



Isha Vidhya

Educating Rural India

Newsletter Issue 5



Dear Readers,

What a surprise to find the last month of the school year has closed in for the 1st - 4th grade students, while the Kindergarten students have already bid farewell for the year, starting their summer holidays from 15th March. As the students relax into their year-end holidays, the central team is at its busiest preparing for the upcoming year, including opening two new schools, expanding the existing schools' infrastructure, hiring new teachers, organizing the teacher training workshops, and purchasing new learning materials.

Looking back, it is amazing to see the growth both in the schools and students! In this 5th edition of the newsletter, we take an in depth look at the first Isha Vidhya school, opened three years ago in Sandegounden Palayam. We also hear from a volunteer preparing the way for the two new schools to open, and we share the success of a recent fundraising event. **We hope you enjoy the read and welcome your feedback and comments at publications@ishavidhya.org.**

Isha Vidhya Editorial Team

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Sandengounden Palayam – The School in Focus



A LOOK AT THE SURROUNDINGS

I love my school! So many foreigners visit us from the Ashram and I like them. The teachers teach a lot about nature, plants and the earth. We went on a field trip to Coimbatore Airport. Now I know what it is to be inside the plane.

-Soundarya 4th Standard, Isha Vidhya SGP

The Isha Vidhya Sandegounden Palayam (SGP) School has come a long way since its humble beginning three years ago. Situated between Coimbatore and the Isha Yoga Center, the school lies at the foothills of the scenic Velliangiri Mountains and is surrounded

by the vibrant green of rice paddy and sugar cane. With nearly double the number of students and staff from three years ago, the school has become a respected presence in the community and is recognized for providing quality education to low-income families.

Coimbatore's renowned textile industry led to the opening of numerous spinning mills in the outlying villages; as a result, a majority of the local employment opportunities are for daily wages (Rs. 80-120 / \$1.20 - 2.20) either in the spinning mills or the fields. Unfortunately, these jobs provide inconsistent income, and many remain unemployed. Moreover, the demand for workers varies seasonally – when there is no rainfall, for example, weeks or months might pass without the need for laborers.

A few private, English-medium matriculation schools are accessible to the middle and upper class residents around Sandegounden Palayam. These schools prepare students to pass their critical 10th and 12th standard exams. But the more financially accessible, Tamil medium schools are not up to the mark, and their lack of English instruction hinders their graduates' abilities to pursue higher education, find gainful employment, and look forward to a brighter future.

Isha Vidhya stepped in to fill the gap – providing high-quality, English-based education to low-income families. Though many of these families have one or two wage earners, their low and irregular earnings make it difficult to manage even minimal school fees.

A LOOK AT THE SURROUNDINGS (CONTINUED)...

The Isha Vidhya SGP School supports 45% of its students on scholarships, covering tuition, books, notebooks and nutritional health supplements. Included amongst the scholarship students are 23 tribal village children. In many ways, the tribal children are apart from other rural Indians—distinct in their culture, dialect, and hygiene practices. These differences present considerable challenges to their integration into standard education systems, and the tribal children's smooth transition into Isha Vidhya SGP is a testimony to the dedication and care of the teachers and principal.

Isha Vidhya welcomes students from all religions and castes. Innocent in their childhood, the students take no heed to their differences in caste. Likewise, the teachers and staff treat all the children equally. The parents, however, have their own ideas, and the SGP teachers have learned that educating the parents can sometimes be one of the greatest challenges of teaching in a school!

The Isha Vidhya SGP School is experiencing a steady increase in admission requests as more parents become aware of the unique opportunity the school offers. Construction for two new classrooms and interviews to expand the teacher base are underway. As this academic year comes to a close, the students, teachers and community are looking forward to another amazing year to come!

Thank you for helping make this happen through your donations and volunteer support!



In Isha Vidhya, learning happens everywhere with everyone. The volunteering nature, the sincerity, the awareness, the dedication, the hard work and commitment comes out spontaneously. This school is my home. These students are my children. I have dedicated my life for the cause of Isha Vidhya education.

-Mrs. Pushpavalli, Isha Vidhya SGP Principal

Teaching and helping these students has brought me so much peace, happiness and satisfaction. I am very happy to be a part of Sadhguru's silent revolution to help the rural children of Tamil Nadu.

-Mrs. Savithri, Isha Vidhya SGP Teacher

The teachers are very good and they take care of us. We learn computers, gymnastics and yoga at Isha Vidhya, which I did not learn in my previous school. I like the morning assembly where we say "Thirukural" every day. I enjoy studying here.

-Nithin, 4th standard

STUDENT HEALTH AND ALL-ROUND DEVELOPMENT



School is not just about learning the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic – or even about passing an examination; but rather, education means nurturing the wellbeing of children on all levels – academically, physically and mentally. Isha Vidhya takes steps to ensure students’ all around healthy development:

- Students receive nutrient-rich snacks made from peanuts, lentils, sesame, dry fruits, and pulses on a regular basis. After just a year of attending Isha Vidhya, students’ physical and mental development levels, which had been below standard, were visibly improved.

- Annual medical camps provide opportunities to check students’ vision, hearing, nutrition and other health levels.
- Physical education classes prepare students to compete in inter-school and district level competitions and teach them how to keep their bodies fit and healthy.



- This year, the SGP 4th standard students enjoyed their first Hata Yoga program, which will help them to maintain peak physical health.



- Students plant and care for their own gardens in nature period. Over the years, they’ll watch as their plants flourish and grow, providing them and future generations with shade, fruits, vegetables and flowers.
- Students explore their creative art talents during art classes and craft class.
- Students display their prowess in writing and elocution contests.
- Yearly exhibitions for science and art allow parents and local Isha volunteers to enjoy and acknowledge students’ achievements.

LOOKING BEYOND EDUCATION

Preparing students to integrate into the world beyond the classroom means exposing them to a wide range of experiences, knowledge and habits foreign to their small, rural communities.

- **Health and hygiene:** When the students come to Isha Vidhya, their first lesson is in how to use the toilets, wash their hands, and maintain other basic hygiene practices. Familiarizing themselves with these habits, some of the students have successfully pushed their parents to install toilets in their own homes.
- **National news:** Each morning begins with school assembly, during which students take turns presenting a news item from the local newspaper. The habit of reading the news and being aware of what is happening beyond their immediate surroundings is not innate in many of the rural families, building this habit at school will serve the students well in their years to come.
- **The world beyond:** From watching the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics to seeing wolves hunt their prey on the BBC's Lonely Planet Series, students sit with wide eyes as they are taken on journeys beyond their classroom and India through the programs they enjoy in their DVD period.

Though they come from small villages, the Isha Vidhya students do not have small hopes for their future, and when they graduate, they will be equipped with the knowledge and experience to make their dreams come true.



At Isha Vidhya, we study, write, read, play, draw, watch DVDs and learn to use the computers. I like the uniform, my friends and the PT (physical training) class. I have learnt new games, gymnastics, writing, and rhymes. I now take bath everyday, and I like it.

- Tribal village student, Isha Vidhya SGP, class 1



With great joy, we look forward to the opening of two new Isha Vidhya schools in Villupuram and Cuddalore. Both these areas are severely economically and educationally deprived, and the Isha Vidhya schools stand to make a profound impact in the communities. Following, is a sharing from one of the Isha Vidhya team members who has spent the last few months travelling the villages of Villupuram and Cuddalore, spreading the word about admissions, interviewing teacher candidates, and working with local volunteers to make every preparation necessary to get the schools up and running by June.

The last couple months spent travelling the villages around Cuddalore and Villupuram, campaigning for the opening of the two new Isha Vidhya schools, have brought me highs of joy and tears of sadness. Many of the people in these areas are poor, illiterate, and visibly malnourished. Most parents earn too little to manage even their basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter – with quality education and health care unimaginable luxuries. Time and again, I met parents who had made up their mind not to send their children to school

could not afford it. After explaining that they can afford the education because of the scholarship program, and then telling them what their children stand to gain: Learning to use computers right from LKG, attaining fluency in reading, speaking and writing English, receiving nutritional health snacks, access to library books, training in sports, etc., the parents are often left without words. Often, they become emotional to the point of tears. Many of them raise their hands together in a show of gratitude and happiness. Some parents ask us if there is a catch, like “Free education in the beginning and exponentially increasing fees with time.” But there is no hidden agenda, no catch.

My years of experience in education have convinced me that every child, rural or urban, whether born of literate or illiterate parents, has a huge potential to learn and achieve, if just given the right educational environment, exposure and guidance. The greatest tragedy for me has been meeting the handful of parents who categorically tell me they will not educate their daughters – even if we pay them to send their daughters to school, they will not do it. Such closed-minded discrimination, and the loss of so much potential for these children, it is truly heart wrenching.

What I have learned through my experiences in Villupuram and Cuddalore is that educating rural children is not just about bringing in the necessary funding, selecting and training the teachers, constructing beautiful schools, or meticulously developing the curriculum. All this we are doing at Isha Vidhya, but beyond that, educating rural India means changing the attitudes of millions of people, who as a result of poverty and deprivation, have closed their minds and their children’s futures to the amazing possibilities life has to offer. This transformation will take time and the systematic effort of thousands of volunteers. But I am confident that Isha Vidhya, through the grace of Sadhguru, can make this happen, and probably stands alone in the world in its ability to enact this on such a large scale. This transformation is only possible through the continued support of our many sponsors and volunteers. Let’s come together and make this happen!

- Ganesh, Academic Coordinator- Rural Education, Isha Vidhya

After completing his Masters in Engineering, Ganesh spent a number of years doing scientific research in the USA before returning to India and entering the field of education. Starting out as a middle-school teacher, he moved into curriculum development for international schools, then to educational consultancy before he joined Isha Vidhya as a full time volunteer in December 2008.

21 km of Sadhana for Isha Vidhya – Isha Volunteers Participate in the Mumbai Marathon

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” – Lao-Tsu

All geared up in their Isha Vidhya T-shirts (sponsored by Airtel) and headbands (sponsored by Religare-Technova), a diverse group of men and women came together January 17th, 2009 to support Isha Vidhya through the Mumbai Marathon. Ranging in age from 21 to over 65, most came without previous running experience, but all shared in their determination to use their legs, bodies and minds to help Isha Vidhya. Amidst over 40,000 people, more than 100 Isha volunteers ran, some jogged, and the gutsy first time lot walked the 21km, following the motto *“It’s the taking part that counts!”*

That day, something extraordinary happened: Through a grueling test of courage, intensity and trust, people who never imagined they could complete a marathon put their physical and mental limits to the test – with amazing results. No matter whether they were tired, losing their breath or finding their legs barely able to move, no one gave up. A new level of intensity and focus was reached by the people who ran and walked, as well as by the scores of volunteers standing on the sides to cheer and those helping quietly behind the scenes to make this event happen.

Through these 21 Km of *sadhana** and with the support of many generous sponsors, the participants raised over 34 lacs (\$68,000) to help create a new Isha Vidhya school. Many may never see the Isha Vidhya School they have helped build, nor meet the rural child who can now create a new future for himself or herself.

At the end of the run, their knees hurt, their feet were tired, their backs ached, but there was a sweet joy in all that pain. It was the joy of breaking one’s own limitations and reaching out to others.



LEGS CAN MAKE THE CHANGE



For me, the run meant a lot. I feel I gave back something in some way to the world. It was a superb confidence booster. It also taught me that there are no limitations to what you can do. And last but not the least, it made me happy! – Soumya Jairaj

I drew sustenance from my fellow Isha Vidhya runners, most of whose names I did not know, each of whom helped pace me. They were the crutch I held on to as I ran, walked and limped. The bond was evident, even if we did not exchange so much as word or even a nod.

- S Swaminathan

CAREER / VOLUNTEER / DONATION OPPORTUNITIES



◆ CAREERS ◆

The success of the schools depends on the dedicated hard work of the principals and teachers. Isha Vidhya is seeking enthusiastic teacher candidates and experienced principal candidates to join its dynamic team. English ability and an open mind are more important than experience for new teachers as training is provided once hired. With the schools located in rural areas, finding the right teacher and principal candidates can be a challenge. If you or anyone you know fits the above description, please contact us at careers@ishavidhya.org

◆ VOLUNTEERS ◆

Short term and long term placements are open for volunteers in the schools or as a part of the Isha Vidhya project team. Assignments cover a wide range, including reading stories to children, joining the construction team, helping develop curriculum, being part of the scholarship coordination, and many more opportunities. A minimum two month commitment is encouraged - the more time you commit, the more of an impact you will make! To find out more, please contact us at volunteer@ishavidhya.org.

◆ DONATIONS ◆

The generosity of donors from around India and the world is making Isha Vidhya happen. Your support will touch many lives, whether it is sponsoring an entire school infrastructure or donating a single library book. At this time, donations for scholarships and scholarship renewals are being accepted. Donations can be made online at www.ishavidhya.org/donate or by downloading the PDF form and mailing in a check. For more information, please contact us at info@ishavidhya.org.

Small drops make an ocean.