

Astitva Gurukul Center Visit

1) Overview

The HelpYourNGO team visited the Astitva Gurukul in Pune on Monday, 27^h January 2020 and interacted with the Key Trustees, Program Staff, Beneficiaries and Parents of beneficiaries.

The Gurukul is located in Veer, Purandar Taluka, Pune district and is 70 km away from Pune city. The nearest town is Saswad, which is 23 km away. The area around Gurukul has a lush surrounding of farmlands. The local community is very helpful and treats all the students of the school with endearment. Currently, Astitva Gurukul houses a school and a hostel.

Distinctive Attributes from the Site visit:

Structure:

Astitva Gurukul has a total of 4 classrooms, 1 administrative office cum library, 1 cattle shed, 1 kitchen, 2 hostel sheds (dormitory) and 2 washrooms, 1 each for boys and girls respectively. The washrooms are not attached to the hostel sheds.

Schedule:

A daily time table is followed at the Gurukul. The day starts at 6 am and ends at 10 pm for the children. This includes provision of time for school, studies, play, meals, exercise, prayers, Karate training, relaxation and watching TV. Children do the daily chores at the Gurukul on their own (except cooking) and duties are assigned to them internally for tasks like cleaning toilets, sweeping, washing utensils, serving food, etc.

During summer vacations (for a month) and Diwali holidays (for a few days), AP ensures that students visit their parents and spend time with them.

Accommodation and Necessities:

Bunk beds / mattresses with bed sheets and blankets, uniform (1 set), school bag, and books are provided to all children at the time of admission. Since past 3 years, Pune based organization Seva Sahyog Sanstha has been providing school bags. Parents usually bring new pair of clothes for their children when they visit the Gurukul.

Food:

Pure vegetarian food is provided four times a day - Breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner.

- Breakfast: Dates, Milk, Poha / Idli / Upma, etc.
- Lunch: Vegetable, Chapati, Dal and Rice (vegetable preparation depends on local or seasonal availability)
- Snacks: Dates, Jaggery – Groundnut / Puffed rice
- Dinner: Vegetable, Bhakhri, Dal and Rice
- Fruits: Twice a week

There are 2 full time cooks who prepare meals. Fresh vegetables are purchased bi-weekly from the local market. Some of the trees planted in the Gurukul premises have started bearing fruits which are used for consumption. On occasions and festivals, special meals are prepared on students' request.

There is a system of barter with the community members where they take flowers growing at the Gurukul in exchange of grains or grocery.

Health:

Monthly health checkups are conducted at the Gurukul by doctors from the Government run Primary Healthcare Center. Any child requiring advance medical assistance is taken to a nearby Government hospital.

Computers:

The Gurukul has 6 computers and an internet broadband connection for digital inclusion in the school syllabus. Although e-learning material is presently not available, training material pertaining to basic computer syllabus from Class 1 to 10 is installed in the computers.

Extracurricular Activities:

Children are trained in extracurricular activities like Karate and classical music. In January 2020, 44 children earned a Yellow Belt in Karate. During our visit we saw several awards and certificates won by students in inter school Karate and drawing competitions. Some students have also successfully cleared their Intermediate and Elementary drawing examination.

Festivals, special occasions, and monthly birthdays are celebrated with great enthusiasm. Tree plantation is also done on the Gurukul premises and the area surrounding it. So far, around 700 trees like mango, coconut, guava, chikoo, etc. have been planted over the past 3 years.

Every year a yatra of ~50,000 pilgrims passes through the Gurukul village. The children enthusiastically prepare and serve tea to ~8,000 pilgrims as 'seva' from their side.

Note: The sessions for classical music had to be discontinued from October'19 owing to shortage of funds in paying the trainer's remuneration. The students now practice the musical instruments by themselves.

Skill Development:

Various skills are imparted to the beneficiaries like growing vegetables, repairing household electrical appliances, cooking, painting, perfume making, diya making, candle making, artificial flower making, etc. AP tries to exhibit these products at melas and exhibitions. Profit, if any, from sale of these items is ploughed back into the activities of the Gurukul.

Picnic:

The staff and children are annually taken for an overnight trip of 2-3 days to places like Mahabaleshwar and Ratnagiri with food and accommodation usually being sponsored by donors. This is a much looked forward to event in the Gurukul calendar.

Parents meeting:

A parent meeting is organized on 15th August and 26th January each year at the Gurukul which is compulsory for them to attend. Besides, parents are free to visit the Gurukul any time by taking prior approval.

Brief synopsis of our Interactions:

Meeting with Trustees:

We met the two founders cum Trustees, Ms. Degaonkar and Mr. Wagh as well as Ms. Wagh who is a key trustee. They briefed us about the background, current activities and future plans of the organization.

Ms. Degaonkar, an educationist and social worker, is a retired teacher and Mr. Wagh, a social worker. Ms. Wagh is a trained teacher and social worker. Mr. Wagh is present at the Gurukul every day and Ms. Degaonkar and Ms. Wagh are present 3 days of the week. The three Trustees are totally committed to the cause of striving for the upliftment of the underprivileged through education. They are well versed with not just the day to day functioning of the program but also with the details pertaining to every single beneficiary at the Gurukul.

Meeting with Program Staff:

Presently, 9 staff members are employed at the Gurukul; 4 are teaching staff, 3 are administrative staff and 2 are cooks.

A Head Master oversees the Gurukul operations and there are 2 rectors, 1 each for the girls and boys hostel respectively.

The teachers possess requisite diploma or degree in Education, while the rectors have completed their Masters in Social Work. The teachers work across multi-class and multi-subject simultaneously.

We met 6 (2 women and 4 men) staff members at the Gurukul. Since it's a residential school, the teachers also stay on the premises with the children. Average staff honorarium is ₹10,000-₹12,000 per month. The current program staff's association with the Gurukul ranges from a period of few months to 10 years.

AP attributes its sustained success in program management to their committed and passionate team members.

Summary of the interaction:

- During summer vacations, training is provided to the teaching staff on aspects of both education and administration. Need based training by external trainers is also provided. Some of the points covered in the training include - Activity based learning, child psychology, need assessment, etc.
- At times, unavailability of sufficient resources for carrying out extracurricular activities is a constraint.
- The older children take care of the younger children. When someone gets hurt or is unwell; s/he is taken care of by the rector or older children.
- The teachers, who are trained in child psychology, counsel the children when need is felt.
- The children watch news or sports for some time daily and on weekends watch motivational movies or animated films.
- The teachers also get themselves involved in playing with the children.
- Employees from corporates visit the Gurukul and spend time with children as part of employee engagement. Activities such as drawing competitions, craft making, and sports events are organized by these volunteers which the children thoroughly enjoy participating in.

One of the key challenges faced by AP is its inability to pay the staff on time owing to liquidity constraints. On an average, 2 staff members leave the organization each year due to factors such as better job opportunities, family constraints, relocation after marriage, etc.

Meeting with Children:

Our team interacted with around 40 children from Class 1 to 6.

Summary of the interaction:

- Children showed active participation and answered our questions with a lot of confidence.
- They said they like the style of teaching and the amenities provided to them at the Gurukul.
- They look forward to picnics and doing extracurricular activities.
- They have fun during their digital inclusion sessions and like learning more about computers.
- The children had aspirations of becoming teachers, police inspectors, businessmen, etc.

We noticed that the children were obedient, disciplined and well-versed with their responsibilities.

Meeting with Parents of children: (Refer Appendix VI)

We met four mothers as part of our interactions with beneficiaries. Of the four, 3 are working as house help at Pune / Mumbai and 1 is working as a vegetable vendor in Loni.

Summary of the interaction:

Parent 1:

- “I feel good about the way my daughter talks with so much confidence, I like the way she is learning to dance and draw. Even when I take her back home, she always wants to come back to school. I come and meet her twice a month. I work as a caretaker for a family and when I told my employer about AP, she visited and donated to the Gurukul. I like to tell others about AP and the good work they are doing for our children”

Parent 2:

- “We are originally from Osmanabad and I work in Mumbai as a domestic help. My children have been here since 4 years now and I have seen them progress. I was very happy seeing them perform yesterday at the Republic Day function.”

Parent 3:

- “We are all uneducated, but we feel proud that our children are getting good education and care here. Our children have taught us to sign our names”.

While all mothers were thankful for the efforts undertaken by Astitva Pratishthan for their children’s education, their only concern was about the girls’ dormitory not having an attached toilet.

Observations from site visit:

Our key observations from the Gurukul site visit are summarized below:

- From the 6 acres of land owned by Mr. Wagh, the Gurukul takes up 2 acres with a lush green surrounding. There are 250+ trees planted around the property to prevent trespassing.
- An inverter ensures uninterrupted power supply to the Gurukul.
- Before the girls' dormitory was built the girls used to sleep in one of the classrooms. The girls' dormitory has bunk beds and they are provided with bed sheets, blankets and pillows.
- The boys' dormitory is a standalone structure. It has very few bunk beds which are generally used by the older children who need to study, the rest use mattresses; they are also provided with bed sheets, blankets and pillows. The room also has some donated sewing machines which AP plans to use for stitching onion bags for wholesale selling.
- Girls are always accompanied by a female staff member whenever they have to use the toilet at night.
- The verandah outside the girls' dormitory serves as the eating place where the children line up and have their meals. They generally have breakfast in the open ground to soak in the sunlight.
- Next to the girls' dormitory is a partially constructed hostel for the girls. The layout has three rooms with attached toilets. The foundation has been laid in such a manner that it has scope for upward extension.
- The kitchen was clean and hygienic and well stocked with utensils and groceries.
- The library was well stocked with a diverse collection of books across different languages as well as genres, donated by multiple donors.
- The desks and benches in the classrooms were in good condition. The walls were decorated with informative posters and charts.
- There is a cowshed in the premises which houses three cows, two of which are Desi Gir cows gifted by a donor. However, the milk from these cows is not sufficient to meet the Gurukul's requirement.
- Gurukul security only includes a front gate. There are 10 solar street lights within the premises. The Trustees said safety is not an issue and neither do children venture out of the Gurukul by themselves nor is anybody permitted to enter the premises without any work. Installation of CCTVs and a fence around the school is in the pipeline for the coming year.
- There is a grievance box in the administrative office to help students share their concerns which they may hesitate to say in person. The same is reviewed regularly by the managing trustees and staff, and responsive measures are taken after careful team discussion.

Conclusion:

AP presently has a 6,500 sq. ft. constructed area of school and hostel. This facility is extremely inadequate to serve both purposes even for the children currently on its roll.

There is a waitlist of around 100 children who cannot be admitted to the Gurukul due to lack of adequate facilities to accommodate and educate them.

On an ongoing basis, AP requires funds to meet the operating costs of running the Gurukul which includes teachers' honorarium, expenses for grocery and toiletries, stationery and books, school bags, bed sheets, blankets, toys, library books, electrical appliances, cupboards etc.

Most of the requirements in kind are met through donations.

Presently, AP requires funds for meeting expenses that require cash outflow and cannot be met in kind like teachers' honorarium, electricity bill payment, purchasing milk for children, etc.

