

**Dear Asha volunteers,**

Following is the report on Navajeevan Trust at Thirunelveli. We solicit your kind opinions, suggestions on all or specific items. We would discuss the same at our monthly meeting.

**A REPORT ABOUT THE SITE VISIT TO NAVAJEEVAN TRUST AT THIRUNELVELI DURING JULY 2008.**

We, E.S.Ananth and Sri.K.Sundaram, volunteers of Asha Chennai, planned a visit to Navajeevan Trust, at Thirunelveli, the southernmost part of India in Tamilnadu State, that was assisted by Belgium Based Rose Foundation till recently. And so we have undertaken the journey by train leaving Chennai, that was Madras on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2008, reaching our destination at Paalayankottai, another segment of Thirunelveli town, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July morning. Since the station is being renovated, the NJT director could not meet us at the station platform even though he had kept the trust vehicle ready. We took an 'Auto' and reached the trust centre, followed by the director within minutes of our reaching the destination. He was profusely apologetic for not connecting with us at the station. He had requested us to refresh ourselves rather expeditiously, to facilitate our participation in a public meeting convened, for elucidating a significant point of the project, which is child labour eradication and children's education.

We promptly readied ourselves within minutes and joined the meeting spot, a Christian missionary Middle School(C M S Mary Horton Middle School), where a propaganda zonal exhibition on the implementation of Child Labour Eradication and regularization Act 1986, was being inaugurated under the aegis of NJT and UNICEF, after a formal meeting, in the presence of many notable persons in Public Service, involved in various capacities at Government departments concerned. The conduct of this show was the first of many such that were to follow shortly, within the specified Taluqs of Thirunelveli Districts.

The Chief speaker was Smt.Hemalathaa(35+), Labour Officer Thirunelveli District. She conducted the meeting in a very novel fashion; she invited children from various ages/classes/genders, from among the 400 strong congregations, and literally interviewed them about their family backgrounds and wanted them to fearlessly, share with the people assembled, about them being utilized by their parents. Ironically, Thirunelveli District is considered the Oxford of South India, with so many colleges, schools, Autonomous University and what not.

The children aged between 5 and 13 and numbering about 15, participated and related the daily routine that occurred every day in their households and elsewhere, where they are constrained to frequent in the discharge of their parents' commands. The one-hour exercise was really a revelation of things obtaining, in those surroundings. The Labour Officer, we were told was a person of exemplary character, with a no nonsense and stern outlook on observance of strict adaptation of the aforementioned ACT, and would brook no indiscipline on this aspect. And so, there was all round appreciation of the work carried out by NJT in association with UNICEF. Then the NJT project director highlighted the various features the trust had undertaken, during the one year specifically, as he had been fortunate to acquire financial support from a Belgium Organisation through the unstinted efforts of Asha Chennai.

Then the Labour Officer inaugurated the exhibition containing messages with suitable printed illustrations, that numbered around 40.

The main crux of the messages depicted through the printed and copies of hand drawn posters was highlighting the problem of child labour and steps needed to eradicate the same and primary modus operandi being the emphasis on educating the unlucky children, not so privileged economically.

Many children in our country today are unable to get education, as they are illegally utilized by their parents out of necessity, owing to inadequacy of resources to sustain their livelihood, and they are misused and abused by others involved in various trades and businesses out to exploit their poverty to their own advantage. The children are denied their rights to enjoy their status as children, besides they are unable to prosecute the education as adumbrated in our constitution. We also observe these pitiable scenarios without bothering to do anything that would set right the criminal wrongs perpetrated by all including ourselves, as we are using them to do menial chores. We do not pay them just wages, in the event of illegally employing them. In order to put an end to such atrocities, The Indian Government, passed an amendment in October 2006, to the already enacted law of 1986, preventing child labour and regularizing the eradication scheme, and had taken steps to implement these provisions, to give life to these acts to the maximum possible level. Moreover, to propagate these acts and the consequent steps by the Government, NJT and UNICEF in

particular, have been carrying out exercises, besides undertaking various projects at costs, to educate the public at large the benefits accruing to our societies in general and children in particular.

Finally, NJT took the opportunity to thank all those involved in their projects, and specially thanked Asha Chennai, for their unstinted efforts in getting NJT the much-needed funds to carry out the tasks; they honoured us besides the other dignitaries, by garlanding with cotton towels. We left by 1330 hrs, and reached the Trust centre after lunch at about 1500 hrs., We had a meeting with Asha Chennai enabled project barefoot teachers(majority girls), the programme coordinator, the community organizers and the Project Director Nalan, in a seminar. It was a no holds barred discussion cum debate with a candid approach, on the implementation and on the experiences obtained, during the last one year, ending 30 June 2008.

The discussion centred on the methodologies used, difficulties encountered, the successes or failures in various schemes undertaken, the involvement by various personalities and the government agencies and above all the reaction of the people affected and others. The teachers narrated their experience of educating children of various age groups during evening and night hours. The ones engaged during regular hours taught vocational training like tailoring and the like. They saw some enthusiastic response among the participants, as the produce thus obtained, was sold facilitating the inadequate resources. Love and affection shown, would do a world of good in achieving the desired objective. The consensus was that the Child Labour Eradication Project has really influenced many people, but not at the desired percentage, one would visualize. It required a continuous and larger level approach from different corners and participation of the public at large in copious degrees. The project Director Nalan also reported about the various income generating schemes that he adopted to sustain the interest among village folks.

This meeting facilitated us an understanding of the project that we at Asha Chennai supported for the last year. The assembly broke up by about 1800 hrs. Sri. Nalan left for Chennai by that evening train, leaving us to the care of project Coordinator Mr.Ravi. After relaxing for a while, we along with Mr.Ravi and several Asha project (they have christened, The asha Chennai supported project aided by Rose Foundation thus) girl/female teachers, left for paappakkudy panchayath, at a distance of about 50 kms, by the Trust Vehicle, to interact direct with the village folks who in some way or other are associated with NJT, in implementing the project.

At about 2030 hrs, we first reached East pappakkudy village with about 500 families and around 2000 strong population, and met with a village committee folks, about 2 scores in numbers, fairly sprinkled with weaker sex and astonishingly enough, included very aged few.(inferred from their countenance or perhaps they are so on account of the mal nourished; however we did not venture to ask considering decency). The committee is headed by a ward councilor of the village panchayath. The discussion on the number of children not going to school in that village block revealed a surprising nil figure. Funnily, they are unaware of the right to information act and the right to education act. At least they are ignorant about these. As a case in point, when the ward councilor was asked about the various benefits schemes that the government announced, he was a bit perplexed. Pointedly, when we asked him about discussion on the budgets, income and expenses incurred by the villages and the *modus operandi and modus vivendi* on contentious revenue issues, during the village council meetings, he said Tehsildar assisting village government officers, would take care of the committees suggestions. It is a case of impotent powers on ignorant & hapless individuals, taken for a ride by a few with no care for niceties and public spirit.

We literally educated them about the RTI Act. Mr.Nalan has already initiated processes in this direction. About higher education like secondary and higher secondary, the village has considered approaching authorities to open up institutions, to prevent children from drifting or dropping out after a particular level. They have revealed that the abuse of the children on gainful employment is on the wane, after the entry of NJT's initiatives. We advised them to think about providing libraries, as the existing ones were never opened, owing to non-availability of librarians. The village boasted of nil knowledge of computer literacy; even if one were to bring in systems, they would be in need of trained personnel to educate the grown up boys going to middle school and higher school levels. The NJT committee is held at a place of about 500 sq.ft available rent-free by the courtesy of certain magnanimous individuals. We took photograph of them and left by about 2200hrs.

Our next destination was a household in a hamlet called kaasinathapuram in Puduppatti panchayath union, consisting of 9 family members. Their main avocation is none other than the cursed Beedi Rolling. *If only there is an institution of f Beedi Rolling(maximum number in the fastest time) as an Olympic sport, then I am sure there would be umpteen 'Abhinav bindras' from this district to win golds for India. Perhaps India can take pride in the fact that it can find even*

*Gold Medalists from amidst people afflicted with abject Poverty. Why can't we appeal to Sivanthi Adithyan, who hails from this district, to seriously consider this?*

All of them are involved in this beedi works profession which has its origin in 1903, to augment their resources. The Price they get is Rs.60 per thousand numbers rolled. Fortunately, they have a regulating mechanism, to report about any mal practices by any one; this was due to the efforts by NJT. But they can not say the same of every hamlet surrounding the Taluq. But to a query whether they are leading a peaceful life, they looked askance. Their looks revealed a consternating posture, without raising the question as to how could we be so stupid.

We shamelessly started our journey to another village hamlet called Maruthamputhur and reached there at an unearthly hour of 2300 hrs. The boys numbering around 25 of various age groups were waiting for us (im)patiently. They were apparently boisterous; we introduced ourselves, and asked them to introduce and about their elder folks. Some of them narrated that they were forced to tend goats and cattle during daytime. A few of the boys were continuously laughing. There was no way of stopping them from doing so. The girl asha teachers revealed, that largely they were obedient. There were some educational kits like the geography globe. A visual education like the use of a computer would really make things livelier. The resource person a male incidentally was computer knowledgeable. Our test on their knowledge did not elicit any positive or correct response. But then who on earth would be willing to stay till around 2330hrs.+, let alone answer questions? The fault lay in us that we ought to have scheduled our programmes properly.

We took of for our abode gulping in some eatables like fruits and biscuits en route and reached around well past midnight literally during the small hours of the 23<sup>rd</sup> July. Need we say we were thoroughly exhausted?

On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, we were making some private tours for the better part of the day, and Mr. Sundaram took leave of us all, starting for Madras that is Chennai, owing to previous commitments. I(E.S.Ananth), in the company of Project Coordinator Ravi, visited several villages where day cum night schools were held with vocational training in the pappakkudy Panchayath union. There was satisfaction on the faces of participating students (girls). They would only be too satisfied if some more facilitating features were made available, besides the increased number of sewing machines, and the allied products. There were several such centres we were told that were functioning.

Our next jaunt was a hamlet called Karisal, at a distance of about 50+kms from Thirunelveli town. Here the Trust arranged the services of an educated lady well over 35, to work with the village folks, in stream lining their profession, forming associations, lest they be deprived of their just rights from the avaricious agents and employers, along with the possibility of aligning with the Ladies self help groups, that are invariably accorded recognition and approval, by the powers that control. There are about 4 main streets in the village. The association of families that E.S.Ananth met consisted of members of about 25 families and there are about 75 families in the street in consideration.

To a query as to how long that this association had been existing, the reply was an astonishing period of more than a decade. An automatic question that followed was why did not the others in the street join this association? Was it prejudice? Was it disbelief? Was it that they had their own group formation? Was it a case of people of vested interest influencing them? Was it a case of pessimists resigning to their fate? Or finally were they comfortable enough to ignore all these factors? These questions did awaken their thought process.

We inspired a qualified girl, just over teens, from their midst with some affluence to help in initiating processes to fell out statistics and thus make efforts in uniting their cooperation first. Later they could for themselves into a self-help Group, to garner financial support, with the assistance of NJT paid staff, from the lending institutions (banks). We also during the course of the discussion came to know that a few among them were involved in dairy management, but in a very limited phase. Our interest was kindled. To a query whether they would be able to market all the milk obtained, in case there was an expansion, there was an affirmative YES. Then the others were prompted to seriously consider taking to this profession in a collective manner, through their association, along with the Beedi Works. They might probably emulate another Kheida District( a La AMUL). We briefed about this Gujerat Phenomenon. Now it did not require another KURIEN and a NALAN would suffice.

The village is proud that all the children in the village are going to school. Only some are disturbed and lured by a nefarious group, trying to wean the girls away, for works at Textile mills in adjacent districts, promising the families a considerable amount at the end of couple of years. Thus, the education is interrupted; the girls that are whisked away

are put to strenuous work schedule, besides being exploited sexually. The girls return well before the set period, not with any money, but with incurable diseases and health problems, that eat away the precious funds earned by the family, through hard labour. But this goes on merrily. None seems to learn lessons. However NJT has succeeded to a large extent in preventing the numbers falling prey to the nefarious designs of these evil minded persons.

Our suggestions, for concentrating their efforts in strengthening their association, forming SHGs, considering dairy profession and trying to educate the wards, girls especially, up to school final level to the minimum, went well with them. They promised to sincerely work towards these avowed goals, with all the earnestness at their command with the help of NJT. The meeting ended at about 2200 hrs

Our volunteer ESA, returned along with the coordinator and others to the Trust, by about midnight. Our volunteer then entered into the various project details including money spent during the last one year. The discussion and clarifications went on for about 2 hrs.

**The main points that were noted in the discussion, are as follows:**

The Teachers that were recruited for the project were not adequately compensated and were also over worked.

Training Committee members and village volunteers would have to be taken at a more expanded level.

Children's exposure to proximate locations can be diversified to inspire them more, by getting to far off locations.

Adequate and more appropriate materials would be needed to equip the teachers involved in vocational teaching.

Supply of books, Computers and technology oriented tools & kits would be required to attract the village children.

Frequent medical camps, and arranging nutritious food to the children at far-flung villages, would be ideal.

In addition to having programmes for children and elders, new pedagogy and teaching competencies coupled with generic skills, would be needed to make the project ideal and result oriented.

It is not that these have not been reckoned with, while preparing the project report. Nor was there a consideration of Only 8 village/gram; in fact side by side other villages were impacted. But the availability of limited resources, coupled with strict superintendence over expenditure of funds got through FERA account, effected a miserly but relevant outlook, was the major cause, in observing some conspicuous drawbacks.

Otherwise, if an evaluation were to be made, the project implementation was on successful lines, with care being taken to plug in the noted gaps, while going in for the next budget proposal.

ESA returned to Madras, on the 25<sup>th</sup> traveling for the most part of the day by the busses, rather helplessly.

. The experience out of this visit must be an eye opener for all of us, who are easily ensconced in far away location, in the lugubrious comforts of city culture, and who are totally oblivious of these happenings, in some corner of their own country. To quote Amartya Sen, our Nobel Laureate, there is a quiet acceptance of consistent deprivations, for people, especially children inhabiting these districts with such abysmal life standards. Yet we note with cynicisms, Gandhiji's statement that India lives its villages. **WHAT A LIFE IS THIS?**

**We certainly can turn the corner or we would be constrained to do so.**

We have attached several photographs along with this report for the benefit of all our associates.

Regards,

K.Sundaram & Ananth E S

