

Site Visit: Bharathi Trust Resource Center
Apr 1 – 5, 2007

I left with Siddamma, her daughter Anitha and the driver, Ravi for the Resource Center on April 1. Anitha has just finished her 11th standard exams and was planning to stay at the Resource Center for a few days. Ravi, as ever, was very happy about going there. We talked a good deal while driving, despite the fact that Siddamma was not feeling too good that day. A major part of the discussion was about the SEZs (Special Economic Zones) that are springing up in different areas. She is part of a group that is working on making raising awareness about the consequences of SEZs. We soon passed a region that was being considered for an SEZ. The local people have been protesting but it is not clear they are being heard. We saw a large piece of land with a huge board that had the name of some company, so looks like land is slowly being taken over for the SEZ. We then saw a Coca Cola factory and then a Kingfisher factory, which Siddamma said has been polluting a nearby lake. I made a mental note to try not to fly Kingfisher if I could help it. We were getting hungry and opened our gobi manchurian snack and before we knew it, were at the Resource Center.

It was nice to see it again. I had a feeling of deja-vu when I saw the sugarcane. It seemed to be eerily growing in the exact same location as last year and was relieved later when I learnt that once you cut the sugarcane, it grows back and this cycle goes on about 7 times. And while I was looking at the next crop, sunflower, heard some screams and a bunch of children were waving at the vehicle. They are children of the two released bonded labor families that work on the fields. They love Siddamma's children and were very happy seeing their friend. We passed their homes and drove till the one room shed where we were to stay for the next few days. Siddamma's sister's family greeted us there.

Siddamma had already mentioned that they had been faring badly on their farm in Karnataka. They were in debt for about 3 years now and her sister had recently attempted suicide. When she heard about it, she was shocked that the agrarian crisis had also hit so close home and asked them to stay on the resource center and work here for some time, while they saved money to pay back their debts. It was amazing to hear how quickly they all had sprung up from a state of hopelessness. They were very happy seeing the effort on the resource center to grow crops without using chemicals, which is what spirals the input costs. It has made them feel so optimistic that they want to go back to their village and work with their friends on organic farming. So Siddamma's sister, Gowramma, her husband, her 3 sons: Pancha, Vaghesh and Vishwa and her daughter-in-law, Sarita (Pancha is married to her) live there. Of these, Pancha and Vagha get paid for their work. They were already working here before the crisis in their family. The other members only joined them recently. They are a very hard working people and have been helping out a lot on the farm.

We had a good lunch and rested a little, it was quite hot. I woke up at 5:00 PM and went out to see the heat was already disappearing. Soon it was very pleasant and a nice breeze was also blowing. I joined Siddamma and Gowramma under some banana plants and we chatted for a while. We then took a walk and Siddamma mentioned how the yields of

different crops were this year. Some part of the ragi and groundnut was sown using seeds from the previous crop, while the rest was from seeds that had been purchased. 50% of the plants that were sown using seeds from the previous season had survived. This could be because the land is still recovering from the chemicals the previous owners had used and hence the previous crop was not strong enough. They will be trying using the current seeds for the next season to see how the yields change. I suggested we keep track of the inputs vs outputs for each of the crops, so we have an idea of how long it takes before the land heals and we break even. This is a question I have often come across in the context of organic farming: how long will the farmer have to deal with losses before making some money. This would be a good piece of information to have. Siddamma mentioned they have been planning to maintain accounts for each crop precisely for this reason and asked Bharathi Trust's accountant, Suganthy to pull out these numbers. They are however busy with year-end accounts right now, so it might take a few weeks before we have this information.

Sunflower crop



Everyone at the resource center is happy with the sunflower crop. They will be harvesting by the end of April and are planning to extract sunflower oil from its seeds. They planted sunflower in 3-4 acres and Pancha was animatedly explaining that the input costs were about Rs. 1000. I don't have the break up but he mentioned seeds, some labor charges and cost for preparing manure. They sprayed the manure they make using cow urine, cow dung, curd, ghee, cocunut milk (I could be mixing up ingredients from different kinds of manures but this is what I remember now!) a couple of times. I asked him how much the inputs would have cost if we had used urea and pesticides. His estimate was Rs. 5,000 per acre. That would make the inputs for this crop atleast Rs. 15,000. Irrespective of how much the output could have provided, this is a huge gap. Pancha seemed quite happy we weren't paying any middlemen all that money. He is completely taken by organic farming and felt cheated that an entire industry is thriving on farm income, especially when its presence is not that justifiable!

Needless to say, the sunflower crop has generated a lot of local interest, which was the aim of the resource center. A few farmers have already stopped by to see what is going on. One of them religiously follows the procedures done on the resource center. Another

comes by to take Panchakavya, the manure that is made on the farm. Bharatji Trust is planning to prepare Panchakavya and hand it out to the local farmers who will not be required to pay for it. Since they want to prepare this manure on a larger scale, they feel they will need larger cement tanks to make it. Currently it is being prepared in plastic drums. This is one of the items on next year's budget.

It appears that with such local interest in the resource center's farming methods, there should be a good turnout at the workshops Bharathi Trust is planning to conduct. A training center is being built right now for the purpose of holding such meetings with different resource people. Siddamma also mentioned that they want to take the farmers to some organic farms in Pudukotai. I was at the resource center for 4 days but did not have a chance to interact with the community. That is definitely something I would like to do on a later trip.

The 2 released bonded labor families

Two released bonded labor families are currently living and working at the Resource Center - Mariamma, Dorai and their children & Elisamma, Rajendran and their children. I was curious about how these two families were chosen. Siddamma mentioned that they had informed the families living in one of the released bonded labor villages (she mentioned the name which I can't recollect now) about the Resource Center and asked people who were interested to contact them. They specified the work and the pay (Rs. 2000 each for the men, the women were given a cow each. They are also given food that grows on the farm) and suggested that families that were in very bad condition apply. These two families contacted them. They had escaped from the rice mills but did not have a certificate stating there had been bonded laborers. Hence, they were not given the cash of about Rs. 20,000. They have been working there for more than 6 months now. And Ravi was telling me they have all gained good health since then. The children have a lot of space to play and access to good food. They are missing out on school and the plan to start the school on the resource center this June / July would definitely help.



The school building

The salaries the men receive are for the work they do on the farm. If there is any construction work going on and they are engaging in that, then they get paid wages for

that work just like the other laborers. The same goes for the women. I'm specifically mentioning this here since many a time we have wondered if people get paid their fair share in such groups.

A case of misuse of funds and how it was resolved

Velan has been the coordinator at the resource center since the last one, the previous landowner, was fired. He was in charge of overseeing the activities at the center, while also working there. A few weeks back, Rajendran had contacted Suganthi to tell her about some discrepancies in accounting that he had observed. Some cows had been purchased by Velan. He had filled a voucher for the latest one saying it had cost about Rs. 11,000. Rajendran happened to speak to the owner of the cow who mentioned that he had sold it for about Rs. 8,000. So Rajendran decided to let Suganthi know about this who informed Siddamma. There was some other such instance where he had borrowed some resource center money recently for some personal use.

The day after we reached the Resource Center, some Sarpam leaders (Krishnan and a couple of women whose names I do not recollect) and Suganthi came there from Thiruvallur to talk about this problem. They all were briefed by Siddamma about what had happened. One of the women leaders mentioned that one of the rules of purchasing anything required two people to go. That way it would be more difficult to misuse funds. Everyone there was very upset. Everything gets discussed quite openly in the Sarpam meetings, I was told, and true to that, they decided to call all the people who worked on the Resource Center to discuss what needed to be done.

Soon the room was filled with people. Rajendran, Dorai, Pancha, Vishwa, Velan, his wife, Gowamma had joined the rest of us. Siddamma initiated the discussion by asking Velan about the resource center money he had borrowed. I felt awkward, being there, but was quite amazed at how well Siddamma was handling it. There was no accusation in her tone; she was questioning him but strongly. He said he borrowed it for constructing his house. She asked him how he could use the resource center money for his personal needs. Then Krishnan, Siddamma and Suganthi asked him about the cow. Rajendran spoke up about what he had heard from the owner of the cow. Suganthi was busy writing down the numbers. Velan was mildly defiant for a while but he knew he couldn't bluff his way through. So he himself gave the amounts he had taken from the purchase of each cow. The total had come to about Rs. 11,000. Krishnan spoke very strongly to Velan and told him to get the money by the next day. Pancha mentioned he had gone with Velan for the purchase of one of the cows and that amount had been correctly mentioned. Siddamma asked him why he had not gone along later. She and the Sarpam leaders stressed on how important it was for more people to make it their business to be aware of what is going on at the center. Siddamma mentioned that we (Asha volunteers) had raised funds by running and that it was their collective responsibility to use it well. Another awkward moment but I think it was good to mention that money was not easily flowing in.

They had another discussion with the resource center people at night. Siddamma wanted to know what each of them felt should be done. She mentioned that the Sarpam rule was to suspend the person, usually for 6 months and make him/her pay back the money. They

would keep tag of the person over this time and see what they did. Based on their observations and the person's interest in returning to the Sarpam, a collective decision would be made. It was an interesting discussion. Mariamma and Elisamma liked this suggestion. Pancha said why he liked it – if Velan were to return to work immediately and if there were another such incident at the center, most of them might immediately accuse Velan which might not be right. So it would be good for him to be away for some time. Mariamma said that if he were around immediately, he might take out his frustration on them. Rajendran, however, felt suspending him was harsh. On further discussion with Ranjendran, it was discovered that he thought suspending him meant firing him for good. Siddamma explained that this was not the case and that if he wanted to join after 6 months, they would certainly discuss it then. He seemed to be fine with it. Then he was worried that there would be no one to drive the tractor around, since that was one of the things Velan used to do. Everyone else said that this was not a good reason for Velan to continue working. It would not be difficult to find someone who could drive a tractor. With all these explanations, they reached a consensus that Velan would have to pay back the amount he had taken and be suspended for 6 months.

I felt that people had a forum to speak out where they need not be afraid of the consequences. Rajendran was aware that he could contact Suganthi about such issues and that he did not have to go through Velan for everything. This was the result of meeting all these people regularly. Though Suganthi works out of Thiruvallur, they often meet at the center and people were aware of who she was. While it was clear that they respected Siddamma's opinion a lot, they also engaged in debate like Rajendran who did not want to suspend Velan. Women were part of the discussion and they spoke their mind which was very nice to see.

Ongoing Construction

Training Center



Currently, they are in the process of constructing a training center where they can hold meetings with the community about low cost, sustainable farming methods. The construction was proceeding at a good pace and should be done soon. It is being constructed with the help of a loan from Action AID that needs to be repaid within a year.

While they will be using it for conducting workshops with the community, they are also planning to rent it for a reasonable price to groups like Action AID and Asha. We are planning to conduct the Asha fellows conference here in December. They are also constructing a few toilets and bathrooms. Currently there are no toilets there. There is a basic thatch structure that serves as the bathroom but we enjoyed a privileged pump set bath, thanks to Anitha's insistence! Without going off-track about a pump set bath, I will just mention that it was quite an experience :)

Platform for drying crops



The material for this platform was being transported while I was there. BT owns a tractor, which they usually use to transport material. They were using it to transport sand from a neighboring farm. Since Velan was not around, Ravi was driving the tractor. Stones had also been brought (big stones, smaller ones that are called 'jelly' and tinier ones called 'baby jelly'). The sunflower crop would be harvested in a few weeks time and they wanted a space where they could dry and thresh the sunflower plants. The platform would have to be ready before that. Its dimensions would be about 78 ft X 66 ft. Though the construction has started, they need support for the platform and it is being included in the budget.

A visit to the potters

The resource center was made with an idea of reviving local economies. Once the agriculture part becomes more stable, the plan is to provide a space for people to learn pottery. Pots are used quite a bit in rural areas. People cook in them and also use them to store grain etc. Plastic is slowly replacing clay for storing foodgrains and Siddamma is hoping to revive interest in storing grain in clay pots. Why is this important? Potters work with their hands, they are creating something out of mud. In encouraging the use of pottery is, not only is the usage of biodegradable materials being supported, also respected is manual labor. Critiquing the unsustainability of the current system will not go very far unless alternatives are provided and in providing space for pottery, this is what is being done.

My ramblings apart, we visited three locations to buy some pots. We purchased pots for cooking at all three places. More importantly, Siddamma was looking for potters who

could make containers that can hold about 10 bags of rice. She was looking for storage space for the coming harvest. The first place only made pots for cooking since that is what people in the community were purchasing. The second place had sold all their pots. At the third location, we found about 3 families that were making pots. Here we met this old potter who knew how to make the containers. Siddamma gave him the specifications and he said he would make it. This container would be made of many pieces. All these pieces would be assembled at the location. I just could not picture how this would look but I was amazed at what could be made out of clay. The cost for making this container was Rs. 400 – Rs. 40 per bag of grain, leading to Rs. 400 for a ten-bag capacity. The potter mentioned that the only work they were receiving of late was to make vessels. They have been doing other odd jobs to make ends meet.

Most of the food that was made that day was made in the pots.

Tending to the cattle



The resource center currently has 7 cows, 4-5 calves and 2 bulls. They have made a thatched shelter for the cattle. The bonded labor families were given a cow each. I think Rajendran's family was given another cow since they have 5 children and thus more needs.

I observed a lot of thought being put into what the cattle would eat. The stalks of the *ragi* plant are nutritious for the cows, so that's where they go after the harvest. I was shown another plant that was good for cattle and was being grown for that purpose. And all the organic kitchen waste was carefully collected into a vessel. They were careful not to put in onion peels, which they said might get stuck to the throats. I had recently read the *Omnivores Dilemma* by Mike Pollan that described factory farming for milk and the logic that goes into making it profitable. The attention being paid to cattle at the resource center was very refreshing in comparison!

Water for the cattle had to be manually carried from the pump set since there is no overhead tank at the center. This is a fair amount of work and they are planning to construct an overhead tank soon.

Watering Trees

About 150 trees of different kinds –neem, soap nut, teak to name a few- had been planted on a bund & trench that was constructed to both obstruct rain water that flowed down from the hills and to do rainwater harvesting. In summer months, however, the trees need to be watered since they have been planted on an elevation where there are no pumpsets. This was quite a tedious job and hadn't been done in a few weeks. Some of the trees appeared to be dying. So the tree watering project was done on two mornings. We started very early, around 6 AM, so we could do a good bit of work before it got hot. I tried balancing the plastic containers being used to carry water but I just couldn't. So I helped with collecting straw to put around the trees – the *One-Straw Revolution* in practice. It certainly wasn't written for these people!

Marie, one of the children, was helping me collect straw. She was not only doing her work but was also watching over me. So the minute I picked straw that had been the home of teeming red ants, she quickly pointed it to me and made me drop it! We made bundles of straw, mine a little bundle and hers a big one – and each time, I thought mine was getting bigger but apparently not! It was fun walking back and forth with these bundles till it got hot. We worked some more and then called it quits for the day. It was barely 10 AM!

We did the same things the next day, after we (Anitha, Kumaresan, Marie, Pavithra, Vishwa and me) came back from our hike. This time I was helping Ravi carry dried groundnut plants to be used as straw.

Overhead Tank

At present, there are about 5-6 pump set points that I noticed. Water for daily usage is carried from these points. This can get tedious not only when water needs to be carried for cattle too but also for watering trees that have been planted on the bund, next to the trench that had been dug for rainwater harvesting.

The overhead tank that is being planned will be constructed on an elevation, so they do not need to construct pillars. The trees can be watered using some drip irrigation mechanism and tap connections will be provided at various points. The masons who were constructing the training center and the platform, provided an estimate for the tank which I mentioned in the budget for next year.

Fun and Food



The evenings were spent in the open; it got so pleasant by 6 in the evening that we didn't go inside if we could help it. It was nice just sitting on mats under the starry sky and chatting. We spoke about SEZs, organic farming, women's rights, alcoholism, sundried tomatoes, ragi recipes, Action AID and so on.

We went hiking a couple of times. The first time was to see the 'Puli Guha' (tiger's cave). The tiger had been dead for a while but before we got there, we heard the chattering of monkeys and Vishwa said there would be too many of them and it was better to scam. Which is exactly what we did. The children were very comfortable with the hills and Kumaresan would just take off. He was our guide and we gave him a hard time if he picked a bad route!



L to R: Pavithra, me, Marie, Kumaresan

L to R: Pavithra, Anitha, Kumaresan, Marie

I can go on about the yummy food I had there - ragi muddai, ragi rotis with awesome stuffed brinjal, steamed jowar cups with chutney, steamed whole urad pancakes to name a few new things I had eaten. I ate all these with fresh ghee and butter! Gowamma's family eats a lot of ragi and jowar. Rice is eaten too but is not the staple diet. She was teaching the other two families how to make ragi dishes since they had some ragi from the farm but did not know how to use it.

Time to go

Lot of food involved when it was time to go! Gowamma wanted to make some *puran polis* to Ravi's delight, Anitha's demand for chicken curry was finally met by Pancha who is supposed to be a good cook, the two families made us some *meduvadai* and I took some fresh butter with me. We took some group pictures and then left promising to return soon.

My Impressions

I think the work being done at the Resource Center is very important. In face of the agrarian crisis, efforts such as these are important since they are demonstrating methods that are low-investment, sustainable, and environmentally friendly as compared to those being encouraged by the mainstream economy. The work has been going on well so far and they have generated interest in the local community, as was their aim. The people at the center appear committed to their work. They realize that their work is not limited to the 10 acres of land but that they have the responsibility of reaching out to the local farmers.

That it is part of a larger organization that is working with the Irulas also makes it accessible to more people. As Bharathi Trust and the Sarpams manage to provide land to the Irulas, it is important to provide them with a model that will help them get some of their requirements from the land. Once the Resource Center breaks even in terms of the input and output costs, they are planning to provide the families that live there with a small piece of land so they can work on it and grow the crops they need. This is perhaps two years away from now but that they are thinking in this direction demonstrated clear thought.

The Resource Center will take a few more years before the yield from the land is comparable to the inputs. So we should be aware that they will be requiring support even in the coming years. It would be good to track how the yields for different crops look each season, so we can learn what is involved in a switch to organic farming. I have asked Siddamma and Suganthi for this information and we should follow up with them for it. Things keep changing and it is important we stay in touch to track what is going on.

Their way of working appeared to be open, ie, it was not so hierarchical that only a few people took all the decisions while the others were out of the loop. Effort is taken to engage people in discussion, so they can share with others their opinion on the state of affairs.

They have been reaching out to the community, which was the main aim of the resource center. This has happened so far not only through the conference they held last year but also more importantly from the interest they are generating in the local community about low cost farming. They intend to prepare the manure (*panchakavya*) and distribute it to the farmers who want to try it out. They are also interested in educating the community

about the impact of SEZs. In fact, there is a meeting on Apr 22 about this. Recently, there seem to be some brokers who have been interested in purchasing land in this area at very high prices (Rs. 5,00,000 as against Rs. 50,000). They are concerned this might be a first step towards the setting up of an SEZ and want to start a discussion in the community.