

Shaaron Special School Site Visit Report
Rajapalayam, Tamilnadu, India.

Today's Date- 3/25/16

Date Visited- 2/23/16

Visitors-

Asha for Education Toledo- Ganesh Iyer, Pallavi Iyer

Rotary Club of Madurai- V. Krishnamurthy, K. Padmini

Recommendations

- Continue support for salary of special educators
- Consider extending support to improve physiotherapy facilities and physical aid equipment to improve quality of life of the children in and outside of the school
- Support school to improve their donor base, be self-reliant and if possible get further government support.

Journey To Rajapalayam

Pallavi and I were in India in February and were visiting Chennai for a family function. Since, Shaaron School project (for which I am the project steward) is also in Tamilnadu, we decided that we would pay a visit to the school. Our close friend and India project coordinator – Amar Ramesh Babu, arranged for some tatkal train tickets for us to go to Rajapalayam and also helped coordinate our visit with the school.

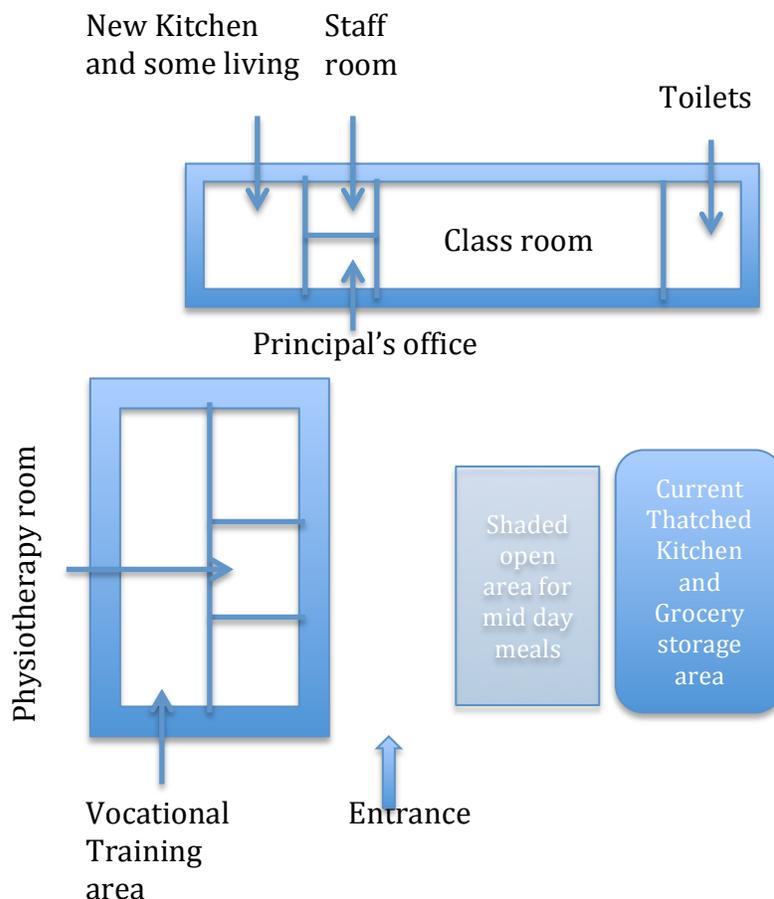
The train journey from Chennai to Rajapalayam in Podigai Express is an overnight journey. We got down at Madurai station, which is a few stations prior to Rajapalayam. Here we met our Uncle and Aunt, V. Krishnamurthy and Padmini Krishnamurthy who are also committed Rotary Club volunteers and work for various social causes in the Madurai and surrounding areas. Hearing about Shaaron School and the work they are doing, both of them were very interested in visiting the school and decided to accompany us. After freshening up and having superb lunch prepared by my Aunt, my uncle drove us to Rajapalayam in spite of suffering from high fever. But with the family chit chat and catching up to do, all was forgotten very soon and we had a jolly ride to Rajapalayam.

The drive to Rajapalam is very mixed. You first encounter the big Madurai city and lush green fields. But soon the land turns barren and dry as you pass through Virudhunagar and Shivakasi. Shivakashi is the closest large town near Rajapalayam and is famous all over the world for its fireworks manufacturing. The next small town we crossed was Shrivilliputhur, with its prominent “Andal” temple Koburam standing out on the flat land. However, during the last stretch of the drive, hills and mountains seem to emerge from nowhere. But they were still far away from the main road.

My first impression on entering Rajapalaym was that of a semi arid small town with a beautiful skyline of mountains and hills in the backdrop. As soon as we entered the town we were greeted by rows of spinning mills on both sides of the road. I was told that these are textile mills for spinning cotton. T. Prema the principal of the school was in constant touch with us during the trip to ensure that we were taking the right route and having a safe journey. On entering Rajapalayam, I called her and she arranged for one of the school volunteers to guide us to the school. The school is across the railway station and seemed to be at the other end of the town on the outskirts.

First Impression of Shaaron Special School

When we reached the school, Miss T. Prema and other school staff welcomed us with garlands and thanked us for visiting them and the continued support. My first take on Shaaron School is that it is small and only fit to accommodate upto 35-50 students. In my opinion the school might need more construction if they need to grow. They did say that they had plans to construct a second floor as a class room and residential school area but it did not workout due to lack of funds. The school layout looks somewhat like this,



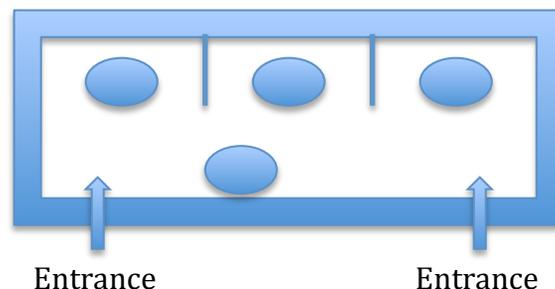
Meeting at the Principal's Office

Initially we had a meeting with Miss T. Pream in her office. My uncle had a few questions about how she chose this line of work and how they operate. She explained that she was inspired during her education and then by her teachers to help mentally challenged children. After a brief period of working elsewhere, she started a school in Rajapalayam. Based on the conversation, initially we thought the school started in 1998, but subsequently when my uncle asked for clarification I spoke to Miss Prema after the visit and got clarity that she initially was just working in make shift facilities. The present permanent school facility was only established in the 2004-2008 time frame. She seemed like a one-man army, working as a special educator at the school, taking care of administrative work, working to raise funds and donations etc. But, by no means is she alone in the school. We noticed, 5 teachers/special educators, 1-physiotherapist, a cook and a couple of helpers. She also runs private tuitions at home for speech therapy, dyslexia and other kind of therapy for children from Rajapalayam and other cities for a fee. She indicated that she donates half the money she rises through her tuitions to support the school. When enquired if the school had affiliation with other Christian organizations in the area and if they received any support from them. She said that they were not affiliated with the Church. Also, the Church runs its own school in another town with similar goals. However they do get Rs.500 donation from some church. My uncle asked her if she got free food grains from the government program for her mid day meals. She said that she did not avail it because the quality of the food was not good. She felt that these children deserved good food at least once a day and she could not find it in her heart to feed them bad food. So from the funding the school receives, the first thing she spends on is about Rs.15000 per month on grocery.

Tour of the School

The Main Class Room

After discussing for about an hour, we went on a tour of the school. We spent time with each of the teachers while they were teaching a group of children in the school. The main classroom is a big hall with three big tables by the window and one small table on the floor for small kids. Each table had one teacher and 5-7 kids sitting around it. The picture below shows how the classroom is laid out.



One of the teachers on the right most tables was a volunteer for that day as one of their staff was on leave. He was teaching the children how to read letters and numbers. He explained to us how some children can only recognize letters and some only numbers and how difficult it is for them to even get to that point without daily training. The three tables had a mix of both young and older kids, which confused us. The other teacher explained to us that the three tables in a way indicate three different levels of mental development of the children and it did not matter how old the child or person was. On the next table they were teaching the kids to color on a coloring book. On the third table the teacher was reading to the children and at the same time communicating with them to get them to reciprocate.

The table on the floor was all the little kids. When we started to talk to them they were all so excited and happy in their response. The teacher teaching the kids had been with the school as a helper for the last 10yrs or so. She was so inspired by working at the school that she decided to get a degree in Special Education. She had come back to the school to do her 1yrs internship as required for her course work. We encouraged her to do an internship with some other school so that she gets some outside exposure. She said that she wanted to come back to this school because she liked the work environment and other personal reasons.

The Physiotherapy Room

Then we went to the physiotherapy room. This is a really tiny room with barebones physiotherapy equipment. Other than equipment donated by Asha Toledo in 2014 all of other equipment were rudimentary and made with the help of a local metalworker or carpenter. They had a walker, that was old and rusted and I think would be very difficult for even adults to walk with. They have a dedicated physiotherapist (a young girl just out of school) who showed us how they had come up with their own idea to make some motor function equipment and built it with the help of the local carpenter. It was really cool to see how they were being innovative and doing their best in a rural setup with limited resources and funding. But this is definitely an area in which they need significant support. We were told that there are 13 children who have physical disability and need physiotherapy daily. We asked them to pay more attention to physiotherapy. We asked them to seek donations to improve their physiotherapy infrastructure and support equipment that children would need in the school and at their homes. My uncle suggested that they should have a senior physiotherapy doctor from Madurai come by and evaluate the children to recommend necessary equipment. He also offered to introduce Miss Prema to some doctors in Madurai who work on similar lines.

We asked them if they had a physiatrist evaluate the children. They said that they only have a physical come regularly and do medical check ups. But did not have any physiatrist help. Again we recommended that they have some physiatrist from Madurai come and do some regular check ups.

Vocational Training Room

Finally we visited the vocational training room. Here there were 8-10 children/young adults making decorative items using ice cream sticks. Two girls were learning to make decorative items and jewelry with beads. They also had a manual machine to make envelopes that was broken. We were told that the machine was donated to the school by a local printing house. It served a dual purpose of training the children in some activity and also helped generate some funds for the school by selling it back to the printing house. But when it went out of business they could not get a person to help fix the equipment. They also had an old typewriter which was not being used. I asked them why would they not train the students in typing. They thought it was a good idea but did not think that the children have reached that level of mental development. We discussed if the youth could be trained for some activities that would give them employment in the local spinning mills. But again they said that they don't have that level of mental development.

When asked why that is the case, we learnt how different the life of these mentally challenged children in rural areas was. The children are very neglected in their homes. Most parents don't know what to do with these children. The children are unruly and don't even know how to clean up after they go to the toilet. Most children show up at the school at an older age. Unlike young kids who are more receptive to special education, it is very difficult to mend the ways of the older kids. The school spends months making the nature of the children calmer and teaching them to maintain themselves. After the school has put in all this effort many a times the children discontinue due to family or social reasons. The school has to persuade their parents to send them back which they generally do after they become unruly again. So the school has to go through the effort of retraining the children again. Due to the lack of awareness in the rural areas the school not only has to educate the kids but also educate the parents. From this we learnt that the school puts in a lot of effort into "behavioral therapy and rehabilitation" which is not even mentioned or discussed openly. It takes tons of more effort than just teaching kids to read and write

Miss Prema told us that the school at its own cost sends auto-rickshaws to the nearby villages to pick up the children every day and then drops them off. This is a major expense for the school. Even then some children drop out now and then. Since the cost of running the school and the transportation is growing and is putting a huge burden on the school, recently the board members have imposed a fee of Rs.500 per child. But only half of the parents are paying the fee and even they do not pay the whole amount. Most of them pay around Rs.200. The school worked with the government to get the parents financial aid from the governments. But as soon as they got aid, many children dropped out of the school as the parents wanted to keep the money to themselves because of their own financial situation.

However, Miss Prema mentioned that a software company from Bangalore has approached them to provide vocational training to a couple of autistic kids. She explained that in some studies autistic kids have been found to be very good at computers. So they were going to experiment with this if they find a suitable candidate in their school. Some one was going to visit Bangalore for this purpose.

Funding Discussion

After the school tour we again sat down with Miss Prema to discuss the funding situation of the school. I told her that Asha Toledo might be able to continue funding for the school for another 6 months to a year. But we would like to see the school more self-reliant, less dependent on Asha in the future and have a broader donor base. She explained that Asha is currently their major and most important donor as we address their primary problem of teacher's salary. She said that it has relieved a major stress on the school and helped it concentrate on the children's education without any worries. She said that in the past she had tried to get funding from Lion's club and Rotary club. But did not have much success. She also tried to get local patrons to sponsor the school, but they dismissed her school as unimportant for the society. She tried to get support from a nearby cement factory but they did not keep their promise. The Tamilnadu government provides some salary for the teachers but it is insufficient and it is not guaranteed. They hold off payment every year and there are frequent advances from government officials to pay bribes to get their rightful money. She is totally against paying any kind of bribe and hence sees it very difficult to get any additional funding from the state government. We asked her if she has tried for central government funding- she did not seem much aware of how she could secure such funding.

My uncle offered to help her with Rotary Club if she was interested in securing funding from them. He explained that Rotary had a new initiative to help education of mentally challenged children and there was international funding for it. So he asked her to approach the local rotary club. He said that he could help her with the documentation and the procedures. He also offered to introduce her other NGO's in the Madurai area who could guide her on how to get private and government funding. We explained to her that it is not possible that every government official is corrupt because there are other NGO's getting funding. We just need to find out our rights and the proper contacts and procedures. Pallavi also offered to introduce her to other Asha projects from whom she could learn to get corporate social responsibility (CSR) and government funding. It just seemed like her bad experiences had made her reluctant to approach for funding agencies. But after we explained to her, she seemed more open and ready to try and learn about other opportunities.

Leaving Rajapalayam

After our discussions, we gave Miss Preema a few teaching aids and chocolates we had brought with us from the US. She was very grateful and thanked us for thinking about their needs. We also took some group photos with the staff and with Suresh, one of the boys in the school who seemed to be fond of us. Suresh drew a couple of greeting cards and presented it to us while we were there. My uncle and aunt left for Madurai at about 4 pm. We were scheduled to catch the 8pm train from Rajapalayam to Chennai. Since we had nowhere to go, it was very kind of Miss Preema to take us to her home and give us dinner. We were at her house for a couple of hours, where we saw her teaching two small mentally challenged girls. She explained that one of the girls was completely uncontrollable. But through her persistent behavioral therapy over a period of 3 months she has calmed and now cooperates. The other kid seemed to have a speech disorder and was learning to read. Miss Preema was explaining that she has to work 8 am to 8pm continuously all day to keep up with the school and her tuitions. She hardly gets any time for her daughter who was playing with us all the time we were at her home. Pallavi and I were amazed at how she had dedicated her life to the cause of mentally challenged children and how hard she worked all day. Finally she arranged for a rickshaw to take us to the railway station. The Rajapalayam railway station on a full moon day looked calm and pleasant and reminded me of the small town Kirkee railway station near my house where I grew up. Both Pallavi and I had a good feeling for having come this far to visit Shaaron special school. We sure have lots to do for this school, but at the end of the day both of us felt that we were working with a trustworthy and dedicated partner and on a worthy cause.