

Review of Amba Foundation for Noon.ch

Sabine Ackermann and Dominic Rau, January 2007

Our two visits

We visited Amba foundation twice, on the 12th of December 2006 and on the 3rd of January 2007. December 12th was during terms and classes for boys were going on when we arrived. 5 classes with each roughly 15-20 boys were taught Hindi, English and math by female teachers. The medical doctor was present in the health centre and available for a short discussion. January 3rd was before terms began again in 2007. No children were present, but the teachers were preparing the programs for the upcoming classes. Conversations with the teachers and the senior staff of the foundation allowed further insight into the organisation, its vision and motivation, and the social environment from which the children originate.

Amba Foundation

Amba foundation is a secular organisation, aiming to provide education and basic medical care to those in need in the slums of Mandawali near the Patparganj suburb of Delhi. At Amba foundation, emphasis is given to religious tolerance between hindus, muslims, and christians, while the organisation has a purely secular orientation. It is run by a group of well-educated local middle-class women, headed by Jyoti Sarwal. After their family duties, they decided to volunteer for the poor, instead of re-entering their former jobs.

Amba foundation targets its services at the poorest from the nearby slum. It is open to everyone and charges only Rs 20 (50 US cents) per month and student. This charge is needed to emphasise the value of the education and to guarantee some discipline. At the school, children are asked to follow strict rules and to do their work sitting on simple mats on the floor. This guarantees that parent's pride would not allow to send their children to Amba, unless they can't afford a private school with decent furniture.

The teachers at Amba are from the local community area themselves. A group of young ladies which have been Amba-students themselves, are teaching hindi, math and english as a part-time job. Being from the same environment as the pupils, they assure a better understanding of the psychology and socio-cultural context of the children. It furthermore allows them to earn a simple living and scholarships for higher education. These teachers serve as role models especially to girl students at the center.

Education Programme

The school at Amba is focussing on complementary education to the state-run public primary schools. For some of the children, mainly the ones, that arrived only recently from the country-side, the state-run school is not available. Being too old for the public primary school, the classes at Amba are the only accessible education to them. Amba school is giving the children a well-structured environment and the peace they wouldn't have at home in the slum. Homework-sessions foster their discipline. In these sessions, the teachers support their learning. In addition, classes are held in hindi, math and english. The children were participating actively in the classes. We could not judge on the quality

of the hindi and math classes, due to our lack of understanding hindi. However, the pupils were obviously understanding some english and could interact with us to some degree. The brighter ones fairly well. Some were also too shy to talk to us.

The computer education, on the other hand, does not allow for the same good comments. The age of computers and the background of both, the teachers and the pupils are too remote to allow for a state-of-the-art computer education. On the other hand, computers are a very attractive item in nowadays India. Even as a distant aim they serve as a good reason for parents to send their children to school instead of work. It is important to have computer education in the programme of Amba school. However, if there is a choice between most recent models or cash, additional funding might be of more use to the school.

Short spans of attention and psychological problems are observed often with the children. The disciplined environment and the regularity of classes helps to structure the children. Child labour often is a reason for parents to take their children temporarily out of school. As they grow up girl marriage before the legal age of 18 years becomes a further reason, why to take girls out of the school. The risk of rape in the slums motivates parents to wed their girls at the age of fourteen or earlier, before something can occur to them with the parents being responsible for the girl. For boys, entering a job is often the reason for not continuing school. It is difficult to persuade them to continue their education instead of helping their parents selling vegetables, bananas or even going to beg.

The need of the family for the additional salary is one of the key reasons, why less boys enter higher education. Boys prefer to learn a simple job instead of studying hard, as some of the girls do. The lack of job perspective and inherent destiny of becoming mother and stay home, on the other hand, is motivating girls to take studies serious. Some girls were showing promising performance and obtain scholarships for high school in exchange for teaching part-time. Three young ladies even managed to enter Delhi university's distant-learning courses. Amba is supporting them by giving them the opportunity to teach classes part-time and earn a living and the tuition fees at the school.

In order to motivate more children, namely the boys and married girls, to enter higher education, Amba needs some success stories. Positive case studies must make parents conscious, that sending their children to high school opens their children and their families new opportunities. Primary school education at Amba shows a well established success. A consistent programme for higher education could include a plan for scholarships for high school and university tuition. Payback-schemes via services to Amba projects or financial support to Amba after completion of the education and having entered a job would institutionalise the efforts. The present-day lady-teachers at Amba can serve as a successful role-model for such a scheme.

However, discussions with these teachers, even with the ones doing university studies, revealed the severity of socio-cultural problems to overcome. Despite of their good spoken and written knowledge of english, despite their success at high-school and university, despite their honourable position as teacher, all the ladies that we interviewed were very shy. They were lacking well-deserved self-consciousness. Instead of being proud of their achievements, they seemed to have a conversation with us mainly for politeness and to escape shily as soon as the circumstances allowed. Maybe making more extensive use of an interpreter while talking to them could have alleviated this impression. However, class- or cast-consciousness is deeply carved into the poor people and hinders them harvesting the fruits of their hard work. It will be a huge challenge for Amba to overcome this heritage of Indian society. Raising the awareness and supporting the individuals, Amba does a great job in improving the situation.

Health Centre

The health centre of Amba Foundation is providing basic primary care. Besides that, it is participating in government-run vaccination programmes. Amba foundation further more organises health camps, in which people from the slums also obtain basic education in health-related subjects (hygiene, women's health, sexually transmitted diseases, ...).

For the primary care, Amba employs a retired doctor part-time. While the doctor's professional know-how probably is sufficient for his front-line job, we were not impressed by his professional dedication. It seems to be very difficult for Amba to find a dedicated replacement for the doctor within the given financial limits. Other than for the school, the situation at the health centre is not fully satisfactory. Possibly some extra funding could help finding more appropriate staff.

Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to review one of the health camps or a vaccination programme. The health camps, according to Amba, are called "Stree Shakti", which when translated means "power to the women". This programme is about empowering poor women by providing comprehensive Health care to them right at their doorstep. The health camps were rewarded with the "Bhagidari Award" from the Chief Minister of Delhi, for the appreciable contribution to the empowerment of women.

Amba is supporting the organisation of the government-run vaccination programmes by collecting the children and providing a location in the health center. Government-employed professional nurses are coming over one day in a month for the actual vaccinations.

Summary

We consider it as a very fruitful investment to cooperate with Amba foundation. Amba foundation impressed us as one of the most promising development projects we ever came in contact with. We are very happy to know that a group of determined women is working for a better future at Amba foundation. We strongly suggest to continue the financial support and to foster the collaboration as much as time and distance allow.

Improvements could be achieved in the health centre via employment of a more dedicated medical doctor. The information given by the doctor was scarce and more about his own abilities than about perspectives and needs of the health centre. However, we haven't had the occasion to review one of the health camps, which might have changed our opinion.

Consistent development-tracks for higher education, including high-school and apprenticeship with motivating role-models, would complement the very good programme of the primary school. The reach of the school into the group of young men could be improved. Alternatives, incentives and their financial consequences should be assessed.

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