

## Brick by brick, a lesson in building

A van playing movies drew children working in the brick kilns of Jhajjar to their mobile school, but education still has some way to go

### HARYANA

WHEN a mobile van first rolled into the interiors of Haryana's Jhajjar district in February this year, there was much commotion. Instead of passenger seats, there were plastic chairs inside and a screen showing animated movies for children.

Initially, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's concept of a mobile classroom for children working in brick kilns in the district seemed a little over-ambitious. The students in question here were children between six and 14 years from neighbouring states who had come to find work.

"We started off with conviction but we knew it was not going to be easy," says additional district education officer Sushil Batra. "The kids we were targeting came from states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan for work in the brick kilns. It was difficult to wean them away from the kilns and get them started with numbers and alphabets."

So, besides an instructor and driver, a helper was employed to be on the lookout for such children. Two routes were charted for the van, covering Bajidpur, Shekpur, Jhangipur, Pahasaur and Bad villages where the kilns were scattered.

Eventually, it was computers that got the children going. "We would show them films on topics that they had studied from textbooks. We also distributed pencils, notebooks and sometimes, food to ensure they stayed on," says assistant project coordinator (SSA) Satyavrat. In five months, the mobile classroom covered 300 children from the kilns. "I guess our perseverance paid off. Children started coming in regularly and we ran the van on all days," says Batra.

Then, as the kilns started closing down for the rainy season by mid-June, the classes started running empty. By the end of June, the mobile classroom wound up.

Officials say funds were never a problem though the issue of livelihood needs to be settled first. Batra is already gearing up for the next session: "May be, we can begin again in December when the brick kilns reopen."

PALLAVI SINGH



Puja and friends explore the globe

## At home in school

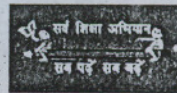
Children of migrant workers in north Kolkata are discovering a new world as they discover their new home

### WEST BENGAL

"Amra kothay aachchi (where are we)?" a teacher asks in singsong as Puja and her classmates

run their fingers on a shining globe, desperately looking for Kolkata above the blue of the Bay of Bengal. It's not a question their parents have asked since they left their homes to find work. For hundreds of children, living in the Muslim-dominated Rajabazar and adjoining localities, the world just got bigger, thanks to Sree Bidya Mandir, a north Kolkata school, running into its 40th year.

The school was taken up for development six months ago, under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, being implemented by CINI ASHA, the urban unit of Child In Need Institute, a city-based non-government organisation. In place of the dilapidated building is a revamped school.



- Free textbooks for all girls/SC/ST children at primary and upper primary level within an upper ceiling of Rs 150 per child
- School within one kilometre of every habitation
- 4 to 5 hours per day of meaningful stay of each child in school
- No single teacher school, At least two teachers in a Primary school and one teacher for every class in the upper primary
- At least 1:40 teacher-pupil ratio and at least 50 per cent women teachers

Brightly painted desks and chairs fill the classrooms, the walls lined with illustrations and charts. And a cache of brand new globes, maps, drawing books, puzzles and textbooks is now laying the groundwork for the future of 200-odd students.

"We focus on creating the right ambience first," says Bipasha Keshri, a programme associate. "Then, we work on the child tracking system to verify if students are attending classes regularly. All schools on our priority list were run in rented premises and required a facelift. It's difficult to attract children in such conditions but things are happening now."

Sree Bidya Mandir is among 100 schools roped in for the programme. "We are witnessing a fall in absentee-rate," says Sipra Das, the head-mistress. Back at the classroom, the children are eager to chat. "My brother didn't study much. My mother says I can become a nurse or a teacher only if I study. She doesn't want me to work, as many children in my locality do," says Puja, as she skips rope.

Leaps and bounds, they say.

MOHAMMED SAFI SHAMSI