

Doorstep – Project Visit Report (January 3, 2003)

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During my recent visit to India, I got an opportunity to visit the “Mobile School” project sponsored by ASHA – NYC/NJ. The visit was planned with a short notice but proved to be productive. The following is a brief summary of the project visit.

Doorstep has been engaged in innovative projects to educate children living on the streets and in the slums in South Mumbai. In year 1998, the organization approached ASHA to get funds to start a mobile school for the street children. The idea has taken off very well since then and Doorstep has been applauded from all sectors of the society for its initiatives.

The following is a brief summary of the itinerary of the “Mobile School” bus on a typical day that will also help explain the objectives of the “Mobile School” project:

Around 7:00 AM, the bus picks up students from their homes (located in one of the 11 slums Doorstep covers) attending schools conducted by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation. After dropping off the students, the bus goes to its regular parking spot at the Crawford market to teach the street children in the Crawford Market area. After conducting the classes for about 2.5 hours, the bus goes back to pick up the returning students from the schools. After dropping off the children at their homes, the bus goes to the Fashion Street for the afternoon session of the mobile teaching to serve the street children in the Fashion Street area. The classes are conducted from 2:30 PM until 5:00 PM and then the bus goes to the World Trade Center to operate an in-built Toy Library for the children in that area for about 2 hours.

As can be seen from the itinerary described above the mobile school achieves multiple purposes.

First, by providing the school-bus services for the children residing in the slums, the Mobile School has addressed the school dropout problem confronting the Mumbai Municipal Corporation schools. By conducting daily attendances and working in close operation with the school and the parents, Doorstep tries to maintain regular attendance of the students. The organization charges a nominal fee of Rs. 50/month for the bus service.

Second, the Mobile School has addressed the core problem of the eradication of illiteracy and the child labor problem confronting the street children. The organization does not provide vocational training to its Mobile School students since the organization does not possess expertise in the area. However, the organization does make the opportunities available to students as it becomes aware of them from its own resources/network. Consequently, several students who were engaged in begging in their pre-Mobile School life are now earning their bread in respectable ways (e.g. Plastic Molding jobs). After attending the Mobile School, the students also learn basic reading and writing skills to enable them to get around the daily life with fewer difficulties. In addition, Doorstep has also made arrangements with the “Sulabh Shouchalay Sankul” facilities operating in the area to provide free bath water and/or facilities for its students. Thus, the students can now maintain better hygiene along with getting basic education.

Third, the Toy Library is yet another innovative way to get street children involved in interesting games that also inculcate basic education skills. Previously, the Toy Library used to be a Mobile Book Library. However, due to the lackluster response Doorstep decided to discontinue the Book Library and start a Toy Library instead. The Toy Library has attracted several street children and made them aware of the “Mobile School” as evidenced by their regular attendance at these libraries.

Daily attendance, continual progress monitoring has been a hallmark of the Doorstep’s Mobile School activities. The organization also commands a competent and dedicated staff. Most of the staff members conducting the classes in the Mobile-School are educated up to the 12th grade. The qualification seems to be enough since the activities in the Mobile School is limited to teaching basic reading and writing skills.

During my visit the attendance was thinner than what’s observed on a regular basis. Only 6 students out of 25 were present on that day. The reason for the mass absenteeism on that day was that being a Friday most of the students were lured to another philanthropic organization in the neighborhood that offers free food and bath water on every Friday. Another reason for the absenteeism was that a few students were busy catching the Matinee show of the movie released on that day. It must be indeed a tough job to keep oneself motivated and run after these children on a daily basis to inculcate basic civic habits.

Ms. Beena Seth Lashkari who leads the organization is a highly motivated person with a strong will. She has been active in this field for a long time and knows to get around the issues and daily problems. For example, parking the Mobile School in the Fashion Street and Crawford Market area has been a regular nuisance for the Doorstep since there are hardly any parking spots for a bus. The residents living in these areas have also been non-cooperative. Ms. Lashkari has however taken a tough stand with the Civic and Police officials to get around the parking problems.

Before taking off, Ms. Lashkari sought advice from ASHA to make the project self-sustainable. The fees that are charged to the students to avail the school-bus facilities cover about 25% of the project’s expenses but there are no other avenues as such. The organization thought about renting the bus for travel purposes but there are practical difficulties since there is a risk that the school activities might get jeopardized, if the bus gets involved in an accident (I wonder given the seating arrangement in the bus if it would really be possible to try such activities). The organization has also toyed with the idea of putting paid advertisements on the bus. The idea hasn’t borne any fruits yet. Ms. Lashkari inquired with me if ASHA would like to have its logo on the bus since ASHA has been the primary benefactor of the project. I replied in negative and told her that the project custodian would communicate with the organization, if the volunteers find it absolutely necessary. This issue needs to be discussed if the volunteers have any differences of opinion.

I spent about an hour in the bus with the students and tried to participate in the learning process. The students demonstrated their reading skills and one of them told us a story. At the end of the visit and after coming back to my routine life, I think the time spent at the Mobile School was the most rewarding during my visit to India.