**PROJECT UQE --- RURAL THIRUNELVELI --- Project Proposal on Refining the Quality of Education among the Rural Children in Tirunelveli District of Tami Nadu**

P R E F A C E

It has been quite a while, since I spent time to muse about anything in writing using my grey cells effectively and to the satisfying level albeit the situations that presented themselves earlier on numerous occasions that I could have utilised to satiate my innate desire, were not so significant as to warrant my attention to do so to be an impresario. Perhaps this site exploratory trip for a project involving pedagogy, has in a sense kindled my appetite to embark on such an expedition as I found the tour quite intriguingly interesting. The tour lasting for about 60 hours including the sojourn by the vehicle on the rails did create so odd an impression upon my mind that as soon as I was abed on the night following the trip I fell insensibly into a reverie of sorts that would have been christened as something in between a dream and a delirium. All these I write here because I started thinking of Thomas gray’s elegy on a country church yard.

The poor are born with the same natural abilities as members of the upper classes. Who can say what humble people might have accomplished in the great world had they not been constrained by their condition and their innate powers not been frozen by “Chill Penury.” Gray implies that the innocence and beauty of these souls, wasted in their isolated rural environment, and resembling hidden deserts and ocean caves, could have flourished in better circumstances:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene. The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear: Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

P R E A M B L E

And now coming down to brass tacks, I left for the exploratory feasibility cum evaluating trip for the project UQE Rural Thirunelveli, on Monday the 20th june 2016 by Nellai express reaching on next morning, being received by Mr.Nalan and drove straight to his NJT office, as was originally scheduled The 2 schools were selected from out of various other ones in different parts of Thirunelveli /Paalayamkottai District after a somewhat careful scrutiny of facts that were made available to me more than a year ago. I wanted this project in three different forms. One I wanted Asha Sennai to own the schools gradually to implement our idea of reaching the desired objective. Two We Asha Sennai would take the schools into our fold as project of our chapter and three support an organisation that will invariably implement our objectives. Ultimately I plumbed for the last one to facilitate other organisation to

present and own the project, as we, I felt, lack the bandwidth to consider the other two schemes, besides the project of this size and goal need constant monitoring if we had chosen the other paths than what is presently envisaged. And so we have settled for the 2 schools namely Sarguna vidhyaalayaa HSS of Maadhapattinam in kadayam Block and the other Graama Committee HSS of Venkateswarapuram of Aalangulam Block. After a brief period for ablutions etc., I was on to study the various aspects of the subjects meaning the 2 schools to cull out the various features nestled in the running of the schools that might perhaps be acceptable considerably to our needs of the project, accompanied ofcourse along with the chief Director of NJT under whose aegis the projects is proposed to be carried out.

ABOUT THE PROJECT UQE RURAL THIRUNELVELI OBJECTIVES

The General overall objective is to ensure that none in the normal school going stage is left without the qualifying opportunities, by reaching the society through sustained efforts, like involving ourselves in these

Schools and to inspire the rural folks which will automatically increase the enrolment. The Specific Objective is to ensure efforts to improve the quality of education in rural Thirunelveli in general through the two schools selected housing a considerable 3547 numbers in student community and thus create ultimately an enviable set of model schools, as we had done about a decade and a half back with the Balwaadis initiating our efforts with the one at Besant Nagar on the east coast in the South east of Sennai. Since we make an effort in taking into reckoning2 schools with large of number of students, we can be safely and confidently optimistic that the desired requisite can be achieved GOD willing and with our sustained involved dedicated approach through our modus operandi. This we will be able to carry out if the NGO in NJT is worthy of the trust we are reposing in them and I am sure that they are in the light of the experiences we have had earlier with them through the association lasting to Almost a decade. How are we going to handle this is discussed in the later part of this epistolary write up here.

A Brief Resume about the NJ Trust and its activities:

The Navajeevan Trust was formed, solely with the aim of eradicating child labour, with the association of CRY(child relief and You) of UNICEF, Chennai, during 1985 in the blocks of Alangulam, Paappakkudy, and Keelappaavoor in Thirunelveli District. Here children were used by the families concerned themselves, in rolling beedies(under intolerable and inhuman conditions and stipulations), to eke out a living; agriculture had no takers, since the areas/lands were invariably barren owing to low water table and rainfall. And so the typical tropical drought conditions were exploited by the beedi industry owners and agents. The only way, the Trust thought, that could mitigate the sufferings, if not in the immediate present and the future, atleast after a considerable period, was to provide basic education to all the children, irrespective of ages. And so to bring in awareness in the communities, abutting these cluster of village blocks, multi-pronged strategies were designed and devised and implemented in stages, amidst resistances from vested interest groups and stooges for petty benefits. The child labour eradication programme was perhaps the first of its kind in the southern zone, which has its main focus on children and the various aspects related to the children development programme. The implementation of the programme, was and is indeed a Herculean task, when one learns about the culture prevailing in the area. Communal clashes were common or atleast not uncommon. The gentry so to say because of being workless, would resort to being willingly naïve in not minding the abuse of their women folks by the selfish, greedy and nefarious agents with vested interest, for practicing the oldest profession on earth. Weaker sex had perforce to put up with these to sustain a livelihood, mostly reluctantly and in some cases not so reluctantly. Perhaps one could boldly venture to say that promiscuity is a virtue after all, in some.

The NJT has been primarily responsible in establishing number of alternative educational centers for children, thus projecting the virtues of education among the families concerned, with the fond hope that one day these educated, if they are ever fortunate to come up in life, with the Grace of God, would enable them to liberate their elders from the clutches of slavery and bondage, and provide succour to them. Well if one wants a target date, I for one would not wager, nor for that matter even Mr. Nalan. Well, optimism goads ever one. The scheme had brought in many changes in the life style of the people and the children. The trust has trained few hundred volunteers, to achieve the desired objective of providing education, not only academic, but also technical training with an eye on improving skills among the communities (these people know no other trade other than rolling beedies/ nor any other profession is available for them to get gainfully employed), and conduct campaigns, seminars and workshops, to create awareness amongst all, to achieve the goal of inculcating the habit of enrolling children into schools. Rose Foundation of Belgium supported the Trust project for a year 2008-9 and they were very satisfied with their faith in them, and NJT has immensely been happy to have carried out the project for the best satisfaction of all concerned, Asha Sennai in recommending NJT to Belgium Rose Foundation, Rose Foundation in being a participant to a good cause, NJT in being able to actively promote the laudable goals projected in their project and the Society at the District level

The NJT has succeeded in relieving about half of total child labour force in several villages during the last 3 years, thus proving relentless involved pursuit with single minded devotion, would always yield results, that inspire them as well as the people associated in various capacities, to proceed further with greater vigour, until they see the total eradication of child labour atleast in the foreseeable future, knowing pretty well that it is an impossible dream in the immediate proximity. Yes dreaming is an aphrodisiac. Dreaming about welfare of the society is nectar indeed. Four decades back Martin Luther King started addressing the Americans, especially the coloured blacks, “I HAVE A DREAM……….”. Unfortunately, he is not in our midst to see the end of apartheid, to a large extent. Similarly, the efforts of Nalan and his associates might bear fruit someday.

For the present, The Trust has about seven well-meaning persons involved in various avocations. It is registered with the Income tax department for various benefits under 80 G schemes, and has also FCRA clearance. It is managed by Nalan Chandra sekharan a post graduate in sociology and political sciences. It functions with the basic objectives of

ERADICATION OF CHILD LABOUR ---- ATTENTION ON QUALIFICATION FOR ALL ESPECIALLY CHILDREN ----- EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN ---- GENERATING AWRENESS AMONG PEOPLE

PROMOTION OF SAVING AND CREDIT PROGRAMMES ------- DEVELOPMENT OF POVERTY RIDDEN SOCIETY THROUGH VARIOUS INCOME GENERATING SCHEMES ----- NON FORMAL EDUCATION CENTRES.

Child labour eradication programme is implemented in about 160 villages, in aforementioned e village unions. Children who take part in beedi making, brick making, agriculture, jute bag knitting and various other small time jobs are identified, and motivated to take to schooling, to continue their studies. Thus the parents of the children and the communities are sensitized, leading to the formation of various associations and committees, and consequently the government coming to their assistance in some forms. The beedi rolling women are taught about their strength, and to form teams to make collective bargaining, from being exploited ruthlessly; also they are taught about the usefulness of savings where and when possible, and about health care in general. NJT has succeeded in moving the District administration to do their might, in mitigating the sufferings of the forsaken lot. The Trust also has developed money earning schemes for the benefit to the extent possible. There is a long way to go they feel. However, they have chosen the following village blocks, for implementing literacy programme and technical skill developments. They have enlisted the services of some qualified teaching and technical assistants, for carrying out their scheme, which also includes nutritious meal feeding to the inmates. These cost a lot, and so the assistance is solicited not from all, save a few organizations like ours.

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS CHOSEN FOR THE PROJECT:

**Sarguna Sathya Vidhyaalayaa Hihger Secondary School** in the Village Mathaapattinam of Kadayam Block (Mahakavi Baarathiyaars In-laws area) founded in the year 1942 when the freedom fight was at its zenith, caters to the schooling of boys and girls from about 2o villages in the radius of this hamlet, at a distance of about 60 kms from Paalayamkottai Town. The girls numbering more than the boys by about 10+ percent; the total strength of the school is about 1817(854 boys and 963 girls). They are in classes from the 6th grade to the 12th grade, including English Medium sections. The school is government aided and the education is free upto secondary level and they charge a uniform fee of Rs.3000 per annum. There are 4 sections in each grade and the total number of teachers available being 31(22 men and 9 of weaker sex). Majority are well qualified and experienced. Even though there is space there are only 24 class rooms besides an unused laboratory that can safely accommodate 6 classes with minor civil reconstruction. There is another building that can be remodified to get more class rooms and for other utilities. Among the staff the work is headed by a Head Master supported by three other assistant head masters. Vast play field is available. The atmosphere save for summer is invariably on convenient climate.

And the school is run by a private trust consisting of Hindus and Christians and the trustees are all settled in sennai, the management of the local school for all practical purposes is executed by

A Christian jessuit holding the name of a former PM of the Great Britain, Gladstone and an English collegiate professor in a William. As such there is practically a free atmosphere without any communal bias and

No evidence of practice of proselytization and a sort of harmony prevailing among the teachers and the taught. In the radius of around 6 kms there is no other secondary school including the government ones.

The students are mostly hailing from the lowest strata of society and their families are from economically backward uneducated landless classes, solely dependent for their livelihood on farm and agricultural job works

with which they invariably find it very hard to sustain as mostly these agrarian jobs in view of low percentage rains coupled with water table being made available on an average depth of about 300 ft. Hence the women folk try to supplement their living by undertaking the Beedi works and other minor casual labour jobs offered by sharks in the form of human race. It is indeed surprisingly astonishing that they are able to send their children to school in spite of conditions tempting enough to wean away the children for bringing much needed money to their kitty.

**GRAAMA COMMITTEE HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL** in the village Venkateswarapuram, (lying at a distance of about 45+kms from Thirunelveli Township) of Aalanguam Block founded in 1990s is a government aided institution, containing English medium sections. The strength of the school is a total of 1730 (Boys 861 and girls 869) with 25 teachers consisting of postgraduates, Diploma Holders, B.Eds to support. And the school is catering to the needs of children from 13 villages as there is no secondary educational institute within a radius of around 7 to 8 miles. But as in the case of the other school the larger number of student population impedes the quality education in some manner owing to the reachability problem with the teachers. This is the case with the other school as well. However the headmaster and others felt that they would bring around the solution with some assistance from NGOs like Asha Sennai. The strata of society from where the children come in hordes, is rather on the economically weaker side. To complement/supplement the extra level of coaching, the student community needs, considering the constraints, the families encounter, is a tall order. Here also the sections are 4 for each standard from the 6th to the 12th. The school offers free education save for the higher secondary classes 11 and 12 where the students are charged a sum of Rs.3000 per annum. The school has sufficient class rooms and a vast play ground; Only the student teacher ratio is very disturbing; Both the school are housed in sylvan surroundings with beautiful pastoral scenery and so are idyllic.

**ABOUT MY SITE VISIT TO THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE OBSERBVATIONS INFERRED:**

I met the teachers with various portfolios and the headmaster of both the schools; but I could meet the management of SSVHSS only, at Mathaapattinam But the other management, we could not as they were

out of town on prior schedules, but the meeting with the persons that matter including the HM and other Asst. HMs was sufficient enough to thwart any misgivings that we might have otherwise formed. At both the schools during our meeting (asha Sennai and NJT), we emphatically stated our objectives and desire and to alleviate any hiccups that we might encounter we proposed a sort of MOU between the Schools management and the NJT to carry out the desired approach without hindering in any way the schools functioning besides their financial controlling activities. They readily agreed to that. This was raised in view of our painful experience with the ICDS Aanganwaadis.

We also observed that the schools have so many numbers of children in their rolls. A superficial perusal revealed that the attendance is on around 90% plus on an average.

The student teacher ratio is indeed a cause for concern despite the efforts by schools’ staff to augment their efforts to abort the negative aspects.

Even though there is a vast space available in both the intuitions, in one at Kadayam block they have need to provide more rooms.

Achievement levels of children are less than mean, when compared with ones elsewhere. Funnily enough 4 numbers have scored an astonishing 490+at std.10 exams. Pass percentage is okay.

Plans are missing for concentrating in the direction of higher achievement for various reasons. They are telling when reckoning the facts of students’ social background.

Aid based learning concept leaves much to be desired and it is understandable in the absence of proper learning kits and materials, especially when computers are available.

Less said about Libraries and their functioning, the better it is. Sports and physical education needs are to be honed up, and it is indeed a sad feature when one finds vast open areas remain unused.

Thankfully and mercifully sanitary aspects are in tune with the required basic necessities. But improvements are certainly needed. Extracurricular activities in various directions are found wanting and obviously too.

In general, long hours of children’s’ productive time remain unutilized. Insufficient potable water supply has got to be addressed.

**WHERE WE SHOULD FOCUS AND THE IMMEDIATE ATTENTION THAT MAY REACH US TO THE GOAL OF UQE**:

The aforementioned salient points speak for themselves where efforts are the need of the hour and gradual approach without let-up, would invariably see light at the end of the tunnel.

To have a separate section in each class by suitably modifying the number strengths for provision of teachers thus paving the way for reasonable students-teacher ratio, over a period of time, would facilitate

the attaining the goal of the project to a large extent.

To facilitate arrangement of extra coaching efforts, without affecting the normal schedule and without students losing their interest in participating in such efforts.

By arranging to provide aid based learning Kits and other learning materials would inspire the learning community.

Efforts are to be put in motion to work as a group and as individuals. Arranging students-parents-teachers meet once in a 4 months’ period time frame.

To work for provision of a good functional library housing minimum number of books and journals and educational materials with suitable gadgets, would yield an encouraging development.

Entrepreneurship and Life skills training, during mutually convenient hours, would find a way in the project for children of higher classes (not for 11th and 12th). This would indeed be the most welcome component, as it would raise the level of economics.

All the efforts would be made to coordinate with the existing teaching community and thus integrate the entire population of the schools.

Provision of suitable number of teachers including ones with computer skills with proper control of the scheduling is the essence of the scheme on hand. A responsible and answerable coordinator

Must be in place. A minimum number of regular/periodical review meeting with the project teachers besides training them with learned reasonable resource persons, would enable us to judge ourselves

And the performance of the chief project coordinator in NJT.

Minimum required number of visits by Asha Volunteer/s would, should and must be in place.

**CONCLUSION AND APPEAL**:

In the beginning I have quoted Gary’s Concerned Epitaph was for the death of his poet friend. But he utilised the opportunity to address the community then prevailing in the 18th century. He perhaps shared the Dickens concern for the economically downtrodden populace. Viewed in this perspective things would appear better. The intervention of this proposed project plan is only a short- to medium-term solution but several things such as government’s pro-active role in improving the quality of education, teachers’ commitment to their students, community’s involvement in the education of their wards, etc. are absolutely necessary for a satisfactory and sustainable long term solution. In the initial one or two years of the project, we plan to gather as much information and feedback for some of the components in order to determine an optimal course and direction. I actually wanted to send this site visit report along with the project proposal for a better understanding of the subject; owing to circumstances beyond my control, I am constrained to defer the submission of the proposal by a few days. Only delineation of the items referred to here coupled with the actual number of teachers required with their specific cost are needed to complete the proposal.

I cannot say I am positively prescient with regard to the prospects of the project except that we can all be decidedly and perceptually optimistic as optimism is the hall mark of life. Plato the great Teacher

Opined that the measure of a man is what he does with his power. Would we at ASHA SENNAI do the same with what is vested in us? I sincerely hope and presume We at asha Sennai make a beginning

by approving and adopting the high(er) secondary schools for the first time in the history of asha, through the project proposed by Nava Jeevan Trust.

Ananth s elayavalli

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