

## **Project Pearl Site visit report on January 23, 2015**

I am Rajaraman Krishnan, a volunteer of Asha Chennai. I had made a site visit to the Pearl project on 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan 2015 along with Bhaskar, another volunteer of Asha Chennai. One of our long time teachers and currently the coordinator of the project John Baul was getting married. The trip was also to participate in the wedding.

We arrived at Kovilpatti in the morning by the Pearl City Express and checked into the Ashoka Lodge. Then by about 9:30 we reached Kayathar and from there went to the church. The wedding function started only by about 10:15. We sat through the ceremonies, then wished John Baul and his bride Irudhayamary Jennifer and then also had our lunch there.

We left by 12:30 and went to Vagai Thaavur Balwadi. The HM of the school with whom we have had a long relation, Iyyammal was also there. We went to the Balwadi and talked to our teacher Durga. We also then interacted by the children there. They were able to recognize the number of fingers I held up and also sang a couple of songs for us.

Then we went to Ayyanaar Ootru. We had met the HM at John Baul's wedding. She was going to Bengaluru and wasn't at the school. Another teacher was out for 6 months of maternity leave and one more teacher was out on casual leave. That just left 4 teachers and Asha teacher Veni Thaaai managing about 210 children! Veni Thaaai used to teach 1<sup>st</sup> std. Tamil medium section and has recently been moved to 3<sup>rd</sup> standard Tamil medium section. Venithaaai was teaching time to the children. I asked them questions on the same topic. Many of them were able to recognize the time if I drew the clock. However when I asked them what is the time some hours or minutes before or after the current time, only a couple of them were able to answer. I talked to the Asst HM and requested her to not move our teacher often between classes. Next year she promised me that Veni Thaaai will teach the same class for the whole year. The school is short of teacher especially on days like this when many of the teachers are absent.

After that we went to Nagalapuram. The HM as always was full of appreciation for John Baul and all the work he is doing for the school. When we went the State Level Achievement Survey test was taking place. This was being held for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> std. students to provide statistics of the performance of the school, district, state etc. We got to talk to the SSA official who was conducting the tests but weren't able to get any more information than that we already had regarding the test.

We then spent some time with the 1<sup>st</sup> standard children which is the class being taught by John Baul. They were confident of writing their name in Tamil but were able to write their name in English only looking at that written by the teacher for them. They were also a little unfamiliar with the English alphabets still. Given that they were in English medium, we expected a little more.

The school was also preparing for a scholarship test conducted the next day for the 8<sup>th</sup> std. children. There were two parts to the test. SAT (Subject Aptitude Test) and MAT (Mental Aptitude Test). Training the students for the MAT portion was completely done by John Baul. This year the HM was confident that one or two of their students will get the scholarship! We saw the other things done by Asha at the school.

A teacher from a nearby school, Mr. K. Kamaraj from ADW school at Thirumangalakurichi was waiting to see us. He had heard about Asha and wanted Asha to help his school as well. Note Adhi Dravidar Welfare board schools (or ADW schools) come under a different administration by follow the same TN state board curriculum. They tend to be even worse funded than the Panchayat Union schools run by the state govt. So we went to the see the school.

It was a high school (till 10<sup>th</sup> std). The school buildings looked good. They had about 150 children. There were about 60 children in 1 to 5<sup>th</sup> stds. They had 3 teacher for these classes. The 90 children in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 10 stds had just 3 teachers including the HM who is often out of administrative duty. In spite of this the school has done well in the board exams. They had 93% pass with the topper scoring 455 marks. It is to be noted that the topper was from the Nagalapuram school (which has only till 8<sup>th</sup> std.).

The 3 teachers in the high school are qualified in Tamil, Science and History. For the most challenging subject for students at this level of Maths and English, the school did not have any teachers. That is what they were asking from Asha. Many of the girls in 9<sup>th</sup> std also recognized Bhaskar who has been travelling to Nagalapuram for many years! It would be good for us to support this school. However it is also to be noted that the teachers view of education for the high school was cram the children with the text so that they can score well in the board exams. This is the unfortunate reality in most schools. We will not be able to change this. This after all is part of the reason why we are working primarily with primary school where this kind of a change has to begin.

After this we went to the library at Suriyaminikkan. We met the librarian Kuzhandhaivelu there and understood from him about the status of the school etc. Then we made a short trip to the Nagalapuram Balwadi. We went there at about 5:00 pm which is well beyond the Balwadi hours. We just talked about the Balwadi to our teacher Pechiammal. Note the Balwadi her officially had a teacher. But this teacher is not in good health and just comes her one day a week! The situation in the Vaagai Thaavur is a little different. There there is a common teacher for two Balwadis which wasn't working out. So she now just attends to the other Balwadi while our teacher Durga manages the Vaagai Thaavur Balwadi.

After this we went to the Nagalapuram library. This is continuing to function extremely well. This was primarily frequented by the children from the Nagalapuram school (particularly 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> std. children). They were using the library well. We interacted with them for about an hour just generally chatting with them. We enjoyed the time spent. The comfort the children have with the library and Pechiammal was very apparent.

After this we got back to Kayathar and then off to Kovipatti and there on to Chennai.