

Education in Remote India – Ekal Vidyalaya

It's been more than 2 weeks since my feet touched the soil in the Village of Todi. A small remote village in the state of Rajasthan, India. We pulled into the village @ close to 3 PM on a dirt road, almost never traveled by car. I was in the back seat and when my door opened, my nose was filled with dust and the faint smell of mustard (from the crops growing around the villages). There was a lot of commotion and



not understanding the Hindi language I couldn't make out exactly what was happening. I could hear the loud banging of a bass and snare drum, I could see people scurrying but that was it. Within seconds, I was immediately surrounded by more than 30 villagers... By the time I could take everything in, I had been presented with 4 garland strands of flowers around my neck. I had one of the village women place the Tilak (ritual mark on the forehead that is viewed as a

sign blessing, greeting) on my forehead, and my head had been wrapped in a decorative red cotton turban...

The day started with a meeting in my Hotel lobby in Delhi with Mr. Vijay Maroo. Mr. Maroo is the Managing Director of the Ranchi Express Group (a media outlet) and also President of Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of India. [Ekal Vidyalaya](#) a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing education and development in rural India. The goal of Ekal is to help eradicate illiteracy in rural and tribal India by 2015. Mr. Maroo was accompanied by Mr. Vijay Sethi a retired government official and a member of the Ekal executive Committee and Anush Kumar an Ekal employee who had just moved up from Southern India to dedicate more time to the cause. I had come to learn of Ekal and meet my new friends through fellow Microsoft Employee, Vasavi Epari. In October 2009, during Microsoft's Annual Giving Campaign Vasavi shared with me the mission on Ekal Vidyalaya. As a supporter of early childhood education I was immediately curious on the impact that a cause such as Ekal could have in a country as Large as India. Vasavi later introduced me to Mr. Subhash Gupta, president of the US Ekal chapter. I had the privilege of sitting with Mr. Gupta where he talked about the work and goals of Ekal in supporting Education and development. I was impressed with the mission and on the spot committed to visiting an Ekal school on my next trip to India.

We left the hotel in Delhi slightly after 9 AM. Together we drove 3.5 hours (about 200K) South to the town of Alwar. Alwar is roughly 500K people and home to many of the Ekal regional volunteers for the state of Rajasthan. In route to Alwar, I started to get a better sense of life within India, outside of a big city. As a maturing global economy and market, India is still made up of thousands of small, rural towns and villages. These small towns rely heavily on farming and local trade to keep pace. I was able to see commerce in motion – the buying and trading of goods, workers transporting heavy loads and goods on camel pulled carts and buggys. To my surprise, I even saw an elephant being used for transport and removal of construction debris. Mr. Maroo was a gracious host. Along the route we talked Ekal Vision

and we talked about the overall state of Education within India. As the conversation progressed I was able to slip in a few innocent questions about the sites and life in rural India (he could tell without asking that I was taken with the Camel buggys ☺). Mainly however I kept silent and tried to take in as much of the countryside as I could.



We were greeted on the Alwar City limits by a team of local Ekal Volunteers. We were presented with flower garland around our necks and then proceeded to the home of Mr. Deepak Sharma. Mr. Sharma's family had prepared a traditional Indian lunch. I learned quickly that the very basic rules of rules of hospitality applied in Mr. Sharma's house – the more that I ate, the more that showed up on my plate ☺. Thank you Mr. Sharma! You have a wonderful family and I was honored to be a guest in your home!

After lunch the Ekal team had a small conversation to confirm our plan and we were Vanayatra (a Hindi saying for "with Forest" or "outside") - off to the first village of Todi about 70K and more than 90 min drive S of Alwar. Considering I was the first to be fitted with a turban, I had a chance to watch the other distinguished guests receive their proper greeting. The welcome processional – with the endless bass and snare drum carried on for about 5 minutes. It took us to the heart of the village. Taking in as much as I could, I was surprised to see the # cement buildings and structures. Some that I would describe as houses and some I would describe as multi-purpose shelters (possibly large multi family living spaces). The buildings were delightfully colored, mixing in an occasional blue, or pink or orange, as well as a mix of natural cement gray. At the center of the village was a small courtyard. This was also where they conducted classes and school for the children. The school floor was a raised cement platform adjacent to a fixed cement structure. And just like Mr. Gupta referenced in our initial meeting, the school was indeed underneath the shade of the largest tree in the village. Once at the school, my attention turned to the children of Todi. Approximately 50 kids in the school ages 4-13 sat in 4 very organized rows. About 1/3 of the students were young girls. You could clearly see that this was not a normal school day. There was definitely some formality involved because of Mr. Maroo's status and I would imagine because of my presence as well. Mr Maroo was introduced, followed by myself and then the rest of the volunteers who had accompanied us on the trip.

The kids did their welcome prayer and then the teacher began to lead the students in a lesson on math (counting) and then into some basic sounds and reading. The kids recited many of the lessons repeating after a lead student or the teacher. A few kids were called to the chalk board to solve math problems – from simple addition to complex multiplication. Each kid that stood up appeared more confident than the next. During the demonstration Mr. Maroo took some time to show and explain the curriculum and books that Ekal provided to the schools. The books looked like a traditional school / study book for basic math and reading. Mr. Maroo also walked me through how Ekal tracked progress of the students. From attendance to simple progress reporting on key life lessons and skills. A simple hand written log /



report that each Ekal teacher is required to fill out daily and submit to the regional team on a monthly basis. I was tempted to talk technology as an enabler but resisted in the moment 😊.

Watching the kids interact and seeing them in this learning environment, there is no doubt to me that the efforts of Ekal are making a difference for the kids and for the Villages that are a part of their



curriculum. In many of these villages, families rely on their children as wage earners and providers. The attendance records reflected that school and education has high value. I was pleased to hear the dialog between Ekal executives and Villagers encouraging the kids to also attend Government run schools in their areas. In the village of Todi, at least 1/3 by show of hands when asked, also attend a government run school in addition to Ekal.

My experience in Todi was repeated 2 more times. The next village of Barankabas, a village of 300 people who are working hard on educating the kids, and also working diligently to progress their organic farming



methods – one of the key outcomes that Ekal is promoting in the various villages. In Barankabas I was honored with the privilege participating in the school session with the lighting of a candle that is lit traditionally to bring blessings



over the lesson and gathering for the day. The lesson plan and curriculum demonstration was similar to Todi. This school had about 30 kids in the 4-11 yr range. Girls made up about 40%. The teacher in this school was quite young, maybe only 16 himself. The model calls for a teacher to come directly from the village in which they are serving. In this case, it was clear that this young man, while instructing the kids, was also learning how to become a leader in his own right.

Our last stop was the village of Banjara Basti. This particular village was population 100 and filled with transient and nomadic parents who move around often in search of better land and better living. The kids in this village were more curious than confident. It was evident in just the short amount of time that we were there that Ekal School was the only structured education that these kids might ever see, and potentially the only structure that these families see on a regular basis. Looking back, I wish we could have spent more time in Banjara Basti to get a better sense of the many ways that Ekal was supporting the village.

Prior to this experience, I connected Village to the notion of “poor”, “struggling” or “underprivileged”. While the villages may not have all the amenities of a large or developing city, they are rich with many things that are often times overlooked or undervalued in these more developed cities;

They are rich with Happiness – everywhere we went and every place we visited I saw smiles on the faces of the children, of the Village citizens, of the elders.



They are rich with Respect – for elders, for their visitors for their teachers – whom themselves each come from the villages in which they teach.

They are rich in confidence – The kids greeted and talked with adults in a confident yet respectful tone. There were all mature beyond their years.

They are rich in Hospitality – I felt welcomed in every village that we visited. The welcome processions, which of course were flattering, each went out of their way to ensure that their guests were comfortable.



They are rich with Beauty – Beauty in many ways. The setting and surrounding within each village, the buildings and shelters, The play, the smiles, the people, the respect, all beautiful!

The simple lifestyle has brought about simple necessities. Education, health and well-being are clearly simple necessities. I was proud that at least for 1 day that I was living a part of the Ekal mission.

The day was over and we started our drive back toward Alwar. With the sun setting I had a last chance to take in a few sites; goat herders making their last trek of the day, wild peacocks flying in the mustard fields and countryside. It was a great time for reflection.

We made a stop in Alwar where we had a recap over toast and tea with the group of volunteers that had made the trek with us. While not fluent in Hindi, it was clear that all felt that the day was a success and a great experience. I was asked to share my thoughts and observations and had this to say;



That I was truly humbled by each and every volunteer who has chosen to give time to Ekal and promoting Education and healthy living in these remote villages. I was truly honored to accompany them on a visit. I was overwhelmed by the level of hospitality and that I was grateful to see and experience life in a small village. More importantly I was impressed with how the elders have embraced education and understand its positive impact on the kids. A great experience that I am thankful to have had. The drive back to Delhi was a little longer than anticipated – I also learned about mid-night traffic jams !!

Thanks again everyone who made this trip and experience a reality for me. I will cherish my experiences for a long time to come.

