

Thoothukudi district – A report of exploratory site visits

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First visit details

Dates: 6th & 7th August 2008 (Wed & Thurs)

Volunteers: Sivasankar, Bhaskar

Schools/villages visited: Eppodum vendran, Kaatunaickenpatti, Aadanur, Milagunatham, Mullur, Vedanatham, Kollamparumbu, Keezhacheithalai

Pictures: <http://picasaweb.google.co.in/chennai.asha/ThoothukudiAug08>

Second visit details

Dates: 2nd & 3rd April 2009 (Thurs & Fri)

Volunteer: Bhaskar; **Well-wishers:** Balamurugan, Murugesan

Panchayat schools visited: Pasuvandhanai, Nagalapuram, Panickar Kulam, Vadakku Ilanthakulam, Ayyanaroothu, Ettunaiyakanpatti, Melamanthai, A.Kalaiganapuram, Vaipar, Anaindha Madan Patcheri, Puliamarathu Arasadi, Thuppasipatti, A.Velayuthapuram

Pictures: <http://picasaweb.google.co.in/chennai.asha/ThoothukudiApr09>

Background

Asha Chennai has been working with a number of government schools in different parts of TamilNadu including the districts of Chennai, Thiruvallur, Thiruvallur and Trichy. We started working in most of these places due to some Asha volunteer's association with a school or village or neighborhood, or a local person's interest in improving the schools. I personally have been interested in starting a project that involves working with not only schools but communities as well, in the poorer regions of TamilNadu.

The southern districts of TamilNadu comprise of Madurai, Thoothukudi (aka Tuticorin), Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram. These districts have some key resources, decent infrastructure and some well-renowned universities but are still considered to be "backward". One of the main reasons is that the state has not been able to attract industries to these districts nor has it invested enough towards industrialization or providing employment opportunities. A slow pace of development combined with social and communal tensions which are prevalent in these parts has hindered the growth and led to the "backward" tag. Some of these factors have also led to migration of villagers to urban areas of the state, mainly Chennai, in search of jobs. For example, walk into any store in the shopping area of T.Nagar in Chennai and you are bound to find sales-men and women from the southern districts.

Thoothukudi is one of the poorer districts of the state. There are not many rivers in the district and so agriculture is completely dependent on monsoons. With decent rainfalls in a season, one crop a year is possible but not more. Other livelihood options are limited as well. I believe that working in schools and communities in this district will help create a significant impact on children's education, offer a different set of challenges, and provide an excellent learning opportunity for Asha Chennai. It also helps that one of our volunteers, Sivasankar, hails from a village in Thoothukudi, and would be able to oversee things whenever he visits home.

First visit in August '08

This visit was quite an open-ended one and our aim was to understand as many aspects of government's reach in a village as possible with a focus on the government school and education. The other aspects included penetration of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and sub-centers, awareness of Right To Information (RTI) act, the roles of panchayat (village local

body) leader and his/her awareness of various government schemes (NREGS, widow compensation, etc) and Public Distribution System (PDS).

6th August 2008

Sivasankar and I started the first day by meeting the Vice-President of the panchayat of Kattunaickenpatti, Mr. Jayakumar. He explained a lot of the government schemes and said that people in the village are generally aware of most of the schemes and do actively apply and get the funds. Those who need filing applications approach him and he helps out. NREGS has been in effect in this and the surrounding villages, and the panchayat works to get funds from this scheme to run projects in the village. He said that the villagers see it as a very good backup option and do take up NREGS-related work if necessary. He had heard about the RTI act but said that he does not know of anyone who uses the tool.

We, along with Sivasankar's father Mr. Mottainsamy, headed out in a TVS-50 after lunch to visit a number of villages in the Ottapidaram taluk of Thoothukudi district. We rode about 4km to Aadhanur. The first thing that struck me was that there was no sign of agriculture and the land was parched. Mr. Mottainsamy mentioned that the entire taluk receives very little rain on average and so there is really no scope for agriculture. I noticed that there were a lot of palm trees, which are common in dry areas, and the region was infested with thorny bushes called "proposis juliflora", referred to as "veli kaathan" in Tamil. This scene was prevalent in most of the areas we visited over the two days. These bushes are known to suck up ground water, leaving nothing for agriculture. A lot of villages in the taluk are not well-connected, and so men and women from remote areas don't have a choice of going to nearby towns for work. New roads are being laid in some of these places but public transport is very infrequent, if not non-existent. The villagers' main occupation is centered on the bushes – they cut these bushes, dry them up, burn them and pack the coal in gunny-sacks. As one can imagine, it is hard labour and involves working with thorns in punishing sun as there is not much shade around these bushes. There are a few mills set up by businessmen from Andhra Pradesh in the district. They buy this coal from the villagers and use it as fuel to power the mills.

We rode about 2km from Aadhanur cutting across a dry stream to Milagunatham. This is a very small village and quite remote. There is a panchayat union primary school right at the entrance of the village. We asked for the panchayat president and were told that he was away elsewhere in a meeting. He was supposed to return later in the evening. We then went for about 7km of absolutely dry stretch through a village called Iyerpatti to our next destination called Mullur. We noticed that a number of young children dressed in school uniforms were carrying water in small plastic containers from a pond across a school, led by a gentleman. He happened to be the assistant HM of the primary school and the children were going to water the plants in the school. We introduced ourselves and told him about Asha and the work we do. He seemed very enthusiastic and showed us around the school right away. He commutes from Kaatunaickenpatti, Sivasankar's village, about 16km one way. Mullur being a small remote village, the school had less than 50 children; they were wearing ties as a part of their uniform and seemed pretty energetic for 4pm! The classroom had a lot of Activity Based Learning (ABL) material neatly arranged and artwork by the children hung on walls and across the room. We spent some time at the school, thanked the teacher and moved on.

We wanted to meet the Mullur panchayat president and were directed to a village called Muthukumarapuram which falls under the same panchayat as Mullur. We rode about 5km to that place only to be told by a group of men (playing cards under a tree) that the president had already left. Another 5km ride, most of it on a rough and rocky path, took us to Kollamparumbu. We had spoken to the president earlier in the day and hoped to meet him, but found that he had not returned from Thoothukudi when we reached. We spoke to his wife and found out that they had lost their son recently and were mourning. We took leave and went to see the aided school in the village. It was about 5:30pm then and the rooms were closed. There were two very old dilapidated school buildings, one of which we could peep into. This room was in terrible shape inside too; there were a couple of broken benches, some ABL material and some notebooks all piled in a corner. The floor was strewn with trash and the ceiling had gaping holes. We decided to come back the next day to meet the staff and left.

The last village we went to was Keezhacheithalai in Ottapidaram taluk. There was a panchayat union middle school with a couple of buildings. One of them seemed in decent condition while the other was in terrible shape. We asked some children playing there about the school and were told that the old building

is no longer used and all students are accommodated in the other building. We wanted to meet the president but were told that he was away. I spoke to him on the phone for a long time and asked him about various things including the condition of the building. He said that he has been asking the education officials to fund a new building but they have not acted on it. I urged him to take up the matter with higher authorities like the District Elementary Educational Officer (DEEO) and he said he would. We also noticed a Adi Dravida (Dalit) school just about 100m from this school. We asked an old gentleman if dalits go to the panchayat school and vice-versa, and he said that generally doesn't happen. He said the children don't even mingle.

It was about 6:30pm and we decided to head back only to find that the rear wheel had a puncture. We searched the village for a mechanic or a shop but couldn't find neither. We were told that there was no bus from here after 6pm. So, we called a share-auto from Kaatunaickenpatti and went back there at about 8pm, leaving the two-wheeler in the custody of a villager. I wanted to meet the nurse at the sub-center at Kaatunaickenpatti and we decided to knock on her door at 8pm. She answered and obliged to have a chat with us. There is a Primary Health Center (PHC) at Eppodum vendran that serves about 15000 villagers from about 12 villages nearby. There are three sub-centers under the PHC and she is a nurse at the one in Kaatunaickenpatti. She is in-charge of Aadhanur and Milagunatham villages also as they come under the same panchayat.

The nurse said that the PHC here and in the district (and in Tamilnadu actually) have received a lot of funds over the past few years and have been upgraded quite a bit. The PHCs can handle deliveries which not all of them were able to before. There are also beds provided and so patients can get admitted. There are two doctors and one of them is on call 24x7. She said that one of the doctors is young and from the city, and that he is very motivated. He spends a lot of time explaining things to patients and follows up diligently. The sub-center is generally equipped with some medicines which the nurse can administer herself. For anything more including an injection, the patient has to be referred to the PHC. If the PHC can't handle it, they will be referred to the General Hospital at Thoothukudi, the district headquarters. This lady goes to each of the three villages once every three days to check on pregnant women and other sick villagers. She also helps them write applications to avail money under various government schemes. For instance, a woman who delivers her first or second baby is eligible for Rs.6000 but it is not automatic.

After spending about 45 minutes there, we thanked her and left to get ready for the village temple festival that night.

7th August 2008

Sivasankar and I got an early start and headed straight to the school at Kollamparumbu. We met the HM and introduced ourselves. The school is managed by the CSI Diocese and is government aided (that is, only teachers' salaries are paid for by the govt; the management has to take care of all other expenses). He said that the Diocese has no funds and has been unable to spend anything even on basic infrastructure. That being the case, I enquired if they have tried handing over the school to the government and he said they haven't. He walked us through the buildings and they were in terrible shape inside. We didn't get a chance to interact with the children though. I asked him if they were doing anything at all to improve the situation of the school but it didn't seem like he was. We thanked him for the time and left.

We then went to Vedanatham, a large village on a main road going from Thoothukudi to Ramnad district up north. There is a Panchayat Union Middle School here. We went in and introduced ourselves. The school has about 260 children and 7 teachers, with another teacher appointment due to be filled. The headmistress called three of the teachers and all of us engaged in a long conversation, most of which was centered on Activity Based Learning (ABL). They explained what works and what does not under ABL and basically how it is turning out to be ineffective with the pupil-teacher ratio as high as 40:1. We walked around the primary section and it was pure cacophony with 100-odd students squeezed in one not-very-large classroom separated by wooden partitions. The village panchayat president came to the school just then and we decided to step out and talk.

He has been the president for a long time and one of the teachers had previously mentioned that he visits the school very often and is generally very cooperative. He explained how he has been trying to get funds for the school to construct an additional building but has been unable to due to political reasons. I queried

him about other things. He mentioned that there were 9 members of the village involved in pond-strengthening work under NREGS currently and there is some work or the other most of the time. He said he has to visit the collector's office quite often in order seek funds for the village and to make sure it comes through. After having spent more than an hour in the school, we thanked all of them and left.

Our final stop was Milagunatham, where we had been to the previous day. We went to the panchayat president's house and discovered that his wife was actually the president but he was the one playing the role! She was clueless about most of the schemes but he knew about some of them. It didn't seem like they were doing much for the village though but were just letting things be. We then went to the primary school there and the children were in their lunch break. We spoke with the assistant HM there. She mentioned that the school has 55 students and she was the only teacher there; the HM had been transferred recently and a new one was coming in September. Being a remote village, she was finding it very difficult to commute daily. She mentioned that the village gets completely cut-off during rains because one has to cross a deep stream to enter the village. People can't leave or enter the village for 5-6 days in a stretch every year, she said. The lunch break was over and she had to go back to the class. We thanked her for the time and left at about 1pm.

Summary

This visit was more to understand the profile of the villages in the taluk and to interact with school staff, panchayat leaders and the villagers. We wanted to see if and how things are different down south compared to villages & schools in our current project areas. One glaring difference was the lack of agriculture-related and large-scale construction/infrastructure work; this reduces the livelihood options for the people leading to more families falling below poverty line.

The situation of schools is similar to other rural areas in that the more remote the village, the less likely that adequate teachers work in the school. Motivation and enthusiasm of school HM and staff seem to translate directly into enthusiastic children, clean classrooms and smooth functioning of the schools. Dropouts do not seem to be an issue at primary level in line with the pattern observed across most of TamilNadu.

The panchayat leaders are aware of most of the schemes and they are certainly empowered to bring in funds to their villages and work on development issues. They can be held accountable but it is the community that has to take the initiative. It will be very difficult for an outsider to force any change, more so without the backing of the community.

Second visit in April '09

Sivasankar and I felt that it would not be possible to work on community-level issues right away. The important thing would be to interact with the locals, gain their goodwill over time and then try to work with on rights-based or advocacy issues. We decided it would be best to start working in the schools and then try to reach out to the community over the year.

Preparation for the visit

Our primary aim in working with a government school is to decrease the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) by appointing additional teachers. Given this, we wanted to approach the problem technically. We dug around and discovered that www.schoolreportcards.in is a very useful website and provides basic statistics on school all across India. We filtered out schools based on the following factors:

- Only primary and middle schools.
- Schools in three dry taluks of Thoothukudi district namely Vilathikulam, Ottapidaram and Kayathar.
- Government schools only; this includes ones run either by local body (panchayat) or by the tribal/social welfare department. Aided schools were not included.
- Most importantly, a pupil-teacher ratio of more than 40:1.

We obtained a list of about 40 schools after applying the above filters but we had to get this down to about 15 for my visit. We looked through the maps of these taluks and picked ones that seemed very remote and the PTR being way higher than 40:1. We also called a couple of school seniors of Sivasankar's back in his village who were very familiar with the geography of the area and the school locations. With

their help, we narrowed down the list to about 14 schools. I wanted to visit these schools over two weekdays when schools would be open so that I could meet with the teachers. Sivasankar was unable to take off from work but he requested his two friends Mr.Balamurugan and Mr.Murugesan to accompany me. Incidentally both of them had finished their teacher training about 6/7 years back and were still waiting for government postings. They had worked in some private and government schools (on contract) earning not more than Rs.1200 per month. They gave up those jobs to take up manual labour work because it pays close to Rs.2500 per month, more than double than that of a teacher.

2nd and 3rd April 2009

I arrived at Kovilpatti at about 7:30am, freshened up in a lodge, had breakfast and headed out to Eppodum vendram. This village is right on the main road going to Thoothukudi about 45 minutes away. The plan was for Balamurugan and Murugesan to meet me at the bus stop and for us to proceed with the visits right away in a pre-arranged autorickshaw. We spent the entire day visiting six schools and returned at 6pm. We got a very early start next morning at 7:15am because we wanted to go the farthest school first and be there by the time school opened. We again spent the entire day visiting seven schools we had shortlisted and returned to Eppodum vendran in the evening. We had covered close to 330km over the two days in an auto, more than half of it in bad roads, and I was completely beaten up at the end of the second day! I will summarize my visits to these thirteen schools chronologically in tabular form below. A few recurring things in most of these schools were:

1. Most HMs, barring a couple, were feeling the burden on running the school with very few teachers at the primary level and were very excited at the prospect of Asha appointing additional teacher.
2. Most HMs were very cooperative but wanted us to get a written order from the District Elementary Educational Officer (DEEO) to appoint teachers in the school. They had received specific directive from the higher-ups about this and they did not have the power to authorize these appointments by themselves.
3. The number of posted teachers was always less than the sanctioned teachers. It is sort of a chain reaction. A teacher from one school would have been posted to another school but he/she would have to wait till the vacancy created in the current school is filled by another teacher from some other school. Of course, new appointments would happen but that typically happens only at the beginning of the academic year but there is always a shortfall.
4. Government teachers working in villages generally stay in towns or cities nearby given that they earn reasonably well and they mostly send their children to private schools. So, if a school they are posted to is remote and requires a long commute, they are unhappy and openly admit to always looking for a chance to get a transfer out of the school. This could affect children's education as they lose continuity and have to constantly re-adjust to new teachers.

School (Click to view the report card)	Taluk	For primary classes only Students: teachers sanctioned: teachers posted Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Remarks
PUPS, Pasuvanthanai	Ottapidaram	128:4:3 43:1	Pasuvanthanai is a small town about 6km from Eppodum vendran on the way to Kayathar town. I noticed that there were separate operational buildings for SHG, PDS and a library in the community. The primary school is on the main road. There were only 2 out of the 3 posted teachers as the HM was on medical leave when we went. It has an old building and a new SSA building (typical shape of 20-paise coin) about 100m away. They had an additional PTA teacher (Rs.1000 per month) but SSA ordered all such lowly-paid teachers to be removed because it affected the quality of education.
PUMS, Nagalapuram	Kayathar	100:3:2 50:1	This is a very remote village and it took us an hour and a half to get here from Pasuvanthanai. We had to go about 6km from the main road to get here. This middle school has till class VII and class VIII would be started next year. There were two teachers at primary level for 100 students and two at middle school level (classes VI and VII) for 30 students. The primary HM was very anxious to have an additional teacher there.
PUPS, Panickar Kulam	Kayathar	83:2:2 42:1	Another 6km ride on a dusty road along several large wind-farms and we were at Panickar Kulam. This and the previous village come under the same panchayat. The school was in a low-lying area and the short path leading upto it was very narrow. There were two male teachers here and they welcomed us in. All students were seated in one large classroom in a 60-year old building. We spoke to the teachers and the students for about half-an-hour, and explained the reason for our visit. They assured us of their cooperation and even said that they would take of seeking permission from the authorities. There is a new SSA building with two classrooms that has been constructed opposite the old building and it was to be opened up for use anytime. There is a balwadi attached to the school but it is not being used. ICDS is renting a room inside the village to run the balwadi.
PUMS, Vadakku Ilanthakulam	Kayathar	174:5:5 35:1	The HM here was very skeptical of our motives and said that the school did not need any additional teachers. Bala was a student of this HM and he mentioned that the HM was a couple of years away from retirement and is too risk-averse to do anything out of the way. The buildings seemed to be in decent shape and the village was rather large.

PUMS, Ayyanaroothu	Kayathar	294:8:7 42:1	This is a large school with about eight buildings. The student strength is pretty high and the school is almost fully staffed. Except one, all teachers are ladies. We introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of our visit, and the HM here was very skeptical as well. She didn't seem motivated at all and told us that straight-away that she was waiting for a transfer.
PUPS, Ettunaiyakanpatti	Kayathar	83:2:2 42:1	We got here after an hour and a half ride back east at about 4pm. This seemed like a wealthier village and there was some agriculture happening. Balamurugan said that there is a large church in this village which draws a lot of people. The children were just leaving the school as we entered, and I noticed that they were all wearing uniforms that one generally associates with private schools – checked design and not blue or khaki! The assistant HM was there and we met her. She was a very cheerful lady and told us about the school. The school had a lot of educational materials neatly arranged, a couple of donated bureaus, a TV and DVD player, etc. She told us that a lot of well-wishers donate to the school. The HM was not there but there was an additional local teacher working there. After spending about 45 minutes in the school and thanking the teacher, we were on our way.
PUPS, Melamanthai	Vilathikulam	146:4:3 49:1	This place is about 35km from Eppodum vendran and roads were in terrible state for more than half the distance. We arrived at 9:15am just as the school was getting started. It is on the main road and has a large campus. The campus houses a high school, a balwadi and a primary school each managed separately. All the primary school teachers arrived on a bus from Thoothukudi at 9:35am. We spoke to the HM and asked her about the really high PTR. She said that that some teacher in another school had an order to move here but she was waiting for her vacancy to arrive there. SSA gives Rs.1000 per month and the school has appointed a local person as an additional teacher. The HM was unhappy about the fact that ABL requires such a low PTR but the mandate is still 40:1. On top of that, teachers don't get posted in a timely fashion. She said that a bunch of teachers recently agitated in front of the AEEO's office demanding a PTR of 10:1!
PUPS, Kalaiganapuram	Vilathikulam	58:2:1 58:1	We moved east from Melamanthai towards the coast of Bay of Bengal and arrived at this school. It is a small village about 2km inside from the main road. Murugesan said that there is typically severe water scarcity in these parts and that the people from this village have to go 2-3km to fetch drinking water. The primary school was waiting for a HM posting to be filled since May of 2008 and there was an assistant HM. The latter was sure that the HM posting would be filled in May of 2009. Meanwhile, there was a local person appointed by SSA to help the school. The assistant HM was pregnant and was due to go on leave but she said that someone will be sent on deputation when she leaves.

PUPS, Vaipar	Vilathikulam	122:4:3 41:1	This is a larger village and the school is right on a main road. The HM was on medical leave and we were received by a teacher there. She was very happy that someone was visiting her school and showed us around the school and classrooms. She said that the posting of the fourth teacher would happen soon and so the PTR will be better then. She sent a boy to get some cool drinks for us and insisted that I interact with the children which I happily obliged. I taught them a couple of memory games and they were very excited. After spending about half an hour there, we moved on.
PUMS, Anaindha Madan Patcheri	Ottapidaram	126:3:3 42:1	We had to take a road about 1km off and along the coast to get to the next set of schools. The entire stretch was filled with salt-refineries/fields ("uppalam" in Tamil) and is a major source of employment in the area. We arrived at the middle school, which has a total of 191 students. The HM was very unhappy about the very high PTR and said that was a reason for a lot of students taking a TC to join other schools the previous year. She herself was going to move to another school in 2009-10 but wanted us to confirm if we could provide a teacher as soon as possible. That way, she could tell the parents that there would be adequate teachers and request them not to move their children out. I said I'd do my best to inform her soon.
PUPS, Puliya Marathu Arasadi	Ottapidaram	99:3:2 50:1	We were moving south along the coast closer to Thoothukudi. This school is about 2km from the main road and we met the HM there. There is a local SSA teacher and two government teachers managing the school. She was hoping that the empty position would be filled soon.
PUPS, Thuppasipatti	Ottapidaram	83:2:2 42:1	This school is 5km from Thoothukudi and that explains why both the HM and assistant HM have been in the same school for a long time! It was lunch time and we caught her napping when we went. The school strength was 75 as opposed to 83. The HM was indifferent when I asked if an additional teacher would help and said that the AEEO would have to decide on that. She wasn't particularly keen on showing us around the classrooms and so we decided to leave.
PUPS, A.Velayuthapuram	Ottapidaram	91:2:2 46:1	We had to move away from the coast and Thoothukudi to get here. There is a large mill on the way to the village right by the main road. The HM was not there but we were met by a very soft-spoken old lady who is the assistant teacher. She diligently asked a lot of questions and about the purpose of my visit. Once I gave her a background, she spoke at length about different things. She said that a lot of teachers find it very difficult to manage children under ABL. They have to exert a lot more energy and with a high PTR it becomes impossible. She wanted me to interact with the children which I did. There were some English-Tamil words written on the blackboard and I asked them some random words from the list and their meanings. The teacher said that she wrote them on the blackboard so that the big writing would catch children's eyes and get them interested as they move about.

Conclusion: The visit to the various schools and villages and the interaction with teachers and villagers was a very good experience. We plan to write a proposal to start a project in Thoothukudi district based on ideas we have gathered in these visits.