

A Week with the School – Agra, Madhya Pradesh

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I was back at Agra (Madhya Pradesh) after a long gap, back to what I loved – applying myself at our school. Agra is the location of Samrakshan's first field office and I had spent close to two years here – learning about children, teachers and life.

During the past few months I have been focusing on "Conservation Education and Awareness" – reading and deliberating on the subject as also attending a couple of workshops and interacting with individuals known for their work on the issue. During my short stint at Agra I was to share my limited experience with colleagues at the school.

On the first day with teachers and Sunil (colleague and school coordinator) we discussed the Bal Mela (an event we organize annually at the school); their memories of the events organized in the recent years including the first held during January 2003 as also their plans and expectations from the forthcoming event. To gauge their involvement with conservation education and awareness, the activities learnt and undertaken by them as also their interactions with Anirban (colleague and wildlife biologist) we played a few games like "Who am I" and "Ball Catching" with them. I realized that our interaction sessions would have to be short, informal, in the open and include physical movement to infuse and retain energy – enthusiasm levels.

We started the second day by talking about colours. All of us looked out for different colours within the school campus – these were then segregated into those belonging to human created elements and natural elements. We then talked about the butterflies and leaves that we had noted from within the list of colours emoting from natural elements. Next was story writing – we narrowed down on 4 words that each of us had to use in writing a story. While the words and thus the story pertained to wildlife issues we discussed the importance of communication skills when each of us read her/his story. Then we got on to playing "Hawk and Pigeons" after christening it as "Sher aur Bakariya". Some of the teachers had been playing it with children, albeit differently, and they shared their experiences.

The third day started in a similar fashion but by talking about sounds. Then we discussed medicinal plants. Balram (colleague and doctor) helped in the act. The tone was set by teachers naming a plant each and discussing its usages with Balram. He then distributed chits (two to each teacher) containing names of plants that grew in the school campus and possessed medicinal qualities. Each teacher was to bring two leaves from the plants mentioned in the chits with her/ him. These were then to be put in a book towards making an album

for medicinal plants. Then we got on to following on "communications" on the earlier day by playing "Pressing the thumb". This got us all excited enough to repeat it twice!

We began the fourth day by playing "Passing the Stones" to discuss the opposable thumb leading to small talk on primates – our flagship species at Mizoram field base. I then discussed with the teachers the efforts of Samrakshan at Meghalaya and Mizoram field bases, with help of photographs. Though some of them were absent the rest more than made up with a series of questions! They asked me if the species depicted in the photographs were present in the forests around Agra and whether Samrakshan would replicate at Agra some of the activities it undertook at Meghalaya and Mizoram. We then discussed colouring commencing with what each of us understood by the term. Then we took sketches of select species occurring in the forest around Agra. Most of the teachers responded immediately with local names of these species as also spots where they had seen them but when it came to describing their colours they were in a quandary! We then got down to colouring the sketches.

On the fifth day we saw a film by Bharatiya Vidyapeeth Institute for Environment Education and Research (BVIEER) – "Bagh Samrakshan – Ek Anokha Prayas" Unlike other films that the teachers had seen till then this was in Hindi (so did not need any translation) as also talked about the process of environment education that had been undertaken by BVIEER. After the screening we discussed the activities depicted in the film and whether we could also replicate them with equal success at Agra.

The sixth and the final day began with each of us telling what we did outside of these interaction sessions during the last two days. Few teachers did interact on wildlife and conservation issues within themselves. We discussed story telling and what it meant for the children in the school. We selected a story and the teachers sat down to writing a shortened version of the story - one third of its length. When we got to orally sharing our versions we felt the need to redo it. The second attempt was an improvement for most of us and we ended our weeklong journey on an encouraging note.

This has been the most amazing week I have had in recent times.

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