

Chairman's Annual Report for the year 2003/04

I am glad to welcome you all for this first meet of our Board for the year 2004/05. Our program Sikshana continues to make good progress on all fronts, thanks to the overwhelming support that we have been receiving from all quarters. I would like to use this opportunity to share with you the salient features of our achievements during the past year and seek your advice and guidance for future.

Reach of Sikshana:

Sikshana presently covers 29 schools with about 9000 children, in the State of Karnataka. Of these, 14 are in or around Bangalore City, with 12 in the South school zone and 2 in the North. For the first time, we have reached out of the City with a cluster of 15 schools in a rural environment spread around Kanakapura Town, which is about 50 kms from the City.

Seven of the schools in the City have been under Sikshana from start in 02/03, while the remaining seven were added during 03/04 and hence under different stages of induction into our program. For purposes of identification below, we will refer to these schools as under Phases IA and IB. The schools under the Kanakapura project are referred to as under Phase II.

We are in the process of dissociating ourselves from two of the Phase IA schools at Kariasandra and Aduodi; the former on account of withdrawal by the joint adopter and the latter on account of local socio-political compulsions. The lessons which we have learnt from both these instances will be extremely useful to us in our future plans; we hope to be able to come out with a study on this for our future guidance. With this step, the coverage under Sikshana will stand reduced to 27 schools and 8000 kids.

Presentation to the Honorable President of India:

I am proud to inform you that we had the honor of being invited by the President of India to make a presentation on Sikshana at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, on 4th Feb 04. The material used at this time has already been circulated and also put on the net for the information of all concerned. Besides briefing him on our program, we sought his intervention specifically on the following issues:

- Establishing norms for min sq ft of space per child
- Registering public land in the name of the schools
- Using technology for quality education
- Promoting new models for 'holding hands' in public schools

The Honorable President of India was extremely appreciative of our efforts and sent his personal greetings to all the kids under Sikshana, which was widely circulated. He also made the following suggestions for our consideration:

- Validation of the model in a rural environment
- Focus on the girl child in our program
- Use of available technological inputs from public sources

While we have initiated steps against the first point, we need to give our serious attention to the other two, in the coming days.

Progress in the Phase IA schools:

Since schools under Phase IA had gone through two years and more of Sikshana, we were prompted to take a close look at the progress achieved in them. In this context, we were trying to fix benchmarks for three skills: lingual, computational and cognitive. We recognize here that the primary education is basically about acquisition of life skills while higher education is centered more around content. To start with, the kids in the third to fifth grades were checked for lingual skills. When we stepped in, about 20-30% of the children in fifth grade were unable to read Kannada fluently except in text books. Their ability to express themselves on any subject was equally deficient. After having gone through our program, these schools can now demonstrate that 90% plus of kids in third grade are able to read text in story books, comics and newspaper fluently. Our library movement, in which the children were given the freedom to select and buy the books, seems to have come out successful and paying rich dividends. The provision we had made in the library hours for the kids to come back every week and narrate whatever they had read to the class has also proved to be a winner, in developing their power of expression .

We have been unable to evolve such clear bench marks for the other skills during this period and hence we have been adopting qualitative assessment for ascertaining the impact in these areas. In the meanwhile, we have been actively looking around for a scientific and validated model for assessment of learning levels, which is quantifiable and acceptable to all. After discussions with a number of organizations and DSERT (Department of State Educational Research and Training), it has been decided to go for the one developed by Azim Premji Foundation, which is available through their Learning Guarantee Program. We have requested them to include our schools in their program for the current year and we hope we will succeed in our effort. An alternative would be to get and use the material developed by them and use our own agency for implementation; we are looking into this as well.

Under this Phase, we have also been trying to get schools to set and work against their own targets for overall performance on an annual basis. We can justifiably be proud of the achievements by some of the schools in this regard. The school at Arehalli is an example of a success story. Against a normal 70% pass rate obtained earlier at the 7th grade open examinations, the school has been registering 100% every year since the introduction of Sikshana. The strength in 7th has gone up from 17 to 40 in two years, due to direct enrolment based on the performance and the pro-active steps taken by the school. An inspiring feature is the fact that more than 15 kids have come in at 6th and 7th grades from private schools on transfer, a migration which is happening for the first time. This reflects a significant change in the public perception of a Government school, as being the last refuge for kids seeking to pass through 7th grade. The school is now seeking to publicize their achievements in the community and attract more talent. Other schools in Phase I are likely to follow suit in the coming year.

One of the demands from the parents and the community is for improving the standard of English taught in the schools. This is in fact the single major factor for parents to seek a private school in preference to a public one. We have started on imparting English as an additional subject from Grade III onwards and the full impact of this will be felt by the end of the current year, when we expect every kid in Grade

IV to have gone through Books 1 and 2. This will ease the pressure on the kids in 5th Grade and enable them to concentrate on other subjects of importance.

This year saw the emphasis on our base line activities being retained and strengthened. This includes spot prizes for children in the class room, support to annual events and awards for excellence, educational tours and training on PC's and use of multimedia. For the last of the above, we are deeply thankful to Azim Premji Foundation who had provided us with a large number of CD's in Kannada usable in Grades VII and below.

One of the innovative steps we took under our program during the current year was the back-to-back adoption of four of our schools by a county school system in Neenah, Wisconsin, USA. As a first step towards cementing the ties between the schools, we had arranged for a live video meet between the kids of our school in Arehalli and the Spring Road School in Neenah. The event which was sponsored by Inatech in Bangalore and lasted for an hour was very enthusiastically received by the kids and used to understand each other. We plan to build on this further, once the schools re-open after the annual break in USA.

Another pioneering effort was the induction of two volunteers from abroad- Sunil and Anne- who spent ten months with two of the Sikshana schools, teaching kids basic English and other co-curricular material. This was received with great enthusiasm both by the kids and the staff. This was all the more remarkable for the fact that both of them did not have working knowledge of any South Indian language and had to communicate with children who had a only rudimentary of English. That this could be done successfully proves that language should not be a barrier while dealing with children and shows the path to us for the future. We thank both of them for their stint with us and also for the support they are trying to get for our program back in USA through their own networking.

The number of teachers we are deploying in the schools has remained constant at 11, thanks to the active policy of recruitment and induction by the Dept of Education. This has eased the pressure on us substantially. With the introduction of mid-day meals by the Government in all schools from June 03, another major need for our intervention has been eliminated. Except for buildings, lack of which continues to cause concern, we are now in a position to concentrate on the learning levels of the children in the class room.

An area of concern which will increasingly affect our effectiveness is the growing gap between supply and demand for volunteers in the field. While the number of week day volunteers has gone up marginally, it is still woefully short of our actual needs. We need to give this aspect our serious attention in the coming months, as our program is totally centered around this resource.

Schools under Phase I B:

Two each of the schools in this segment have been jointly adopted during the year with Asha for Education, Aztec Software and Friends of CRY respectively, while one is directly under our Trust. With increasing empowerment of Phase IA schools and the consequent decrease in our work load, we hope to be in a position to devote more attention to these schools in the coming year, and ensure that the concepts of Sikshana are effectively instilled into them. At present, our partners are providing all

the local help that is needed, especially in the form of active volunteers, and also financial resources to a limited extent; we need to bridge the gap in the resources and provide the necessary leadership and guidance for achieving our common goal.

Sikshana Phase II

With the completion of the first phase, a second one is now envisaged where the following are sought to be achieved:

- ✓ Consolidation of results obtained under Phase I
- ✓ Progressive empowerment of schools for setting physical targets and financial planning/ expenditure
- ✓ The existing school committees to move towards becoming 'competent' autonomous school boards
- ✓ Enlargement of the program over a wider area to establish statistical validity of the results

It is against the last of the above objectives, that the present project for setting up of a second node at Kanakapura has been taken up.

Kanakapura Project:

This project is an effort with focus on decentralization, empowerment and "management at arms' length". The schools selected under this project are spread over a distance of 30 kms from the town and a few of them are in really remote locations. The program is locally supported by volunteers from the Rotary Clubs of Banashankari and Kanakapura. The project which is unique in many respect, is being funded by Abbey National, a leading banking institution from UK. The total estimated cost of the project during the first year is Rs 465,000, roughly equivalent to UKP 5700. It will provisionally run from June 04 to Mar 05.

We have made an impressive start with re-orientation programs for the staff and the volunteers. The schools are expected to come up with their plans and budget within the next few days. Tentative disbursement of funds for meeting the requirement of the first month has already been made. Future course of Sikshana will depend to a large extent on the success of this experiment.

Financial results for 03/04:

I am happy to inform you that we have come out with the audited results of the last financial year on schedule by the end of May 04. The detailed statements are given under Enclosure. Our income this year has been Rs 4.96 lakhs against which our expenditure has been Rs 3.21 lakhs, showing a healthy year end balance of Rs 1.75 lakhs. With zero overheads and a very cost effective approach, we can justifiably take credit for opening up new vistas for NGO involvement in primary education.

It is worth mentioning here that I was able to utilize my foreign trip abroad on personal account to network effectively on behalf of our program. Apart from creating awareness on major issues through invited talks, this also netted us contributions to an extent of \$4500, which forms almost 40% of our receipts this year. We approached the Government of India for the first time for a clearance under FCRA and had received it successfully. Once the pattern of support stabilizes, we intend to approach the Government for a permanent clearance under FCRA. Besides

this, our indigenous support base continues to be as strong as ever providing solidity to our operations. However our concept that such support should essentially be local in origin from within the community has still not taken off, which causes some concern.

Plans for 04/05:

We intend to concentrate during the current year on the following:

- Decentralize and empower Phase IA schools
- Bring Phase IB schools up to the level of IA
- Implement under strict scrutiny the new project in Kanakapura
- Carry out course corrections based on the findings under this project
- Develop a model for remote locations and evolve the framework for future operations

We also plan to expand our resource base with your help and active networking, so as to make our operations less vulnerable to fluctuations in inflows.

One of the emerging features this year has been the number of requests we have been receiving from volunteers abroad to work in our program. These participants will be coming here at their own cost but may need local support in the form of reimbursement of living expenses partly or in full. The first of such volunteers is likely to take up work in the next few weeks. I need your advice and guidance to make this experiment a success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to place on record my deep appreciation for your support at all times, without which we would not have been able to achieve any of the above. I hope that with your sustained efforts and guidance, we will be able to take more impressive strides towards fulfilling our goals during the coming year. Our thanks are also, in no small measure, due to the large number of donors, supporters and well wishers who have all been responsible for pushing us continuously towards our goals and pursuing excellence.

It is now my privilege to place before you this Annual Report of 2003/04 for your consideration and approval.

E S Ramamurthy
Chairman
For Sivasri Charitable Trust

27 June 2004