

Site Visit Report - March 2-3, 2020

Background

Karthik grew up in the Karumbalai locality of Madurai town amidst many challenges. Education was never a priority in his family and he overcame it to become the first graduate in his family. After graduating, he continued to work at the same centres which once supported him. He was keen on helping others in the same way he was helped by others. His project, Madurai SEED, is funded by Asha Boston since 2007-08 and in 2013, he became an Asha Fellow and is supported by Asha Boston.

Site visit

I visited the centres on the evening of March 2nd and had discussions with Karthi separately on March 3rd. The centres have been segregated age-wise catering to students from class 1 to 12th. Karumbalai is a backward locality in Madurai and most families in the locality belong to the lower strata of the economic classification. These centres offer them space to pursue their studies after school without distraction. The infrastructure offered is fairly primitive and constrained by the uncertainty of tenancy of the place. The volunteers, who were once students of these centres, are mostly studying in colleges and engage in this work during their evening hours.

Chat with Karthik Bharathi

On March 3rd, I met him for a freewheeling chat about various topics. Karthik was very open in conversing about his work, the society around him, support from other agencies, his views on Asha, and others.

The activities undertaken by Karthik are well intended and the needed of the community. He is a good role model and an example for others in the community to emulate. His story of struggles against odds will inspire many others to continue their education without dropping out earlier. He has some schemes in place like scholarships that partly finances children's education. He has also started savings schemes for children to learn to save money for their education. The diverse activities that he is engaged in with the children creates wonderful opportunities for many children to express their talents and engage in productive use of their time, outside school hours.

I was trying to understand his perspectives on what the fellowship means to him and the activities that he proposes to undertake through it. While he is clear about his role in current projects and the desired outcomes, I feel that he need to start looking into the future. Many of the issues that he is addressing currently, like awareness on the importance of education, may not exist in the future. However, there will be issues in upgrading the quality of education, using education to bridge social and economic gaps, etc. We tried to look at the problems that could emerge in the social structure and how he could address it.

One of the biggest challenges for his project has been the lack of space. Being an Urban centre, it is highly unlikely that the project can ever get its own space in future. Moreover, such investment may not be the right deployment of funds either. The

sustainability of the current scholarship schemes that are provided to students were also discussed. The second area is the frequent change in volunteers. Since many of them are college students, they move out either due to higher education or work or family, sooner or later. This is not a challenge by itself, as long as Karthik can attract new volunteers on a regular basis. But, the uncertainty and training the volunteers always presents a challenge. Karthik can consider developing training workshops for volunteers on children psychology, education philosophy and other areas before they take up their roles as volunteers. He must also emphasise that such volunteering initiatives add significant value to their career.

In the past, Karthik was publishing a journal called '*Pudhuyugam*' with collected works of his students, volunteers, and his own writings. It has been suspended due to lack of funds. I had requested him to re-start the project in digital format as it would present a window for interested people to know about his work. It would also serve as an excellent archive for future reference.

I feel Karthik must be given opportunities to participate in larger forums and workshops to discuss about his work. It must be part of the fellowship requirements for him to participate in these programs.

Site visit by - S. Balaji, sbalaji1@gmail.com