerly part of Thane district). With three teachers on board, the school enrolls about 123 tribal kids studying grade 1 through grade 6.

PALAVPADA – ANANTPUR

the region

When you travel from Mumbai on Mumbai-Ahmadabad Highway for a couple of hours and take a right turn on to State Route 35 or 73 going towards Wada and Vikramgad, you would be in the vicinity of an ancient tribal region that has ethnical roots dating back to Neolithic period of 2500-3000 BC.

This predominantly tribal area of Vikramgad Taluka is in the newly formed Palghar District in Maharashtra State of India. It is merely 125 KM away from Mumbai, but the poverty and vulnerability of the people in this region starkly stands out contrasting the shiny skyline of Mumbai. The proximity to Mumbai has hardly brought any opportunity for this largely poor, illiterate and ignorant tribal community to grow and prosper.



The families in the tribal villages survive on the rice they produce during monsoon. The men in the families often move out after the monsoon and work on brick kilns or on fishing boats for earning meager daily wages. The hard labor does not really pay off, and the families continue to struggle for their survival amidst the evils of poverty, undernourishment, addiction, ignorance and superstition. The children in the families, who are in abundance, are the natural victims of the circumstance.

the school



ZP School Palavpada (Anantpur)

Anantpur (Palavpada) is one such hamlet in the tribal region of Vikramgad. Like any other village in the vicinity, Anantpur (Palavpada) is also deprived of basic health, education and sanitation. Nonetheless, certain changes are shaping up through government undertaking. For example, Zilla Parishad (ZP) School in Anantpur (Palavpada) is operating under the government-led *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Right-to-School for All Initiative), and where I came as a teacher in 2009. The school has class 1 through class 6 with total 123 students

on the roll this year.

challenges

A couple of years back, it was quite rare for tribal kids in our locality to show any sign of belongingness or bonding towards the school. It was therefore futile for me, as a school teacher, to forcefully bring them to school and hold them for hours together. The kids have free will; they



want to wander around; they want to play as much as they can. At their age, they don't really care what is good and what is bad. If you run to catch them for school, they would run away with athlete's speed, leaving you far behind. If you go to their houses to bring them to school, you never know what weapon they will greet you with – maybe a stone or maybe an axe. Nevertheless, these kids would be very shy and silent if they were somehow made to stay at the school.



A boy skipping school to cook at home in absence of his parents

On the other hand, there was very little I, as a teacher, can expect from the parents of these children. Most of them are extremely poor, and even worse, outright drunkard. When invited for a parents meet, many would come in drunken or even semi-unconscious state. Neither do they expect anything from their children, nor do the children expect anything from such parents.

With such an unfortunate state of affairs at hand, noble goals like “right to education”, “quality of education” were far from reality. It was quite embarrassing and even more annoying and painful for me to report barely 30-35% of school attendance when the expectation was that of 100%. Even the mid-day meal offered to the school-going kids was unable to improve my attendance report. The quality of meal served was often sub-standard. Moreover, the kids tend to get nauseous of a routine diet-plan, very quickly.

Many kids were undernourished and always towards the lower side of weight-to-height ratio.



Sudhakar

Chandrakala Bhavar was one such child who used to be quiet in the class and her extreme weakness was worrisome. Likewise, Sudhakar, who enrolled newly in the 5th standard at our school, was with a critical medical condition. When I sensed something wrong with him, I enquired to the teachers of his previous school. I came to know that he is a patient of sickle cell anemia and needs a continuous medical therapy. Although studious, well-mannered and lively, he was unable to progress. Poor health would invariably affect ability of such kids to concentrate, be it for their studies, sports or day-to-day activities at school. However, it was very difficult in our remote tribal areas to avail or afford (normally an expensive) medical treatment for these children.

The safety of children, especially of the smaller ones, was another cause of concern for me. The school has a small play area. The kids would play there during the off time. It was a bit risky because the villagers used to leave their cattle around for grazing. And it indeed happened one day when it was a school recess and most of the kids were playing around after their meal. An ox in the nearby field got wild and ran towards the school and eventually heading at a small kid of first standard. The kid could not run fast enough and fell down. In an attempt to save the child, we teachers ran fast and took the ox head-on. We were able to cover the child, but nevertheless, the ox had pressed the child with fore legs. Luckily enough, we were able to dampen the blow at the right time and the child, although unconscious, survived with no major injuries. Thereafter, we called all the villagers at the school for a meeting and from the bottom of our bellies, scolded them for bringing cattle in the school area. A few



students from 5th and 6th standard were also appointed for vigilance during the recess time to protect any possible cattle attacks. But the safety of kids at school was still a major concern for us.

Although we teachers were struggling against all the odds on different fronts, it was often annoyingly painful and even frustrating to deal with the status quo. It seemed like we were never be successful as a teacher in achieving anything. But we did not want to lose heart; we did not want our negative feelings to affect ourselves, and more importantly, our school kids who are dependent on us for their better future. What we really needed was a moral boost and sustained support.

suhrid foundation

It was during this time when I got in touch with Suhrid Foundation. It was around July 2013, and by then, the foundation was already supporting a few ZP schools in the nearby area. The foundation team visited the school on one of the Saturday and discussed with us in detail about the child nutrition, medical help, educational support, personal hygiene, cleanliness at school, and so on. They also understood our specific problems in regard to water supply, school fencing & gate, and other logistic issues. And they agreed to support us through various programs of the foundation.



Implementation of SUN Project

At the beginning, Suhrid Foundation included us in SUN project – their nutrition project. It was meant to enrich the government-run midday meal program with a scientific diet plan so that the kids would get appropriate amount of proteins, iron, calcium, vitamins and minerals. To this effect, SUN project introduced vegetables, jaggery and protein enrichment to the daily mid-day meal at school.

We started seeing the impact of the project within a month. The weight of the kids started increasing by average 1 to 1.5 Kg. They became more active and began to participate in various school activities with keen interest. They became more attentive at

the studies and their grasp improved a lot. They now speak out in the class, and attempt to answer any question in a full sentence. Chandrakala is not only a healthy child today but also a fast learner in mathematics. She is often the first one to solve a sum and shout out the answer during a Maths period. The addition of a variety of vegetables brought in much needed variation in the mid-day meal which caused improvement in the appetite of the kids and hence in their daily food consumption. On an average, the kids were eating 33% more and looking healthier. As a result, the attendance at the school also went up visibly and on record.

Every six months, we organize medical camp through Suhrid Foundation. The purpose is to track basic health parameters of the kids, and wherever needed, provide medical treatment for them, be it for regular medication, vaccination, or even specialist diagnostics requiring a visit to Mumbai. Sudhakar is under medical treatment, and despite sickle cell anemia he is now the captain of our Kho-Kho¹ team.

¹Kho-Kho is a traditional local sport requiring a lot of running and swiftness.

The foundation has also provided story books, games, toys and sports material to the school. Instead of wandering around, the kids now play longer at school, and they play with more aggression and vigor. We hope to see a few carom board champions and chess champions from our school very soon. The games like carom, chess, Lego-blocks added new dimension to kids' thinking and learning process. Besides, these games are becoming a right alternative for the outdoor games during the rainy days.



Medical Camp

Petty-Cash is an interesting initiative which is essentially a lonesome cash amount provided by the foundation to the school on a regular interval. It is intended for personal hygiene and personality development of the kids through habitual and lifestyle changes. The amount is meant for any spend towards buying very basic personal hygiene items for the kids such as hair oil, face powder, nail cutter, comb, hair ribbons, needle & thread, buttons, liquid soap, and so on. These are the things that are important for personal cleanliness, self-esteem, and do not cost much. But such things are neither so easily available for the kids at their home nor part of their day-to-day habit.

Suhrid Foundation therefore provisioned for the petty cash to all the teachers on a monthly basis, with no questions asked. The school teachers decide what to buy and how to make the kids smart and clean.



Children playing indoor games

Surprisingly, this has served many purposes. Apart from personal hygiene, it has helped to boost self-respect and confidence in the kids. Inferiority complex is long gone. The kids have become assertive in their talk and do not hesitate to ask us

for a new notebook when they need one. Likewise, they are now conscious about washing their hands before and after a meal. The free choice given to school teachers through the petty cash has done wonders for the kids with considerably low spend.

Suhrid Foundation has indeed brought a kind of transformational change to the school. It has served every small and big need of the school, be it for putting a gate at school entry for protection against cattle, or be it for phonics training for reading in English, or be it for provisioning of tie, belt, id-card and footwear for the kids. Today, the kids have become more lively and pleasant looking. The boys, who were once pelting stones at the teachers for avoiding school, are now not only attending the schools regularly but also staying back longer reading story books and playing carom or chess or cricket. The school seems to smile and laugh when the vibrant kids are around. We, the school teachers, take great pride in reporting near about 100%



Children using hand-wash before having their meals





student attendance at our school during our monthly meeting with the education officer. And we feel honored when the education officer compliments our school with a positive note. I truly acknowledge the contribution of Suhrid Foundation in the progressive journey of our school till date, and in many small yet significant achievements we had on the way. I also look forward for continuing support from the foundation in our journey ahead.

Thank you Team Suhrid.



This article was originally written in Marathi by **Ganesh Mudhale**, a teacher at the government-run - Zilla Parishad primary school in Palavpada (Anantpur) - Taluka Vikramgad, District Palghar) – about 150km from Mumbai. It is translated in English by Mr Shailendra Langade.