

Pearl Site Visit Report – Nov 2020

Click [here](#) to see photos from the site visit.

At all Asha projects since June 2020, we have been running mini-schools close to the places where our teachers reside. If you haven't read it already, read our [first report](#) which talks about why we are running these mini-schools. We have also created a [video](#) to explain how our mini-schools are functioning. We wrote a [second report](#) in late August with an update about the mini-schools. These reports will provide a background for this site visit report.

Bhaskar (Project Steward for the Pearl project) and I travelled to the Pearl project mini-schools on November 20th and 21st. Because of the Covid related concerns we avoided travelling by train and instead travelled to Madurai by flight on the 19th. We stayed at a hotel in Madurai for the night before heading to Kovilpatti early on the 20th morning. As I have observed in other places in TN, there was absolutely no habit of mask wearing in Kovilpatti or any of the villages we were visiting.

Click here to see photos from the trip.

Visits on 19th

We met Murugan the project Coordinator at Kovilpatti and our first stop was Natarajapuram, a locality within Kovilpatti. It was a poorer locality and many of the families were involved in Matchbox making work. Our teacher Divya was running the school here. Even though there are only enough children for one batch (about 15 to 20), she had to run another small batch in the evening because many of the children were also working in the Matchbox making work and couldn't come to the morning batch! The children were also very quiet in this area and didn't talk freely with the two of us. Couple of them showed us a couple of experiments and gave a couple of prepared speeches but there was very little answers to our questions. I played "Simon says" game with them. That got them interacting!



From there we went to the temple town of Kalugumalai. We went to our teacher Rajadevi's house. Children were assembled in her house. The children here were completely different. They interacted



with us very easily. The children wanted to present to us something they had made on their own. We were happy to see their craft work. Here too one boy showed us a science experiment. Since the school had the Maths kits, I asked them to show me numbers and how they would do addition using base-10-blocks and Abacus kits. The children struggled to show subtraction

using the kits but were quite comfortable with place value and addition.

We then drove to Karadikulam Colony. This mini-school was functioning almost like a normal school. Our teachers Annalakshmi and Sulochana are running this school right from early June when we started these. The school was running in the house of Annalakshmi's sister. It was so nice of her to give her entire house for Asha's use. The school was running 2 batches with about 40 students in each batch. Both the batch children wanted to see us. I did some exercise on shapes with sticks. The children here too gifted us some of their craft work. Then one boy did a couple of experiments to explain density.



We also used this opportunity to recognise Annalakshmi for the very good work that she has been putting over the last several months. Over and above running two batches of mini-schools, she was also doing mapping work, and stepping up to volunteer for even more responsibilities.



After that we went to Koovachipatti which was just across the district border in Tirunellveli District. Here we have been supporting the government school with two Kindergarten teachers. Since the



Kindergarten classes are not exactly run by the government, the villagers (with support from the school HM) were able to resume it. So our teachers are back to teaching the Kindergarten children in their usual class within the school premises! The class looks nice with tiles floor etc. We got there very late and the young children were ready to head home. We

interacted with them just a little bit. They knew their alphabets and their numbers well.

After this we went to the mini-school at Pudhupatti. This is where our teacher Kanagalakshmi lives. The village was clearly a



poor village. The houses were small and in bad state. Our teacher was sparing the only room in her house to run this mini-school. The sacrifice that these teachers are making for the cause of education needs to be celebrated. She had started the mini-school right in the beginning in June. She is now running two batches of about 10 to 15 children each. All the children go to the nearby government schools. The children had made some wonderful craft flowers and Peacock that they presented to me and Bhaskar. Here too I did some activities with shapes.

Our school part of the trip for the day got over. We then visited three of our libraries starting with Suriyaminikan. Our librarian Kolandaivelu was there. Some adults were hanging around the library.



Some children were also sitting inside the room. We are not running a mini-school in the village. I asked the children what inputs they have been getting in the last 6+ months in terms of education. Absolutely nothing! Besides going to school to get their textbooks, they have not had any other interaction with the school or the textbooks! Some kids were saying that their mothers taught them something. But it is scary to

imagine what digging ourselves out of this pit we have pushed ourselves into in terms of education is going to take.

We then went to the library at Nagalapuram. The library was in full strength as the children were curious to meet us. We had a good time chatting with the children for a bit. Then we had a story telling session with them. They also told us some stories. Most of them abruptly ended with the main animal in the story just dying! I think they didn't remember the story properly. I also told them some stories – "Foolish man and the 7 donkeys", "Three boys fighting over a flute" etc. We were able to get the older children to express their own opinions with the second story.



Finally we went to the library at West Subramaniapuram, Kayathar. The librarian Pushpa was there with the kids. Here too we had a story telling session. They told us some stories. There is this old 6th std girl who boldly told us stories the last time we were there. This time too, she was the main person to tell stories. I also told then a modern version of the "cap seller and the monkeys" story.

We then got to our lodge in Kayathar. We also met an ex-teacher of Asha who is now working as a govt teacher. It was depressing to see absolutely nothing being done towards the education of the children and the enormous amount of wasted money that continues to be paid as salary to the govt teacher to do no work.

Visits on the 20th

We had a pleasant morning. During this whole trip for that matter, the weather was very pleasant. There had been rains till the 18th. So the weather was cool and breezy. There was water in most village ponds and things looked greener than usual. We even got to see some wild Peacocks a couple of times!

Murugan first took us to see the Asha office at Kayathar. We were both seeing it for the first time. It was the right size for our need there and the place was clean and very easily accessible. On the whole a good office for us.

We first went to Elanthapatti to our teacher Saraswathi Devi's house. It was a nice 100 year old house with the ceiling sitting on wooden rafters and 1.5 ft thick walls etc. The children were assembled and waiting for us. Here, more than at most

schools, the children were very comfortable talking to us. Here too, we received nice gifts of art and craft work done by the children. Since they had all the Maths kits, I got the children to show me numbers on their base-10-blocks and abacus. They were comfortable with place value and knew how to do addition and subtraction. I made them tell me stories for



word problems. They participated very well. They also did the lemon floating in salt water experiment. I also showed them how water stops flowing when the mouth of the bottle is submerged.

We then drove back to Nagalapuram this time to see the mini-school in action. But pretty much all the



children were once again there. Saranya and Vaitheeswari are teaching two batches of mini-schools here. The children showed us some science experiments. I then did some word problems with them and by that time I finally got some straws to make reeds with. Children always love them. Here too the children really enjoyed playing with our own handmade reeds.

After that we had some nice lunch of Kambu Dosai courtesy Vaitheeswari (Murugan's wife and Asha teacher) at their house. After that we went to Chidambarampatti, our final stop. Because of some local politics, someone complained about our mini-school which was running in a Panchayat building, and it had to stop. The villagers were very keen to resume the mini-school. We brought in our teachers to discuss this with them and then also talked to the school HM and some of the parents in the village. They were very grateful that we were running the mini school and were eagerly waiting for it to resume.



Finally ...

We then drove back to Kovilpatti and from there straight to Madurai airport. On the whole both of us really enjoyed the trip. Seeing our teachers sparing their homes to teach the mini-school really made us appreciate the sacrifices they were making.

Some of the other things we were seeing was disturbing. Very little is happening in terms of education for the vast majority of the poor. The effect on their education and future development is terrible. Equally terrible is all the other social evils it is bringing back. Child labour is on the increase once again. In Nagalapuram, at least two teenage girls who were in 10th std have got married in the last couple of months. One of them was going to be married off to a 30 year old man. She instead ran away with a classmate of hers. While we admire her guts, going to school and receiving education would have been better than both these options. Universal free education had pushed back these social evils. They are also coming back.