The Global Classroom
At
The Adivasi Ashram Shala
in
Chikhale Village,
Maharashtra, India

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Adivasi Ashram Shala in Chikhale is organized by the Institute of Cultural Affairs India. Emerging Ecology, a North Carolina based non-profit organization committed to promoting a worldview for the next generations’ solutions, provides technical and financial support.
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Long ago, before days were numbered and years recorded on calendars, before the Aryan peoples settled along the Indus and Ganges Rivers and then spread their culture across the Indian subcontinent in ways that would eventually become the nation of India, a civilization flourished among the verdant forests and flowing rivers that would draw other peoples from distant lands. As the civilizing process developed, these people would be called the Adivasi people, the tribal people of India. With the growth of large cities and society’s turn toward large-scale industrial production, these people were increasingly cut-off from many of the benefits afforded to the people living in the expanding urban centers.

Amid the social ferment that followed the second great war that engulfed the Planet, on a university campus in Austin, Texas a group of compassionate professors and their inquisitive students banded together to seek creative responses to the deep human issues that confronted people in the 20th Century. By 1975, this energetic nucleus of care had moved to Chicago, expanded it numbers and had become known worldwide as the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). They sought to demonstrate a commitment to grassroots community participation with a focus on “the human factor in world development”.

These two dynamic forces of human ingenuity came together to foster the initiation and development of the Adivasi Ashram Shala at Chikhale Village in India. What began with a single class of 15 first graders in 1989 grew into a residential school for over 600 students grades 1 through 12 by the time classes started in June 2014. On January 24, 2015, the school celebrated its 25th anniversary at a gathering of students, faculty, staff, alumni, dignitaries and international guests. This paper tells some of the story of the school’s growth, success and uniqueness culminating with the initiation of the global classroom.

During the closing quarter of the 20th Century, Mumbai (previously called Bombay) had become the established economic and financial center of India. Numerous efforts were underway to expand the industrial sector and to provide for a smooth transition from a primarily agrarian society to one that could both utilize the technological advances of other countries and capitalize on the engineering and technical creativity available in the rising middle class of India in ways that would benefit the entire nation.
The rapidly expanding middle class required goods and services like those available to their counterparts in other technologically developed countries. With the growth of urban areas that provided infrastructure for the factories and housing for their workers, the tribal people were pushed onto increasingly marginalized land. With limited educational opportunities and inadequate social skills for participating in a complex urban society, these people experience growing isolation and increasing poverty throughout all their small villages called wadis.

By the 1970’s, this gap between people able to benefit from the industrial development that encircled the globe and those groups ill equipped to participate in, or strategically excluded from, these changes were becoming apparent in many nations. From their homes and offices in the black ghetto on the west side of Chicago, the staff of the Institute of Cultural Affairs had first-hand experiences of the human suffering caused by this widening social divide. While some organizations sought to resolve this dilemma by concentrating their efforts on high-level government and corporate policies or fermenting social unrest, the ICA took a positive, grassroots approach. The staff became convinced that by empowering and training local community residents and developing local leadership capacity the villages and neighborhoods could take responsibility for their own destinies and find creative ways to participate in global society.

On the west side of Chicago, the ICA began the Fifth City Human Development Project as a laboratory to test practical methods for grassroots development and to demonstrate a replicable process for every community to forge their own future. By 1975, this project had been expanded internationally to Australia and India with the launching of the Mowanjum and Maliwada Human Development Projects. These two additional demonstrations expanded the set of practical methods available for conducting this kind of grassroots development and showed that the experiences of Fifth City were not unique to residents of the United States.

Twelve other similar projects were conducted in North America. In India, a major effort to replicate the Maliwada Project was undertaken across the State of Maharashtra. The ICA’s overall plan for grassroots development involved holding a planning consultation with the community to build an inclusive master plan for enhancing their economic, social and cultural well-being. The ICA then provided a resident team to work with the community toward the implementation of their vision. In 1979, the village leaders of Chikhale in cooperation with the Government of Maharashtra and business leaders from the nearby town of Panvel invited the ICA to initiate the Chikhale Village Human Development Project. Over the next decade, numerous programs were conducted to train the village leaders in decision-making skills, to improve the infrastructure and to enhance the overall quality of life in the village.

Over this 10-year period, the villagers and the national and international staff developed effective ways of working together. The village served as a host village for a delegation from the ICA’s International Exposition of Rural Development in 1984. Service groups and business leaders became acquainted with the development programs and added their support when needed.
During this time, the ICA began construction of a training center on some land near the village pond. By 1989, enough of the building was functional that the ICA could begin using it for on-going programs. A government run school in Chikhale Village served the children of the community. However, the village leaders and ICA staff were aware that in the hilly area beyond the village, the tribal children did not have similar access to much needed educational opportunities. Thus, the decision was made to convert the Human Resource Development Center into use as a residential and classroom facility exclusively for tribal children.

As shown on the map at the right, Chikhale lies east of Mumbai and Panvel. The village sits about 2 km. off the old highway connecting Mumbai and Pune. The new expressway to Pune and points south passes quite close to the village but the limited access highway does not have an exit nearby. The rapid urbanization of the area around Navi Mumbai has dramatically changed the demographics of the region. Commuter railroad service to the area began in 2014, a port facility for container ships has been opened and work for a new international airport is underway.

After the first classes began, work on the school building itself continued. It now has two major wings and an assembly hall connected by a three-story central structure. The building provides classroom space for all of the students as well as cooking and dining facilities. Most of the students stay in dormitory-style rooms located on the upper floors. The courtyard in front of the school serves as the sports ground and play area. The pond (center of picture) is used by both the school and the village for washing their cloths. The original portion of Chikhale Village is shown in the lower right-hand portion of the photo from Google Earth.
Chikhale Village is located at the end of a 2 km. narrow road. Until 2010, all the water used in the village homes was carried in jugs on women's heads. For many years, most of the residents of the village were involved only in agriculture. They tended the fields around the village. More recently, people have begun to work in surrounding industries and travel in and out of the village by motorcycle or auto rickshaw. Most village streets are too narrow for four-wheeled vehicles.

Due to anticipated urbanization resulting from the expansion of Navi Mumbai (New Mumbai) and the impending construction of the new international airport within 25 km of Chikhale, new housing colonies are being constructed near the school. These recent additions to the village are changing the overall look of Chikhale at a rapid rate. Nonetheless, the location of the Adivasi Ashram Shala in Chikhale Village provides a relatively easy transition for the tribal children as they begin their journey from the tribal areas into the urban existence of modern India.

The tribal students at the Adivasi Ashram Shala come from over 100 small settlements (wadis) located on the edges of the Western Ghats which run parallel to the coast about 50 km inland. Many of the communities are accessible only on foot. Most contain only 20 – 30 dwellings. As a result, nearby educational opportunities are limited because there is an insufficient student population to warrant high-quality teachers. Thus, the students who come to the school in Chikhale have a unique educational opportunity for people of their background.
In 2010, the Adivasi Ashram Shala in Chikhale received government authorization to expand its curriculum offerings to include 11th and 12th standards. The school elected to begin two tracks for the students – science and arts. Very few schools for tribal students include a science track but the leadership felt confident that students could succeed in this arena. Five boys began in the first class, three years later 30 students were enrolled. For the first three years, all the students in the curriculum passed their 12th standard end of year exams. In 2017, 96.5% of the science faculty students and 88% of the arts faculty students passed their year-end (HSC) exams. Two students from the original 12th standard graduates completed a 4-year engineering degree and others are pursuing similar objectives.

The two higher secondary classes provided new opportunities for the school. Since the science track is be taught in English, more students in the school have the option of communicating with international students who are conversant in English but not Marathi, the primary language of the school. In conjunction with Emerging Ecology, an associate member of ICA International in the United States, a Global Classroom was envisioned in which Chikhale students could communicate, via Skype, with high school students in North Carolina. Launching the Global Classroom involved setting up a computer lab at the school, getting an Internet connection, training the students and staff and finding partner schools in the United States.

ICA staff first took computer technology to Chikhale Village in 1983 when they brought a Tandy Model 100 with 32k of RAM. A special metal box was built in Panvel to allow the equipment to be carried to various village projects. Twenty years later, when computer technology had spread through much of the Indian business community, companies were willing to give outdated equipment to the school. By 2011, a dedicated room for computers was available at the school and useable machines were available to the students and faculty.
While the students and faculty had seen computers, and had studied about digital technology in their classes, none had direct word processing experience. That changed dramatically in preparation for the first Skype call. Each of the eleven Chikhale students that participated in the first call, typed their own handwritten essays into Word documents.

Internet connectivity near the school proved to be problematic due to public infrastructure constraints. In November 2011, a third-floor apartment in the nearby housing complex offered the only place that a strong and consistent wireless Internet signal could be maintained. Using an international consultant’s laptop computer and a wireless modem, the Chikhale students and the AP environmental studies class at Forsyth Country Day School held their first international Skype conversation. In preparation for the conversation, the students wrote and exchanged one-page essays. During the conversation, they asked each other questions about the various essays.

During the remainder of the first year as well as the following school year, the proposed Skype conversations were plagued by scheduling constraints, inconsistent power supply in Chikhale and an unstable internet connection. By the third year, the supporters of the Chikhale School decided to work around the connectivity issues. The students were brought into a factory in Panvel Industrial Estates where consistent power and a high-speed internet connection were predictable. With a growing number of students in the science curriculum and increased confidence in the internet connection, an additional high school was added to the conversation schedule. The agriculture class of Ayden-Grifton High School joined the third round of international dialogues.

By the beginning of the Adivasi Ashram Shala’s 25th year, the 2014-15 school year, several practical enhancements greatly improved the viability of holding international Skype calls. Because a national bank opened a branch office in Chikhale Village and needed high-speed internet service for conducting its ongoing business, an internet cable was run into the village. The school patched into this wire and to connect to the Internet over this cable. Certain electrical wiring changes were made at the school to allow the wireless router and some computers to be connected to the inverter (uninterruptable power supply). These changes reduced the problem of having the power go out during an international call.

When the teacher of the AP environmental studies class at Northeastern Guilford County High School heard of the Global Classroom, she asked to be a part of it for the 2014-15 school year. Thus, by the fourth year of the Global Classroom Project, three high schools in North Carolina and 30 students from
the science curriculum of the Adivasi Ashram School in Chikhale Village prepared to have three Skype conversations during the school year.

Left: Chikhale computer lab (2015)

Left: Northeastern Guilford High School (2015)
Below: Ayden-Grifton High School (2014)

Photos by F. Nelson Stover