

Project: Timbuktu Child Resource Center

Site Visit: 17th Aug 2019

Visited by: Anjana Mohan

Overall project scope

The Timbuktu Collective is a comprehensive program for people in the Ananthapur district of AP. The program affects 181 villages and around 22,000 families. They have a integrated array of programs addressing the development and upliftment of local communities. This includes the following:

- Working with Agricultural Laborers and recognizing and protecting the “wealth of the villages” (Gramisiri)
- Empowering rural women through collective thrift / credit and alternative banking (Swasakthi)
- Working with the children of these communities in educating them (Chiguru)
- Inclusion for people with disabilities (Militha)

As they worked with these groups, they found opportunities to strengthen communities through setting up cooperatives and encouraging collective ownership, marketing and sales of the local (agricultural & other) wealth. They also saw fit to do work with Forest Ecology, restoration, biodiversity and natural resource management and created a formal program for the same (Kalpavalli). As they realized money from their cooperatives, they set up further “enterprises” to sell non agricultural products also (weaving, fabric etc.).

There are three main geographies for this project:

- 1) The Timbuktu Collective:
Houses the administrative offices, main dining hall, women’s thrift, fabric dying and weaving, organic farm produce sorting, packaging and warehousing.
- 2) Child & Youth Resource Center (CYRC)
In Cheenakothapalli (CKPalli) and is the space for many academic and non academic learning programs, vocational training, resources etc. It functions like an inclusively programmed YMCA / Community Center for the village with special attention to kids. For the villagers, this is the psychological and physical heart of the project.
- 3) Prakruthi Badi (School) and Residences
Houses the alternative nature school, a separate daycare center, and residences for the kids at the school as well as the administrative staff of Timbiktu, a dining area & large community kitchen and other community gathering spaces that are shared by all there.

Education Component

The Asha Bangalore project is focused on their Education “vertical”, the “Chiguru”. The two components of their Chiguru are an alternative school (Prakruthi Badi) and an outreach and experiential education program (Mogga). Within this outreach (Mogga) is a Child & Youth Resource Center (CYRC) that functions like a Community Center for the CK Palli area.

Maddy is the director of the Chiguru vertical and Paroma manages the operations under his guidance. Paroma (From Kolkata, Bachelors in Zoology from Delhi, Masters in Ecology and Environmental Science) accompanied us for our entire tour.



The Prakuthi Badi school was “born” first as an outcome of the founding couple’s (Bablu & Mary) realization that their own children needed better educational infrastructure than what was available, and hence the oldest of the growing landscape of the collective. Homes and housing for the admin staff surround the school and its residential area (which I was not allowed to visit to protect the privacy of the children).

The Mogga program was the effort of reaching out to both adults AND children in the area villages with mobile educational programs on topics ranging from ecology to traditional academic concepts. A community center for children and youth was created as soon as they found space for it. Until last year the Govt. owned the buildings and grounds and Timbuktu Collective had to pay rent, but last year the Govt. has handed over the property to Timbuktu Collective and they don’t have to pay rent any more (Rs 10k / month).

While they continue the Mogga outreach program which casts a very wide geographical and educational net, they started a more in-depth “Mobile CYRC” experience for children in a smaller region. This mobile CYRC serves as both an after-school learning experience as well as a supplemental learning program for kids in area govt. schools.

Other funding for the Education component

Kadoorie Charitable Foundation, a Hong Kong based privately funded group sponsors the larger Mogga program. However, Timbuktu relies entirely on Asha Bangalore for their main (CKPalli) Child & Youth Resource Center (CYRC) building maintenance, caretakers salaries and materials for their mobile outreach program as well as other programs that they hold in the CYRC spaces.

Kadoorie foundation has also supported the capital investment for the expansion of the CYRC concept to other areas. The caretakers for the other CYRCs are also being supported through the Mogga outreach program, since they are utilizing Mogga staff for the purpose.

CYRC

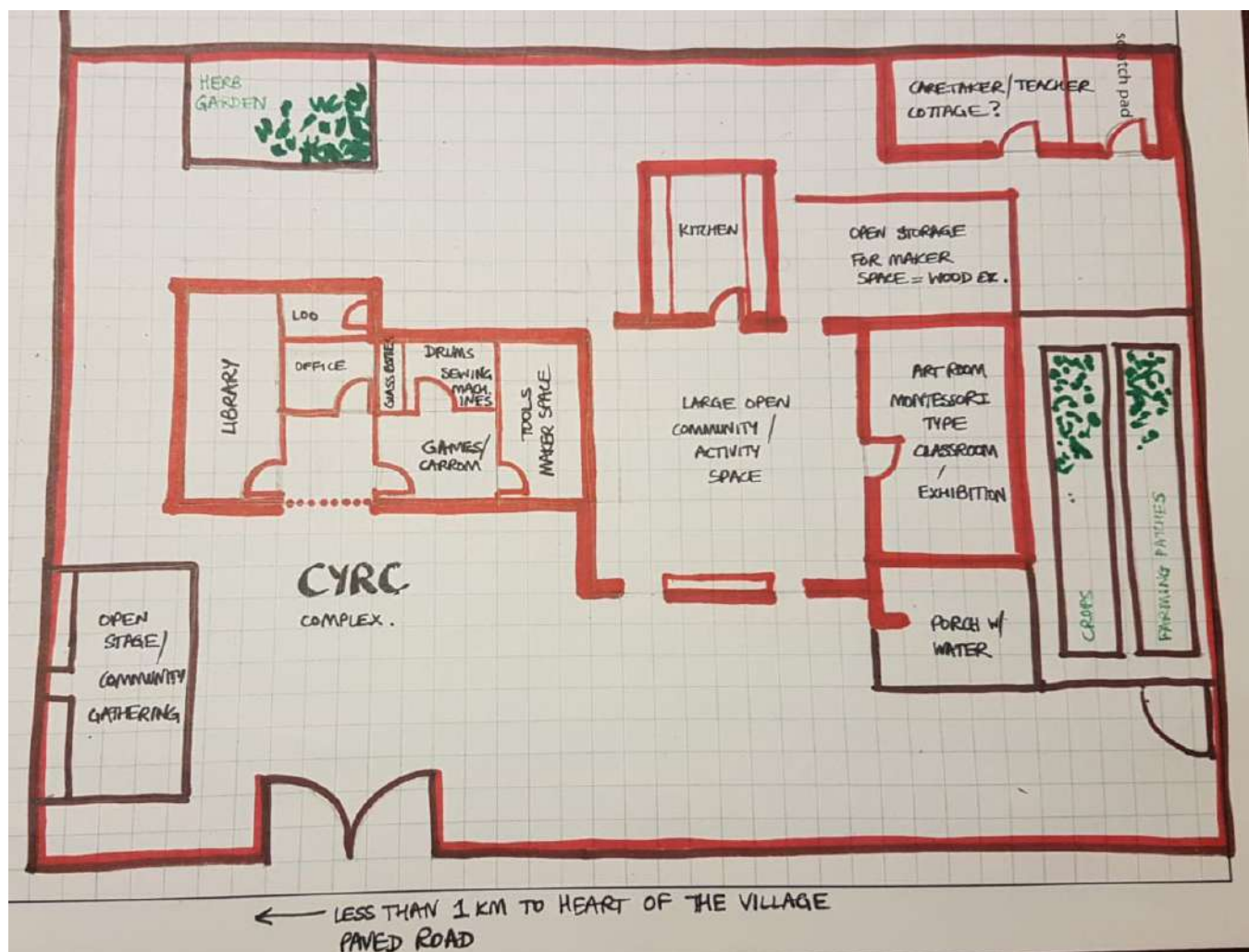
The existing CYRC is in Cheenakothapalli (CK Palli) and less than 1km from the Main Road and easily walkable by local kids. The anchor person is Alavelamma and she has a male assistant, both of whom I met and interacted with. There are two others who were out on outreach activities.

Currently, children from further away areas are transported to the CYRC in CKPalli, but this is a difficult task that requires time and resources for kids and Timbuktu. There seemed to be ample justification for two new CYRC locations.

Building of CYRCs in Ramagiri (complete) and Roddam (to be built by Dec) are in progress. The decision to expand was on the basis of the success and heavy use of the CK Palli CYRC.

The CK Palli CYRC layout contains the following activity spaces, each of which are well used:

- Outdoor Community gathering / stage space
- Library
- Games, materials, instruments & other storage rooms
- Makers space with hand tools and power tools (& outdoor storage)
- Multi-purpose open hall
- Art room / Montessori type space
- Farming patch & Herb Garden





- **Outdoor Community gathering / stage space**

Used by the village for community gatherings, festivals etc. Some of these gatherings are initiated through the CYRC programs and some initiated by the villagers themselves.



- **Library**

Accessible to all children and youth, books are sorted by Alavelamma by age. The books seemed too random to me to be a useful resource for the kids and was more like an avenue for further exposure. Paroma and Maddy explained that they have created a tie up with a publication which has supplied them a more attractive and more useful set of books that has been used in the Mobile CYRC. Maddy said that he intends to use some money for continuing this tie-up with the publisher and getting a more curated set of books that will make sense for the context.



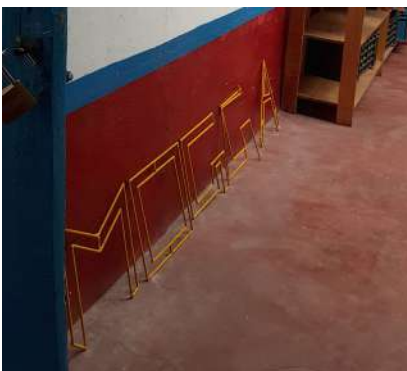
- **Games, materials, instruments & other storage rooms**

Looks to be well used and well taken care of board games, carrom boards and other borrow and play equipment. They also have some bins for bottles etc. used for new creations.



- **Makers space with hand tools and power tools (& outdoor storage)**

This is a relatively new and hugely successful program for youth who are thrilled to learn new skills and make useful things. An array of hand and power tools helps kids learn how to simple carpentry, weld, paint etc. This program also has the biggest potential boost confidence for youth in creating utilitarian items for their lives and encourages engineer-thinking.



- **Multi-purpose open hall**

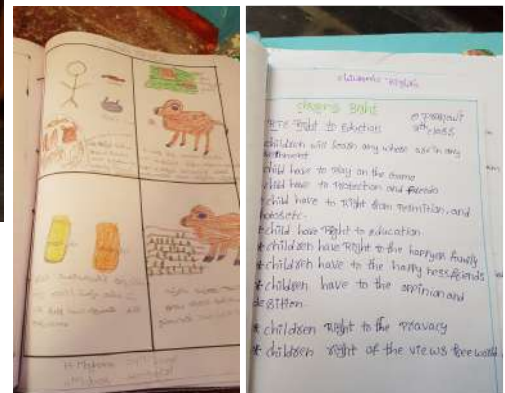
The heart of the center used for play, programs and activities, competitions, gatherings and more.





- **Art room / Montessori type space**

This was another space where Alavelamma seemed to come alive. Many artistic, cultural and value based activities on display here and you can see the connection and pride in the displays. Some vocational training also happens as girls and women are taught how to weave some craft items for sale.



- **Gardening patch & Herb Garden**

Children are taught to garden and introduced to agricultural skills that they may not have picked up on from their parents. New skills, knowledge and principles are picked up by youth through programs conducted in these spaces.



Overall Impression & Recommendation

The value of the CYRC is evident in how heavily it is being used and I estimate the impact on the local communities to be high. Not only is it a cultural and connective hub for the community, it appears to be a safe space for local children and youth who seem to look up to Alavelamma and the male "teacher" as role models and parental figures to discuss their aspirations and dreams with. CYRC seems to impart contextual and relevant knowledge and offers an important community function that is part of the fabric of the overall empowerment of locals. Alavelamma and staff are very intimately aware of the area children, their abilities, their potential and their issues. The space and programming is diligently used.

Special mention is deserved for how fantastically the place is kept. Clean, tidy and everything in good repair, it is evident that those who work here care for the center as an extension of their own homes and take pride in their work and the space that supports it. It is no easy task to maintain the CYRC at almost Japanese level care.

High recommendation for Asha Bangalore to continue funding this center. Kadoorie Foundation may consider extended funding in the future and the Asha Steward may want to continue to converse with our Project Partner on this. One issue may be how to measure the impact of such a resource center on the community. They don't have any metrics at the moment but I believe the effort well worth continuing. For now, they are reliant on Asha Bangalore funds to continue the work being done and I have no reservations recommending continued funding.