

## **Report of the Project Manigal for gypsy children at Thiruvanmiyur (2016)**

Project Manigal has completed over ten years in the gypsy colony of Thiruvanmiyur. In 2005 a modest beginning was made in the colony of 60 odd families living in an exclusive ghetto of their own. Our observations were -

- The group was totally excluded from mainstream educational opportunities.
- Hardly anybody was literate in the colony and families needed help in reading their names on ration cards or the contents of other documents they had.
- Children enrolled were not attending school or were not progressing in learning.
- Most of the children joined their parents in rag picking or in garbage clearing.

In this scenario Project Manigal took up the task of educating the gypsy children as a challenge. But it was not an easy task and the road blocks were many - from the community, from parents, from unwilling children and from educational systems not used to the unruly and independent ways of the gypsies. We tenaciously persisted despite many difficulties and setbacks and slowly inched our way forward.

What began as a non-formal education centre in the colony in 2004 extended to participation in neighbourhood schools in 2005. As our understanding of the unique problems in gypsy education increased, we responded flexibly and innovatively. We adapted our responses to ground realities and built from there with no preconceived solutions. We focussed on providing teacher resources to give personalized attention and quality educational inputs. Daily follow up with parents and community went hand in hand. As the children and community responded positively to the initiatives we renewed our efforts each year to sustain them in the schooling process.

At the end of 10 years,

- We have some educated youth in the colony. The community can turn to them for reading ration card names, mails/letters or for filling in forms and they no longer have to ask outsiders.
- Gone are the days when we saw almost all children with garbage bags and catapults. Now we have some children adept at sending What's App messages. At the slightest drizzle, they expectantly send messages enquiring whether it is a rain holiday. A couple of children can send e-mails as well.

So one generation of children is quietly changing.

These are some visible indicators. Other changes that are deeper and more subtle can be seen in the children who have been educated with the help of the project.

Besides schooling there are several issues in the colony which needed intervention. Since we lacked the volunteer bandwidth, we focussed on the single most issue of education which we perceived has the capacity to empower the community

### **Profiles of the children that the project has been following up.**

1. C. Velankanni has appeared for final year B. Com. this year (in 2016). After she completed the Chennai Primary School, we followed up her education in middle and high school. She was the first child to complete 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Board exams from the colony.

Velankanni joined the Avvai Home girls hostel in Class 6 and completed her schooling there. Additional learning support was given to her throughout.

Her school and a company, Inautiks India, decided to sponsor her college education. She took admission and stayed in a hostel. She is awaiting her results.

2. K. Ajith was the next child to clear 12<sup>th</sup> in 2015. He was given additional coaching to cope with his 12<sup>th</sup> subjects and clear the exams. Earlier he had stayed at RMK hostel and cleared his 10<sup>th</sup>. He has taken admission in first year in college.

3. G. Vasanth has appeared for Class 12 exams this year (2016) and is waiting for his results. The Project had been following up his education since he was in Chennai primary school. Earlier he had stayed at Sivananda Hostel and completed his 10<sup>th</sup>.

Vasanth has taken vocational stream in his Plus1 and Plus 2 courses in Anna School.



G. Vasanth





S. Sivaraj



M. Doraimurugan

4. Three children, Doraimurugan, Nethaji and Shivaraj, passed Class 10 last year (2015). This is the first batch who stayed in the colony, commuting to school as day scholars and passed the Board exams. These children are pursuing Plus 1 courses in schools nearby. The Project continues to give learning support by way of tuitions during after-school hours.



G. Vasanth, S. Shivaraj and M. Doraimururan then at primary school Aishwarya, vijayalakshmi and jayanthi are others.

5. E. Vijay returned from RMK hostel after being sick half way through the academic year. His mother too died recently. The family decided to educate him as a day scholar and E. Vijay was helped to gain admission in Anna school in Class 8. He is continuing school and he is being helped with additional coaching. The child is staying with his brother's family.



E. Vijay



Sharan

6. Sharan, studying in Class 9 at Thiruvannamiyur Corporation School was admitted in a hostel by his father early this year. Half way through 9<sup>th</sup>, the child did not like the place and returned home. Getting readmission in November was a problem. The Chennai floods further delayed the process and all schools refused admission late in the academic year in Jan 2016. Currently the Project has arranged for coaching so that he is in touch with his subjects and can continue his studies in the next academic year.

7. Kashi, studying in Class 10, dropped out at the beginning of the academic year. Three of his friends had passed 10<sup>th</sup> and moved to a new school. He followed them to the new school by taking admission there. However he felt unsettled and dropped out. He has joined his father at work.





Vikram



Vikram then at primary

8. Vikram is studying in 8<sup>th</sup> standard at Thiruvannmiyur School. A bright child till 5<sup>th</sup> after he moved to middle school he became irregular. Last year he was in a district with his family and stayed away for four months. But subsequently he came back and rejoined school. With other gypsy boys joining him this year, he had been very regular.

## Hostel children

Due to special circumstances in the family a few children have joined hostels. All the hostel children are helped with uniforms and other supplies necessary for the hostel.

- G Vijay completes his 9<sup>th</sup> at RMK hostel . Next year he will appear for 10<sup>th</sup> Board exam. After completing 5<sup>th</sup> in Chennai Primary School he joined hostel for Class 6 and he is quite settled there. During holidays the Project help in English learning.
- M. Ajeet is studying in 8<sup>th</sup> at RMK hostel . After he completed 4<sup>th</sup> his family moved to Vettuvanganni. The project tracked the family at Neelankarai beach and got him admitted in Vettuvanganni school from where he completed his 5<sup>th</sup>. Subsequently the family was helped to fulfil all the hostel formalities and gain admission at the

hostel. The family has admitted their two younger children in a local school at Vettuvanganni on their own.



- Ajeet then at primary



Nagaraj

- After Nagaraj completed his 5<sup>th</sup> the family admitted him in a hostel. The child has a hearing problem with holes in his membrane. He had consultations at hospitals but doctors ruled out the possibility of a surgery. He is unable to use a hearing aid. He is in seventh and the family has sent him off to Andhra and it is not clear whether he can continue his studies for long.



Meera, Shalini and Sharoni

- Meera and her sister Shalini are studying in primary at Thakkar Baba hostel after they lost their father. Their cousin Sharoni too joined them and the three settled down well in the hostel. However we are told that the hostel is closing down this year and in the next academic year they will study as day scholars.
- S. Shyam will complete Class 4 and enter class 5 at Shivananda Hostel.
- Santhosh, an orphan, is staying at ICCW hostel and is studying in Class 1 under RTE. The child was staying elsewhere and after his mother's death he was left at his aunt's place in the colony. At the request of relatives and others in the colony he was admitted in the hostel.

### **Indra Nagar Primary School**

It is the learning inputs given at Chennai Primary School and the follow-up undertaken in the colony that has helped in changing the educational scenario of the gypsies. A few years back children remained in the primary school for a few years and then joined their parents at work. Now parents want children to continue education beyond primary.

When we started ten years ago, the children's levels and the classes in which they were enrolled did not match. Children were uninterested or



would disturb the class as they could not comprehend what was happening. They would loiter in the corridors and it was a disturbance to teachers and other children. Instead of blaming them or dismissing them as disinterested, we went their way and devised ways for engaging them by starting with activities that interested them like dice games. Board games, drawings. Over time, using a variety of learning materials, starting from level of the child, changing activities the moment they were bored, giving variety of choices and making children confident as learners were some of the methods we employed. Opportunities to converse and express in their own language made them comfortable in the school setting.



It was a challenge for the project teachers to go back to lower level (class) concepts and cover them in a shorter time so that children can keep pace with their own class books and other children of the school. Children enjoyed doing what they knew already and there were several opportunities for them to work on simpler concepts. When they were ready to move on to the next level, learning was gradually built up.

Because the gypsy communities often travel, some children have prolonged absences from school. Earlier, children who returned back to school after prolonged absence didn't fit in the scheme and felt disinterested and could not comprehend what was happening in the class. With special attention given in the Project, such children too have opportunities to catch up and stay in the school system.

In the beginning years, at the slightest opportunity, children would sneak out of the school into the colony. This was causing a lot of tension to the school teachers. Many a time-Project staff were making a second trip to the colony to call such children back. Now the gypsies are more settled. Regularity of the children has improved. Primary children no longer miss school on Fridays as a rule. As their levels have improved, their confidence too has grown and they are willing to engage in learning. The Project teachers visit the colony daily and keep track of all the school-going children of the colony.





Inside the school a variety of activities and learning materials are used to make learning interesting for gypsy children. From a bridge course approach we were able to move to the text books as children's learning levels have improved. The Project assesses the learning levels of the children and gives special attention to those lagging behind. This year a variety of teaching materials and audio visual learning aids such as laptop is used to reinforce learning in the school and in the colony. The children leaving the primary school are on par with other children and will be able to cope with the Class 6 syllabus.





## LKG section of the school.

The project donated a variety of preschool teaching aids to the newly started LKG section of the school. The LKG teacher of the school is using the material to conduct activity based learning for the children.



Starting of the LKG in the school is of great help to the gypsy families as they do not have access to other preschool facilities. Settling down in school early helps them to continue in the schooling process.



Earlier gypsy children had no access to any early childhood education . The only balwadi (run for them in the colony by an NGO) closed long back.



### **Evening coaching**

As there is no learning environment in the colony, gypsy children face difficulties as they move up the education ladder. Even bright students lag behind as they go off to thiruvizhas off and on. Hence the project arranges for tuition for children studying in high school. Younger children are given help in the colony.

After school help is given to children admitted to English medium schools under RTE. The teachers normally sit on the road behind the colony and take classes as there is no proper place in the colony. We are trying to identify tutors to whose houses the RTE children could go and read/do home work in the evenings. One of the children, Bharat, is having learning difficulties and the child is being observed to see whether he is a special needs child.

## **Children in other colonies.**

A lot of support is needed for gypsy families to keep their children in school. We have seen that when families move away to other gypsy colonies, the chances of the children remaining in school go down.

Balamurugan, Meena and Perumal were all coached by Manigal Project staff at the primary school. The family moved to Navalur and the education of the three children was discontinued. The project tracked them down at Navalur and helped get admission to Sivananda Hostel. However after a year, the family decided to educate them at Navalur itself. We hear from relatives that they are still continuing their education.

Chokkamma is another child who completed 5<sup>th</sup> at Indra Nagar and the family continued education at a local aided school till 8<sup>th</sup> at Pallavaram.

Vasanthi completed 5<sup>th</sup> at Indra Nagar school and her family moved to Mahabalipuram and she and her siblings dropped out. We could not succeed in convincing the family to continue the education of the children and the family was not willing to try the hostel option either.

Similarly Saravanan and his sister dropped out from primary after moving to Vettuvanganni. We admitted them in Vettuvanganni primary school but they didn't survive in the school system .

Krishna was one of the first children who joined middle school among boys. He studied at the Olcott memorial School till 8<sup>th</sup> and experimented by staying in the hostel for a year. But in 9<sup>th</sup> he left the hostel and as a day scholar it was hard to be regular and he dropped out in 9<sup>th</sup>. He is currently working as a house keeper in the guest house of a company.. His family too moved to Navalur. Krishna however regrets that he did not complete his 10<sup>th</sup>. Whenever he sees other children completing 10<sup>th</sup> and continuing in higher classes, he enquires whether he can do so too. But it has been difficult to follow up as he is not seen in the colony much.

## **Transition from a freer and traditional way of life.**

Despite being talented, many of the gypsy children lag behind as there is no learning environment in the colony. With no follow up at home, learning at higher levels becomes a problem. As they grow older,



children have their own mind. They have their own groups and agendas and bunk school often. Bright children who do well in primary lapse back if they receive no special attention in the new schools.

Persuading and cajoling one generation to stay in school and complete the school cycle seemed essential to break the mental barriers that existed in the colony. As one set of children cross the milestones, the feat seems doable for the next lot. But progress is not smooth or predictable, and Project input is still needed for each new generation.

### **The challenges for girl children**

As Chennai Primary School ends with Class 5, for many girls adjustment in middle school seems to be a problem. Going to far off schools on time and regularly is an issue which hampers their education. Girls are also expected to help in fetching water and in taking care of younger siblings if the mother is busy. Parents do not show much seriousness when it comes to girls education in higher classes.

In the earlier years we have had Jayanthi, Aishwarya, Vijayakshmi , Bhanu all of whom successfully completed primary school. But over the years in far off middle schools, as they attained age, they lost interest in schooling and joined families in garbage cleaning work. Aishwarya was the most promising of the lot. But after her father died, she joined her mother at work. Sarasu, Soundarya and Devyani are the next batch of students who completed 5<sup>th</sup> successfully and joined Avvai Home. They dropped out in 7<sup>th</sup> after attaining age. Devyani is now married. Bhanu too is married and has a child too.

These are some recollections of efforts, not all of which were successful. But the efforts ensured that they got a good foundation till 5<sup>th</sup> and experience of schooling for a few more years.

### **Overall impact on the life of the gypsies in the colony**

In some ways, the lifestyle of the colony has been changed by the participation of gypsy children in the Project.

Velankanni's first step of clearing 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> and entering college has opened the doors for others. Many parents now see the possibility of

educating their children beyond the primary school and we have several children continuing in middle and high school

Doraimurugan, Nethaji and Sivaraj showed that it is possible to live in the colony and commute to school and pass Board exams too. In earlier years, gypsy parents considered hostel as the only option for educating their children beyond primary school. With special attention given to the gypsy children in the primary school and their learning levels improving, more and more gypsy parents are preferring to continue their education as day scholars.

The Project has served as a link between middle schools and parents and helped the gypsies in gaining access to the middle schools in the initial stages. It negotiated with various authorities and created necessary spaces for their entry into educational systems out of bounds for them. It assisted them in fulfilling school formalities. Sometimes their birth certificates are searched and downloaded from the net and sometimes help is given to get caste certificates. The project constantly visited the schools, ensured that the children have settled down well and also followed up suggestions given by the school regarding their attendance, punctuality and learning.

Over the years the schools are getting used to having gypsy parents amidst them. The confidence levels of the parents in dealing with mainstream schools has also grown and now the transition is smooth. Usually a new entrant to Class 6 tags along to a gypsy child studying in a middle school and adjustment is easier to the parent and child.

The confidence and trust of the parents in education too has improved and they do not keep calling children from school during school hours. Even during thiruvizhas many families leave the children at home or make the children commute from the local thiruvizha site rather than make them miss school for 10 days.

The issue of retaining gypsies in the school system had been tenacious and daunting task. Follow up tailored to the individual needs of the children is helping in sustaining them in the schooling process. Slowly, but steadily the children are moving up the educational ladder. It is for the educated gypsy youth to negotiate with the modern world and the traditional strengths of their community and strike a balance.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Immunization**

When a couple of Hepatitis B cases were detected in the colony while admitting children in hostel, the Project followed up with Liver Foundation and arranged for an immunization drive in the colony. About 130 members - children and parents from the colony got all three shots at regular intervals.

The ones who were not present during the drive were followed up and taken to the hospital and helped to get their shots . It was a difficult task taking all of them in the 29 C bus and commuting for an hour, but the community too cooperated and understood that it was an important task.

Some of the community members had relatives in Kottur and they requested that a camp be organized there. Bases on their suggestion a camp was held in Kottur. However as we didn't know the Kottur colony at that time, organizing an immunization drive was far more difficult . After the first drive some lost interest and many didn't show up for the second dose. Only fifty percent, about 80 members, completed all three doses, Thus it was only a partial success. Yet there was some awareness raised and the process helped to build relationships with the community.



## **Appendix 2**



## Flood relief

During Chennai floods and rain, the colony was inundated. All the material they had accumulated for sorting and recycling was soiled or washed away. They were without work for a month because of rain. The Project arranged for the distribution of bedsheets and towels. It also distributed old clothes and miscellaneous items.





