

THE ADHARSHILA SCHOOL

Shaping a Dream...



A Report on the upcoming Adharshila School and Campus at Village Agraa
JULY 2005

samrakshan



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Village Agraa
Vijaypur, District Sheopur, MP

The Beginning...

In January 2002, Samrakshan set up its first set of informal primary schools, christened the '*Asha shalas*' (the schools of hope), under makeshift shelters, trees, huts and in unused school buildings in 10 villages in the Vijaypur tehsil of district Sheopur. The children who came to these schools had been displaced very recently from their homes inside the Kuno wildlife sanctuary. Since 1999, they had been facing a grim struggle along with their families to re-establish their lives and livelihoods at the relocation sites allotted to them by the forest department (which had carried out the rehabilitation programme). Samrakshan, which began working in this region as a bridge between the displaced community and the forest department, found that in village after village, the displaced Sahariya tribals wanted to send their children to school. They in fact told us repeatedly that one of the reasons why they shifted out of the sanctuary was to allow their children access to schools, which they had never had the opportunity to attend.

With a team of young men drawn from the local community, Samrakshan launched the Asha education initiative in 2002, to provide access to primary education in villages hitherto unserved



A makeshift Asha school in Village Ahirwani

by the government's education facilities. During 2002-04, the Asha schools grew and matured, as did the education team at Samrakshan, and by 2004, the Asha schools had become an integral part of the landscape of these villages. More than 500 children have passed through the portals of the Asha schools, and around 60 children have been able to get admission to a regular government-run middle school and hostel, after passing their Class 5 examination as private students tutored by Asha schools.



The Asha School, Village Ladar, 2004

By the end of 2003, we had consolidated our Asha schools into 3 main centres, run out of unused government school buildings, with 2 teachers per school and a student-teacher ratio of around 40:1. The girl-boy ratio in the Asha schools averaged around 1:3, and the attendance percentage (despite repeated droughts, distress migration, limited infrastructure and extreme weather conditions) remained between 60-80 per cent. This entire period threw up challenges, learnings and moments to remember almost every single day, and at the end of the day, gave us renewed confidence to dream bigger dreams.

New Dreams...

In 2003, the education team began a process of collective introspection and perspective planning to create a vision of where we wanted the education initiative to go over the next few years. The most important issue that emerged was that we need a school campus of our own to bring into action a number of innovative approaches and activities that our collective experience had led us to evolve over 3 years. The government school buildings out of which the Asha schools were being run did not offer the scope for such innovations, since there were issues of ownership and security of the premises. We had not been granted any official recognition by the state education agencies to run the Asha schools in government buildings, although village level state functionaries regularly reported our activities to their higher authorities.

We wanted a space of our own to be able to provide our young students with opportunities to go beyond mere syllabus-based learning. We wanted them to have a school where they could play, create, experiment and innovate. We wanted to offer them opportunities to design and implement various project ideas, and to learn as many as possible of their syllabus-based lessons in the outdoor mode – using all of their senses and a variety of media. We wanted to expose them to cutting-edge methods of sustainable agriculture and non-farm livelihood while they were in school, so that adopting these ideas when they grew up came naturally. We wanted them to be close to nature and to a variety of living creatures, so that their natural compassion and care for the wild could get a keener edge. And to do all of this, we wanted a physical space that allowed us the freedom to build, innovate, and unleash our own creativity, so that we could create a school that each child will find joy in attending and will look back upon with fondness later.



Better days ahead...

The Process...

This is how the idea of the 'Adharshila' (Hindi for foundation stone) was born. However, to give this dream a real shape, many prosaic and mundane practicalities had to be dealt with and tackled, and many obstacles, some anticipated and some completely unforeseeable, had to be overcome. We began with registering an educational society under the MP Societies Registration Act, which would allow us to apply for government recognition for our school, as and when it got established. In October 2003, the Adharshila Shiksha Samiti was registered duly at the office of the Registrar of Societies at Gwalior. In June 2005, we have obtained permission from the district education officer to conduct government recognized classes till Class 8 (the middle school level).

The next challenge, of course, was trying to raise money to build the Adharshila school and campus. After a long process of negotiations, we received the go-ahead from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, which agreed to support us over 3 years and to meet costs like building construction, creation of livelihood



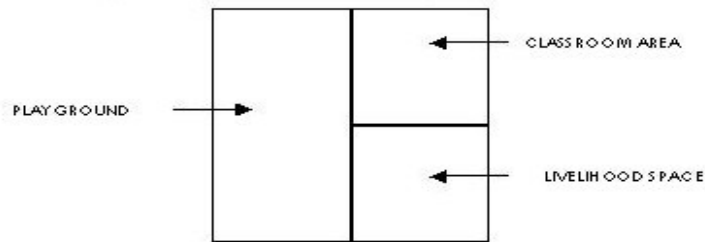
The chosen site for the Adharshila campus

spaces, resource material for students, salaries of the education team and overhead expenses. We then went into overdrive in a highly personalized fundraising drive for meeting the cost of purchase of land for the Adharshila campus. This drive was initiated after our complete failure to interest the district authorities in granting us a plot of land on lease for housing the campus. By June 2005, generous financial support had been received from Arun and Satish Mandhana, Atul Kumar, Kamal Nayan Kabra, Monica Sood, Pawan Bharadia, Dr. Nisha Singh, Dr. Sheila Rani and Dr. PN Sinha. We also entered into an MoU with Frontline Venture Services Pvt. Ltd., a Mumbai based company, which agreed to provide support for purchase of land and establishment of a water supply system at the Adharshila campus.

The Adharshila School...

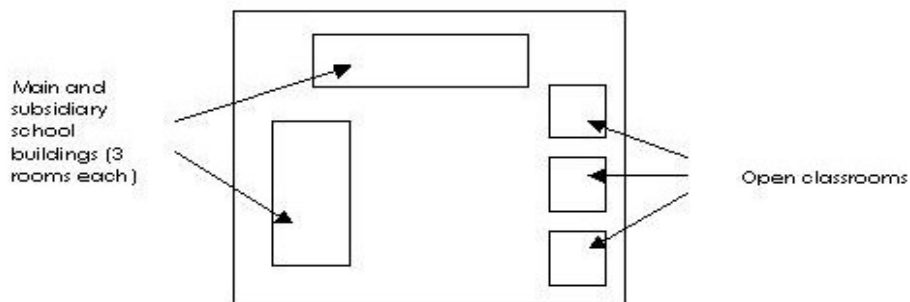
By May 2005, the process of purchase of land and transfer of the land in Samrakshan's name had been completed. There was a delay of almost a month after this, when we were unable to get the revenue authorities to complete the process of physical delineation of the land boundaries, but by early June, this too was completed. The design of the Adharshila campus was prepared by Samrakshan's field team, and was the subject of much debate and discussion in the preceding months. The final design (depicted schematically in Figure 1) consists of 2 buildings of 3 rooms each, 3 stand-alone classrooms, a separate livelihood space, and a large playground.

Figure 1: Schematic depiction of the Adharshila Campus



All school buildings will have a sloping roof made from cement sheets. The open classrooms will have no entry or exit; 3 sides of these classrooms will have walls up to the height of low windows, but above that the room will have no walls – just open windows that the children can come into or go out of as they please. The fourth wall will go right up to ceiling level, and will be used for displaying resource material and for the blackboard. Care has been taken to position the rooms to get maximum shelter from the summer sun, dust storms and monsoon rains, while receiving good sunshine in the winter. Fast growing, leafy trees will be planted around all classrooms to provide a cool green canopy over the classrooms in the next 2 to 3 years. The detailed plan of the Classroom Area is depicted in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Schematic depiction of the Classroom Area of the Adharshila Campus



Construction work on the campus began in June, and has been in full swing since then. We target to open admissions to the school in the 3^d week of July, and begin the academic session on August 1, 2005. In the first few months, the academic session will not involve a full-fledged livelihood skill development component, since the livelihood spaces will take a few months to become fully operational. However, children will be involved actively in many aspects of this start up phase. Tree plantation on the Adharshila campus, establishment of the poultry shed and the Vermicompost shed, establishment and fencing of the medicinal plants nursery and the vegetable cultivation plots, and laying out the flower beds for the Adharshila campus will be some of the activities that the children will be involved in right from the start.

