

Site Visit by : Santhosh C Padmanabhan.

Address: Seva Chakkara Samajam, 89/41, Swami Pillai Street Choolai High Road
Choolai, Chennai, TAMIL NADU 600 012

Note: Asha has been working with this project for over 5 years now. The main purpose of my visit to the orphanage was to get photographs of the kids for their individual profiles. But, I realized the experience of just being with the kids cannot be paralleled against anything I would have wanted to do there!

I met up with Sanjeev's (Asha Volunteer & the first custodian of this project) mom, Mrs.Sasikala and we left to Seva Chakkara Samajam together. Seva Chakkara is near the Central station. The streets are pretty crowded around there. Once we reached the place we met the watchman/caretaker at the entrance. We signed in at the register and walked upstairs. The stairs were narrow too. But, that's how buildings are in this area. The cost of the land is at a premium and a place as big (the place is just big enough to house 85+ kids) as this would cost a lot more than if it were in some remote area.

Not all kids had returned from school. There were a few kids in the room fidgeting with their books. Mr.Velayudham was not there. Sukanya gave us a glass of water and we sat down. I introduced myself and explained as to why I was there. There was a small 'Swami' room or a 'Prayer' room with pictures of deities. This was where the refrigerator was located as well. I introduced myself to an elderly gentleman who was busy writing something at his desk. Then Sasikala aunty took me for a really quick tour around the place. The boys were housed in a huge hall. As expected I could see why one would say this was where the boys were if they just entered the hall. Not that it was not clean or anything, I have been in a hostel and I know what boys could do to fans, window panes etc when playing cricket :). Then we moved to where the girls were housed. There were a lot of the younger kids who had just returned from school. The scene looked like a lot of bunnies from the Duracell battery advertisement and the kids seem to just come out of nowhere :)The entire place was lively and bustling with activity! The kids wanted to know what I was doing there. I told them that I had come to take a few pictures. That's it! All the kids started getting ready for the pictures. There was a rush to wash their faces and get ready for the pictures.

After the rather quick tour (there was a computer room with a few computers and another room with typewriters, then there was a kitchen, where I met the cook who has been there for a long time) we came back downstairs to the hall. Lakshmi, once a resident at the Orphanage, now a very competent help for the organization had come. She and aunty went to get all the kids ready for pictures. Meanwhile, Mr.Velayudham returned and I spoke to him for sometime. He explained why he wanted to know more about me when I had called a few days ago. He said there have been instances where so-called agencies/charity organizations had come, taken pictures and left without even giving a call later. These organizations probably just used the pictures but, never did anything for Seva Chakkara. He gave me a brief history about the orphanage and then Lakshmi told me that the kids were ready for the pictures. I asked Mr.Velayudham if I was taking too

much time from the kids' schedules, especially because it was their examination time and he replied that the kids actually loved to meet people and this was not a lot of time.

When I went inside the hall, all the young ones were ready sitting in a formation (I guess as instructed by Lakshmi). We found a good spot to have the pictures taken. Then while Lakshmi called out each kid, I started clicking away. I showed each kid his/her photo and if they didn't like it, I would take another picture. The kids were excited and were dressed pretty neatly for the big occasion :). It was fun for the kids and for me too! Then we had to take a break. Some of the elder kids still had to return.



Lakshmi and Sasikala aunty left me alone with the kids. Some of them went out to play and there was a group behind me. Lakshmi had instructed the kids to find out how to study and get good advice from me. I was not sure if I was the right person to do this :) As a kid I hated this part, because 'advice' was the only thing I got for free and without even asking for it :). I started talking about cricket, the India-Pakistan series, their favorite batsmen, bowlers etc. Then we spoke about movies. We spoke in length about all 'Tamil' movie actors and actresses. We spoke about upcoming releases and which movie would become a hit etc. Then I asked if anyone bunked school to watch movies. Then every kid pointed to the other and said he/she does. Then I put on a stern face and asked if the kids meant it seriously and then the kids replied in the negative and said they wouldn't do that for sure, because they liked school. I asked them how they were doing in school. They said most of them had problems with Math and English. I told them that English was like any other language and to make sure that they don't form an impression that English is something that can't be learnt easily. I asked them to use the Tamil-English-Tamil dictionary. They said they already have it. I just asked them for their subjects scores and I got drowned in the voices calling out 80s and 90s in Tamil, Science etc.

Then one of the girls asked me some really tough questions. Yeah! it was my turn now. She asked me what the most memorable moment in my life was ? I was caught unawares and to escape from it, said every moment in life is to be cherished and remembered. Immediately, one of the boys asked me what color shirt I wore the previous day. I couldn't reply and he said you have contradicted yourself. I realized that I just can't make up things with these kids. They are sharp and really get after you. But, I was enjoying it thoroughly as much as the kids were having fun by pulling my leg! One kid kept pouncing on me with riddles that I couldn't answer at all. Then they wanted to play cricket. They showed me all the window panes and fans that they had dented or broken

by playing cricket inside. I told them not to tell anyone and I joined them for a few seconds. Then the kids wanted pictures taken. The boys wanted to sing songs, yes they wanted to sing a 'gana' (If you lived in the mean streets of Chennai you would understand what a 'gana' song means - Actually, its a rhyme in the local city slang). Then the girls sang a song too. I captured a few seconds of it in the camera.



Then once the elder kids were ready, we took more pictures. One of the kids was physically challenged and there was one kid in her late teens who was mentally challenged. There is an infant in the home, who is the darling of the home. She is cute and very bubbly. A few kids have started going to college. These kids seem to grow as responsible adults pretty fast. The elder kids take up the responsibility of helping out the younger kids and always look out for them. Even otherwise, the kids grow up as a family and quite a few times I saw kids come up to me and point to the other kid as their brother/sister.



Once the pictures were taken, I spoke to Lakshmi about how things were going. Lakshmi said there was a dearth of teachers. They wanted volunteers who could spare a few hours in the evenings to teach kids from class 6 to class 12. The kids find Math and English very hard. She then showed me the computer room and said two of the computers were down. They tried to get them repaired. She showed me a quote by a vendor and they looked highly inflated. I said I would verify the quoted price and find help for her.

Then she asked me to distribute the chocolate bars I had brought for the kids. I felt odd doing it and asked her to distribute it herself. All the kids thanked me for the chocolates.

Then, I had to leave. I had to disturb Sasikala aunty in her class to let her know that I was leaving. Then one of the kids said he will show me the way to the main road bus stand.

This young guy was in his 11th grade. He asked me if I was in the same place as Sanjeev in the US. Then he said he wanted to be a doctor. He asked me if it was possible to go to America to study to become a doctor. He wanted to know if there were scholarships etc. I said it was quite possible and in some cases for really brilliant students they even pay their flight tickets. I told him that funds/money would never be a constraint in his life if he puts in his best efforts.

Then it was time for me to go. I waved good bye to him as he left me drowning in my own thoughts.....