

A Reach to Teach

December 21 - December 30, 2019

Gramothan Resource Center, Karanjo, Jharkhand, India

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Four high school students from Los Angeles and Chicago embarked on an EKAL Vanayatra to the Karanjo GRC in Jharkhand, India from December 21st to December 30th 2019. This report presents the experiences and stories from their trip.

Summary

We have always heard stories of what EKAL is doing in India, however stories are nothing compared to going there and seeing EKAL's impact firsthand. We went to the Karanjo GRC largely unsure of what to expect; however, upon returning to the United States, we can say with confidence that this trip was truly life-changing. The most memorable aspect of our Vanayatra was undoubtedly the people. Witnessing the genuine kindness, hospitality, and joy of both children and adults made the trip not only educational but also inspirational. We went there expecting to visit solely EKAL schools, but we were exposed to the many aspects of rural life that EKAL is changing. From developing social enterprises in agriculture and tailoring to facilitating the development of more engaging and interactive EKAL schools, we are now certain and proud of the profound impact that EKAL Abhiyan has had on rural India. In this report, we will present our experiences and impressions from conversing with the farmers and students of Karanjo as well as our ideas for developing existing EKAL programs in the future.

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EKAL Vidyalaya schools, the hallmark of EKAL Abhiyan seemed like an engaging and enjoyable place to be for all the students, as well as an important part of village life. One noteworthy thing to consider was that many older students brought their younger siblings, who were not enrolled in the school, to the EKAL vidyalayas. This trend is extremely important because it signifies the general desire to learn amongst the village students. Our general observations characterized the schools as an exciting learning environment. We could tell by the pure joy and participation of all students that they enjoyed being at school and could grasp knowledge effectively. Music, dancing, and games seemed particularly effective in keeping younger students engaged and motivated to return to the schools.



Karajo GRC Main Headquarters

The first day in Karanjo, we visited an EKAL school in Baurasay, a village near the GRC. Immediately we felt welcomed by both EKAL staff as well as the children. It was remarkable to see the confidence and leadership exhibited by older children, specifically girls, in the EKAL schools. We could tell by the avid shouting and laughing during games and during basic interactions that every child was happy to be at the school. Based on our interactions with the children, we could tell that most of them had a good grasp of Hindi, but only a limited English knowledge. In some villages however, Hindi was sub-par and EKAL teachers utilized local dialects in the classroom. We believe it is important for teachers to use as much Hindi in the classroom and to only use local dialects to ensure that students are learning. We were amazed by the confidence, conviction, and ambitions of the EKAL students. When asked what they want to be when they grow up, students quickly and confidently replied “police man”, “doctor”, or “engineer.” It was also amazing to see the leadership expressed by older students, particularly girls, in the EKAL schools. These students were the first to answer questions by the teacher and organize class games/activities.



A young girl reads a story in hindi for the class while holding an EKAL workbook in her hands.

We learned from the school teacher that an hour of tablet usage per class has contributed to the development of English knowledge; however, independent tablet usage is restricted to the 3rd, 4th, and 5th ghats. An important part of education in the U.S is encouraging self-learning. We believe that EKAL should focus on a less structured classroom with more emphasis on discussion between students to facilitate their own learning. For example, students who express curiosity or a willingness to learn, even in the 1st and 2nd ghats should have access to use tablets with limited guidance. In our opinion, a less structured classroom will encourage independence of learning amongst children and help encourage comprehension and curiosity of the subject matter rather than regurgitation.



Students are quizzed on arithmetic and language at an EKAL School in the Bongajana Village

The EKAL on wheels bus was one of the other educational implementations that we were able to observe. The ability of the EKAL on wheels bus to provide digital tools and computers to villages and students that would not have access otherwise was a big factor in motivating children to come onto the bus. Not only did it allow them to learn basics in word processors, but it introduced them to English as well. Both the bus and the tablets demonstrated the benefits of using technology as an educational tool, as students were able to learn utilizing modern technology.



EKAL On Wheels Bus in action at a village. The bus spent 2-3 hours at the village teaching students primarily how to use paint.



Sitting inside the Karanjo GRC's EKAL On Wheels bus

A major component of western education is developing student-led projects and experiments to develop and foster creativity and curiosity. In both EKAL schools and in the GRC school, we noticed a general lack of curiosity among students. While all the children were extremely motivated and had great conviction (with regard to their future career path), we believe that teachers assess memorization rather than comprehension. This can be solved by encouraging students to ask questions and by using the “socratic-method”. With this teaching style, EKAL teachers can foster independence and confidence by using a discussion style forum to encourage critical-thinking and argumentation. For example, after reading a passage, teachers can ask students to take and defend an opinion. Similarly, teachers may ask students to hypothesize about various natural and scientific phenomena. In both cases, a student’s learning is a part of their own responsibility. Developing this kind of thinking will help produce more independent and motivated learners.

A predominant area that we felt could be improved in EKAL education is geography. In some villages, when we introduced ourselves as being from America, many children did not even know where that was. One of EKAL’s primary goals with the Vidyalaya program is to foster patriotism and nationalism for India. However, we believe this cannot be done without a basic understanding of the different places and cultures in the world. Every EKAL handbook includes a map of India. However, we believe that a world map should minimally be hung up on the boards at every EKAL school and should be reviewed to some extent with the children. Learning about geography and to some extent, history, will help achieve EKAL’s goal of fostering a national love of India.

One of the primary issues that we believe faces EKAL schools is some measure of progress. Teachers told us that they conduct assessments; however, in order to ensure that children are truly learning Hindi (rather than their local dialect), arithmetic, and comprehension, EKAL should develop and proctor standardized tests. These tests can be administered to every village to get a comprehensive understanding of how children in those villages are learning compared to their urban counterparts.



Visiting EKAL teacher training at GRC

In regards to the novel idea of holistic development presented by EKAL's Gramothan, the approach and education involving agriculture was advanced in our eyes. EKAL's ability to teach modern techniques such as crop rotation, drip irrigation, staggered seeding, and crop diversification, etc. was profound and present in each one of the farms we visited. Staying at the GRC allowed us to be exposed to the various methods that EKAL has utilized to foster more efficient and more successful farming for villagers.

The knowledge in America regarding EKAL revolves mostly around the one-teacher schools, as the awareness for these is much more than the awareness for the farming and other aspects of development that EKAL provides. The impact of farming due to EKAL is very significant, as the methods of teaching allow for self-sustainability and increased efficiency throughout the entire farming process. It was educational for us to visit the village farmers who utilized training provided by EKAL to be self sustainable. After visiting everything from nutritional gardens to paddy and wheat farms, we believe that EKALs efforts to educate village

farmers should be publicised to a greater extent. One of the most remarkable aspects of an EKAL farming education was the utilization of environmentally conscious biopesticides and fertilizers. The GRC demonstrated the use of cow dung and urine in preparing natural plant growth hormones that demonstrated the sustainability and resourcefulness of EKAL educators.

We were amazed by EKAL's movement forward with developing social enterprises for farmers through the EKAL AB organization. EKALs packing and distribution of village grown crops including Haldi, Moringa, and Arjunaa leaf proved to have significant impacts on generating income for village farmers. We were concerned that EKAL's partnership with farmers who grow these crops would lead to a homogenization of plants grown in various villages. However, EKAL's plan to expand the packaging and distribution of farmer grown products to a wider variety of crops seemed to help a greater population of farmers while allowing them to retain their existing agricultural practices. The products are sold in a network within the EKAL organization, as currently the supply of goods is not able to compete in a larger market while retaining the same benefits for the farmers. It would be beneficial to expand the market that the products are sold to, but it is important to keep the farmers' and villages' as the priority.



Haldi fields in local village farm



Haldi product, processed and packaged at GRC

Another major aspect of the EKAL's holistic development that we were amazed by was the tailoring training and the tailoring centers. We were shown many women and girls who were being trained as tailor to produce bags, clothing, and other items in order to generate income for their families. We were taken to a offsite tailoring center in one the villages that was actually started by an EKAL student who sought to augment her income. Just like the social enterprises we discussed for agriculture, we believe that it is important to support women in tailoring entrepreneurship. As such, we commissioned the stitching and customization of close to 500 bags from the GRC's tailoring center. Our goal is to expand the markets accessible to these

tailorers by selling these bags in American markets (to EKAL donors and volunteers) in order to boost potential revenues. Our goal is to develop a social enterprise system similar to that for Haldi and other crops but for clothing, bags, and other products made in the villages. In particular, we were amazed by the bamboo baskets made in several EKAL villages near the bamboo forests. We believe that EKAL can support these villagers by commissioning bamboo baskets and other products to sell to the EKAL network.

The trip ultimately cemented the role of EKAL in the development of India as well as expanded our knowledge on its functions and abilities. It allowed us to understand firsthand how everything works, and it shined a light on the differences between our culture in America and the everyday lives of those in India. The trip enabled us to observe just how crucial EKAL is, and this is an idea that we are able to spread back to EKAL chapters in America.

Memorable Experiences



Eating sugar cane at a village farm

Apart from being immensely educational and eye-opening, the trip itself was extremely fun, adventurous, and exciting. The first day began with a tour of the GRC campus, the nutritional gardens, and the beautiful scenery surrounding the GRC. It is almost other-worldly to wake up every morning in the middle of the forest and to view raw nature like never before.



Climbing a guava tree at a EKAL nutritional garden

Even better, that same day we toured a village farm, learned about village life, and then proceeded to eat sugar cane straight from the farmers backyard.

The locally grown vegetables/crops at the GRC made for some of the best meals that we have ever had. The hospitality and kindness of both GRC staff and village farmers made the trip even more memorable. On one particular occasion, we visited a nutritional garden a few miles from the GRC. They learned more about the life of the farmer and how EKAL training has impacted his ability to successfully grow and sell a variety of crops. Farmers on several occasions were immensely kind to us as they let us pick crops, sample fruits, and climb trees all while teaching us about the village lifestyle.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the trip was the children (both at EKAL schools and at the GRC). Everyone had unbelievable energy, motivation, and will to learn and to succeed. We will never forget teaching the children there AMerican football and feeling the camaraderie and joy that they all felt when we played together. The last day of our trip we taught a large group of over 50 students how to play football. After mere minutes, the GRC students understood the rules and we began playing! That evening they reminded us of their hospitality and kindness with singing and dancing performances to bid us farewell. We can say with confidence that the EKAL students have made a lasting impression on us that is sure to have a similar effect on anyone else who visits the villages.



Teaching and giving american footballs to the students on the GRC campus as well as to EKAL Vidyalaya students



The entire EKAL staff along with us for the day of our departure from the GRC

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