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In February this year, we went on a tour of 15 villages to acquaint ourselves with conditions at rural schools and assess the kind of help, if any, that TELSA might be able to provide for such badly needed amenities as lavatories, drinking water, school supplies and aid students in the areas of transportation, scholarships, learning aids etc., We had a particular focus in terms of toilets, especially for girls and female teachers in view of their rising numbers at these institutions.

Our visit took us through 14 districts and we visited 16 schools in 7 districts. With the exception of two which are owned and run by private managements and two others called "Ashram Schools" run by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), all institutions visited by us were high schools run by Zilla Parishads (Z.P.Schools).

Sanitation

Leaving aside the two private schools and one Z.P.School , all the schools visited lacked functioning toilets as the toilets built were in a state of disuse due to lack of water/water lines and maintenance. Often, the approach to these facilities is covered with overgrown brush and trash making them inaccessible. It was found that both students and teachers have to use open spaces to answer nature's call and many a girl student was said to be avoiding water intake during school hours in order to minimize the need to relieve themselves. In some villages, teachers have informed us that they also follow the same practice. In cases of emergency, women teachers often seem to depend on the kindness of home-owners in the neighborhood, should they happen to have functioning toilets. In one private school, we were informed that the day we visited was a particularly bad one as the sweeper had quit after a long period of tussle with the management and the toilets were unusable on that particular day. We left the school wishing that it was for just for that

day only, indeed!

In some schools where there were bore-pumps, water was still not available at the toilets as no pipelines were laid to them. In some cases pipelines could actually be seen in the toilets, but there was no water available to make them functional. Students and teachers have to carry buckets from a distance when such visits to the toilet become inescapable. Every school we visited had presented toilets in a filthy state as they were not cleaned. There were no scavengers on the staff of the schools and in some cases teachers themselves try to clean them occasionally with the help of students when water is available to be carried from either the neighborhood or from within the school premises. In some cases, such attempts to enlist the aid of students seems to have resulted in protests from parents who regard cleaning toilets as a violation of their caste status or from youth groups (probably with political affiliations) within village who regard such attempts as a violation of laws against exploitation of child labor. In some schools, teachers contribute money to hire the village panchayat's scavenger to have the toilets cleaned once a week or once a month.

On the whole the situation is unbearable and both teachers and students suffer due to lack of such an elementary amenity as a functioning toilet. They informed us that they raise the issue every chance they get within the councils of the appropriate authority, but to no effect

Industry's Impact

There were two kinds of impact from industries and corporations we noticed; one was beneficial and the other deleterious to the health and well-being of the schools and the villages. In Dusipeta, we were told that Comcast Industries which processes iron ore plays a very supportive role by assisting the school with some scholarships and paying the costs of electricity. In Pydibhimavaram where a number of drug manufacturers

and chemical industries including the well-known Reddy Labs are located, the ground water is said to be contaminated by effluents discharged by these factories and the school's supply of water is muddy and contaminated. We were told that some of these industries, in fact, discharge their poisons directly into the sea. The process of erecting some classrooms by some of these industries to accommodate students who currently occupy open sheds meant for bikes is said to have been stalled due to political interference.

Overcrowding

Another problem these schools face is the level of overcrowding in classrooms. Students numbering 60 to 70 per class room is almost the norm while in one case the number was over one hundred. In many schools there were not enough teachers, and again in many cases the post of the head master remains vacant. The schools are in charge of acting headmasters or teachers with full additional charge for the administration of the schools. In one Ashram school for girls (Lakkampur, Neredigunda Mandal, Adilabad District) which is also a residential school, 50 girls have to live, change and study in rooms that might measure 13 ft X 20 ft. As a result, tin boxes measuring approximately 15"X22" in which their meager possessions such as an additional pair of clothes, books and trinkets are stored are lined up in the open verandah outside the classroom. When asked where they were kept when it rained, pat came the reply that they remain in the verandah.

Problem for Girls

In some schools, we were also told about a special problem (related to the lack of privacy due to dysfunctional toilets) that confronts female students during periods of menstruation. Lack of privacy, and inexpensive but hygienic sanitary pads are said to have some effect on girl-student attendance in co-ed schools, and to a lesser degree, in all-girls' schools. We were told that the Rs.15 allowance per girl per month is

completely inadequate to cover the cost of these pads. We were also told that some teachers have received training in making pads cheaply from cotton and other materials purchased locally. Help was sought from us to pay for the cost of these materials.

Vacant Posts

We were told that were an attender or sweeper (who may or may not be the person required to keep toilets clean, should they be fortunate enough to have access to some water), or a teacher in some cases, to leave the post, those posts are allowed to remain vacant on an indefinite basis. Thus, both at the level of teachers and support staff, posts are allowed to remain vacant for long periods of time. The question as to who should keep the school premises clean, or who should provide nonteaching services is left unaddressed in many instances. Teachers make do with such arrangements as they can whenever they can. Conditions in schools in such circumstances must remain unhygienic, and do indeed. In Dusipeta and some others, we noticed that teams of students and teachers take turns at coming an hour before school opens to sweep the premises and clean the class rooms. Lack of water as well as the long-standing practice of sweeping the dusty premises without first sprinkling water on the grounds, kicks up clouds of dust which is breathed by all present, and leaves a film of dust to settle down on the floor and furniture in the class rooms.

Something Positive

On the positive side, we have noticed that the mid-day meal scheme that was extended to cover all classes up to the 10th since last October has had a salutary effect on absenteeism. More students than ever are attending classes. Under this scheme, rice is delivered to schools (the headmaster's office having been turned into a store-room for bags of rice delivered once a month, or more frequently in some cases), and local

womens' self-help groups often known under the acronym DWACRA, are hired to cook meals in the school compound, providing from their pocket such other items as kaandi pappu, eggs (ostensibly on two days a week), cooking pots, fuel or firewood at Rs.3/- per student. We were at two or three places during the time mid-day meals were being cooked or served and noticed that sambar was mostly thin pappu charu with barely any vegetables added, and two or three fists-full of rice and this gruel made up the midday meal. Roughly half the students in each school are said to avail this meal, the others refusing it for either caste reasons or the ability to provide their own meal. In one school, we were told that the water available was used up for cooking and students were forced to bring drinking water from their homes. In none of the schools, there was a kitchen or covered dining area for students to eat their lunch. They eat squatting all over the school property, often right next to piles of uncollected garbage.

Again, on the positive side, we found a good deal of commitment to the students' growth and welfare on the part of teachers in the schools we visited and a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of students, especially girls. With a few exceptions, girl students seem to be performing better than male students. It should however, be noted that perhaps 10-20% of these students would go into college, although everyone raised his/her hand when asked about the prospect of their going to college. With talk of the state government making education free for the poor from Kindergarten to Post-graduation, increasing proportions of students may indeed go to college.

Do Teachers Care?

The point about teachers' commitment to students' growth and welfare was, however, disputed by some in the state bureaucracy and a few other persons claiming to have better information than our limited visits could have given us. It should be pointed out that a couple of these people

have private schools run for profit in a couple of villages. Be that as it may, our visits, which were completely random, not even we knowing in most instances where we were going to appear, have given us reason to leave with a favorable impression of teachers as well as students. The commitment of teachers will soon be tested to some degree on how they follow up on the requests they made to us for various kinds of help. We have mailed 'applications for grant' to all the schools which asked us for help, and these applications have a deadline of April 15th, 2009. Let's see how many will actually submit them!

One feature that we noticed in all the schools, almost without exception, was that the Parishad Schools were all populated by students belonging to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Backward Class students. Students belonging to the better off castes, as well as the better-off among the SCs, STs and BCs are going to private schools of varying quality either in the same village, if it is a large one, or a nearby town.

Public vs. Private

Teachers in public schools are getting better pay compared to teachers in private schools in many of these villages. In the two private schools we visited, we were able to meet students in only one of them. We were not able to detect a significant difference in the composition of the class in this school as compared to students in the parishad schools. When asked about it, the principal told us that many of the students left parishad schools to join them. The reason, they said, was that there was better instruction in their school. Our interaction with the students did not show any evidence that the students were brighter or better prepared than in the parishad schools we visited. Class size in this private school was however smaller at roughly 30 students per teacher.

A Worthwhile Visit

On the whole, our visit to schools was a fruitful one. We were received

with great courtesy and our questions were answered willingly and without apparent reservation. While the dismal facilities in all the schools visited were quite depressing, the enthusiasm of the students and the dedication of the teachers were gratifying. While there were moments of great satisfaction from our interaction with students and teachers everywhere, our most memorable visit was to a school in Lakkampet in Adilabad where in one school run for girls by the ITDA, a group of girls put up an impromptu performance of song, dance and drama when they learned that we would not be able to attend their school day performances set for only four days later. Jadav Pravanita, a lambada girl sang a couple of songs in her exceedingly sweet voice and we left believing that there might be a jewel there, waiting to be discovered by some music director. The girls' dance decrying the practice of bride-showing was also very entertaining.

Help sought by the schools was of the following types:

1. Water lines to toilets
2. Bore-wells
3. Bicycles for distance commuters
4. Enclosures, doors and repairs for toilets
5. School supplies such as note books, game sets and computers
6. Scholarships
7. Books for the library.

There were requests for additional space but we told them that was beyond our limited current budget.

Following is a list of the schools visited by us:

1. Zilla Parishad High School, Village Narsingi, Chegunta Mandal, Medak Dt., 502248

2. Government Ashram High School (ITDA)Kuntala, Neredigonda Mandal, Adilabad Dt.,504323
3. Government Girigen Girls High School(ITDA) Lakkampur, Neredigonda Mandal, Adalabad Dt.,504323
4. Zilla parishad Secondary School, Pinapaka, Via WYRA, Tallada Mandal, Khammam Dt.507165
5. Rahul Vignan Kendra, Cherla, Cherla Mandal, Khammam (Private School)
6. Z.P.Girls High School, Cherla, Cherla Mandal, Khammam Dt.
7. Mahatma Gandhi Junior College & High School, Atreya Puram, E.G.DT (Aided School)
8. Z.P.High School, Dusipeta, Dusi R.S.(Via), Srikakulam Dt.532484
9. Zilla Parishad High School, Pydibhimavaram, Ranasthalam Mandal, Srikakulam Dt., 532409
10. Z.P.High School, Uppada Kothapalli, Kothapalli Mandal, E.G.Dt., 533447
11. Govt. High School, Anatavaram, East Godavari Dt.,533222
12. Zilla Parishad High School, Ambazipeta, E.G.Dt., 533214
13. P.V.R.Z.P.High School, Munganda, P.Gannavaram Mandal, E.G.Dt. 533224
14. Zilla Parishad High School, Kaikaram, W.G.Dt., 534416
15. Zilla Praja Parishad High School, Bhimadole, W.G.Dt., 534425
16. Sri Sai Century School, Makkapeta Post, Vatsavai Mandal, Krishna Dt., 521190(Private)