

Sankaran Tata Play Center — Visit Report

Submitted to: Asha for Education

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Introduction

On July 9–10, 2026, I visited four Sankaran Tata Play Centers run by Ramalaxmi and her team, supporting tribal children across the Paderu, Pedabayalu and G Madugula mandals. These are not schools in the conventional sense. They are play centers — informal, community-rooted spaces that help bridge tribal children into the formal schooling system. I use “play center” or “center” throughout this report, since that is the more accurate description of what I saw.

My visits were informal by design: conversations with teachers and field coordinators, watching lessons unfold and interacting with the children directly wherever I could. I stayed in G Madugula for these visits and reaching some of the centers meant long bike rides over difficult terrain — ghat roads, isolated villages and in one case a village with no phone connectivity at all.

Against that backdrop, the centers I visited were Vantiveedula, Nanubari, Kuntumamidi and Mullumetta — in that order.

Overview of Play Centers (Register)

Language in this table is the children’s community language / mother tongue.

Village	GP	Mandal	Teacher (record)	Phone	Community	Language	Boys / Girls / Total	Center Started	Joined Residential School	Nearby Residential School	Nearest Govt. School
Vantiveedula	Kinchuru	Paderu	Killo Nageshwarrao	7382362106	Gouda	Odia	11 / 9 / 20	3.5 years	3	Araku, G Madugula	Kodapalli
Nanubari	Injeri	Pedabayalu	Killo Chilakamma	9009263125	Kondh	Kuvi	14 / 10 / 24	3 years	0*	Boithela	Kondru
Kuntumamidi	Bongaram	Pedabayalu	Anukuru Satyavati**	7013304270	Konda Dora	Telugu	12 / 7 / 19**	10 months	5	Bondapally	Bongaram
Mullumetta	Vanjari	G Madugula	Korra Paparao	9346606818	Kondh	Kuvi	17 / 11 / 28	10 years	3	Chintapally	Jorugumetta

* At Nanubari, 13 children have gone on to the MPP school in Kondru but continue attending this play center as well, so the “joined residential school” count of 0 refers specifically to residential schooling, not the MPP school transition.

** My visit notes list this center’s teacher as Krishna Kumari and the student count as 24; the register lists Anukuru Satyavati and 19.

Play Center Visits

Vantiveedula

Getting here took a while — a long ride on the back of the field coordinator's bike from G Madugula, along a ghat road, through forest. I arrived to find the center — a temporary shelter next to a church, built by villagers — full of children aged three to six. The teacher, Killo Nageshwarrao, has studied Intermediate (HEC). The center has been running for 3.5 years.

As I settled in, what was on the board caught my attention: the teacher was working through wild versus domestic animals and in English at that — which made me wonder whether this was too abstract and too much of a language leap, for children this young, especially given how limited their Telugu is and how different their mother tongue is to begin with. When the teacher asked the class directly, in English, which animals were wild and which were domestic, the room went quiet — which, at the time, felt like it confirmed my doubt.

But then I decided to try something myself. I turned it into a game: we named ourselves after animals, then I asked the children to sort themselves — wild animals to one side, domestic to the other. After a bit of hesitation, the older kids took charge of organizing everyone and the sorting came out right. That told me something important: the children understood the concept fine. They just hadn't responded to the way the question was originally framed. I walked away having revised my first impression of both the lesson and the teacher.

Nanubari

This visit did not go as planned. It was raining when we set out and visibility was low. After finishing at Vantiveedula, my program coordinator, Matsya Raju and I stayed overnight at a nearby village and from there continued on to Nanubari.

Raju took me to see the spot where the play center used to run before it was washed away by heavy rains and wind — and then showed me the big tree under which the center runs during the summer months instead. It struck me as a genuinely natural play center, shaped around the seasons and what the land allows.

The teacher, Killo Chilakamma, was on leave that day — someone in her family had passed away. Her home is in the same village, but it sits half a kilometer across a hill, which I learned is a completely normal distance for people to live from each other in this region. This village has no phone connectivity at all, so there was no way to give her advance notice of our visit.

Raju gathered the children himself, in front of a house on its veranda. There weren't many of them, but they were calm and attentive. We asked them to write numbers in English and do some basic addition. Even without a full formal session that day, the center's pull on families was clear: thirteen children from this center have transitioned to the MPP school in Kondru and still keep coming here as well.

What stayed with me most from this visit had little to do with numbers or addition. The woman in the house where we'd gathered the children was running a high fever and had been for four days, with no doctor contacted and no medicine taken. The nearest Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) lives in a neighboring

village. When we urged the family to get her seen, we couldn't even get a phone signal in the village to help arrange it; once we picked up signal elsewhere, we asked an RMP to go check on her. It was a stark, brief reminder of how thin health access can be in these areas.

It was a smaller, quieter visit than the others, but in some ways it told me the most about how resilient this effort is: a center that gets washed away and rebuilds under a tree, run by a teacher who walks across a hill to get to work, in a village that can't be reached by phone.

Kuntumamidi

I reached this center while it was raining — a proper drizzle. The center has only been running for about 10 months. The teacher I met that day was Krishna Kumari (Intermediate-educated and an MPH nursing intern); the register lists Anukuru Satyavati, so I've left both names noted in the overview table.

The center was temporarily running out of a private house's veranda, covered with tarpaulin and it was dark inside because of the rain. Finding a local teacher who actually understands the children's language is an ongoing struggle here — not a small problem, given how much language matters for these kids.

With the children, we worked through number words from 1 to 100, multiplication tables in English and three-number addition. Practice like this — saying the words, tables and simple multi-addends — could sit usefully across the centers.

There was also a lovely, if slightly funny, moment where a discussion came up about whether a horse and a rabbit count as wild or domestic — genuinely, I wasn't sure myself. Some animals live wild in the forest but are domesticated elsewhere and I didn't want to add to any confusion, so I let the teacher's judgment stand. People who actually live in the forest — including these children — often know these distinctions better than I do.

Mullumetta

The center has been running for 10 years — by far the longest-established of the ones I visited — and is run by Korra Paparao, who has completed Intermediate (HEC). The center itself is a single room with a metal-sheet roof, right next to church premises; an NGO based in Anakapalli helped fund the construction.

Paparao organized the children into three groups by ability rather than age, a pattern I noticed across these centers. Group A is the most advanced; Group C is for children who have recently joined. While Group C worked independently at the board, repeating Telugu alphabets, the teacher gave his direct attention to Groups A and B.

Then something happened that I genuinely didn't expect: several children in Group A introduced themselves — name, interests, their parents' names, what they wanted to become — entirely in English. They followed that with a short role-play using flash cards, built around a birthday party scene, also entirely in English. At one point the sequence went slightly out of order and afterward, one of the girls spoke up, unprompted, to point out exactly how it should have gone. I want to sit with that for a second — a tribal girl, in a community I'd been told is generally shy and reserved, correcting a mistake in front of everyone without hesitation. That confidence is

not something I expected to see and it says a great deal about what's possible here when the environment supports it.

The same energy carried into a quiz: the kids were nearly jumping out of their seats to answer — and it didn't feel like they were performing for me. It felt like they genuinely wanted to participate. The teacher himself came across as passionate, capable and — I'm fairly sure — formally trained at some point, which I think explains a lot of the difference I saw here compared with other centers. That kind of teaching is what Asha for Education is supporting here — and honestly, I'd like to go back.

This was, without question, the visit that stayed with me the most.

Overall Reflections

Looking back across the four visits, a few things stand out clearly.

The children are active and engaged wherever there's an opening for them — but as a rule they are shy and the girls even more so. That's part of what made moments like the girl in Mullumetta correcting the role-play sequence, or the eager hands going up during the quiz, feel so significant. It's not that these children lack confidence; it's that the environment doesn't always draw it out.

I also want to be honest that understanding this region — the community, the children and the teachers — properly takes more time than a single visit allows. I don't think I fully grasped everything I saw and I don't think one round of visits is enough to draw firm conclusions.

I noticed the curriculum now includes some basic English instruction, which wasn't the case the last time I visited this region. That's a real shift and I think it's already showing results — the English introductions and role-play at Mullumetta wouldn't have been possible without it. Number work of the kind we did at Kuntumamidi — saying words for 1 to 100, tables in English, three-number addition — could likewise be strengthened across the centers.

It's clear to me that the teachers haven't had formal training in some time. Every teacher I met struck me as genuinely motivated, but motivation on its own only goes so far — another round of practical, hands-on guidance would likely help them make even more of a difference for these children.

What I keep coming back to is how remarkable it is that these teachers are doing this work at all, given the conditions they're operating under. That kind of steadiness left an impression on me.

Separately, the physical reality of the centers needs attention: better infrastructure and more learning materials would go a long way. A single room with a metal roof, a veranda under tarpaulin, or a tree in the open are what these children currently have — and what they're managing within those constraints makes me think about what could be possible with even modest additional support.

I'm grateful to Ramalaxmi and her team and to the field coordinators who made these visits possible, for the time and trust they gave me.

Photos are available at: <https://1drv.ms/a/c/fe7e3b2ad699daf3/IgDWu4-jLezXRrhjBP7GyZJ1AT2DwCYPP50v0-iiQgxOUks>