

Site visit to Rehabilitation Center for the Blind, Mannarpuram, Trichy, India.

By P. K. Subramanian and Karen Subramanian – November 5, 2009

Photos: <http://picasaweb.google.com/ashalosangeles/TrichyCRBW>

We had arranged to meet the Director of the Center on November 5 at 9:00 a.m. even before we left the US. We called her on the 4th to reconfirm our appointment but found out she had an unavoidable doctor's appointment in the morning. We eventually agreed to get started without her around 10:30 and that she would join us by noon. When we did reach the Center, we were quite surprised to see her waiting to greet us before she went to see her physician. She left us in the very capable hands of Ms. Radha Ramakrishnan and Mr. Chandrakanth.

As other previous site visitors have already pointed out, the Center was started by the late Dr. Joseph Gnanadickam in 1975. Until Asha entered the picture, the focus of the Center was to provide sufficient training to visually impaired women who are mostly from impoverished village families in Tamil Nadu, and nearby States, but some from poor city dwellers as well. The training was focused on providing a sense of self-worth, confidence, a vocational trade to sustain them and to function in the basic units of family and society. This focus on education has been increased dramatically with funding by Asha. The Center now provides education up to 8th, 10th and 12th standards and especially encourages those who have never had any schooling to appear as private candidates. Those who are academically inclined have gone further to finish college and do graduate education. One has gone on to get a doctorate and is currently the department head in a college in a nearby town.

The Center is supported solely by private donations as well as consistent support from Christoffel Blinden Mission (Germany) and various other organizations in India such as the Lions Club, YWCA etc. It receives no aid whatsoever from the state or central governments. They generate considerable income by selling products made at the Center during the women's training and get repeat orders from local civic and business organizations in Trichy.

The residents get vocational training in envelope making, tailoring, baking (buns, breads), agarbathi making, cloth weaving and silk screening(for towels etc.), weaving baskets from thin bamboo reeds, and canning both seats and backs of chairs. We witnessed all of these skills being practiced as well as music classes.

Most residents are allowed to stay for a maximum of three years and occasionally for an additional year or two. After the training, they are taken back to their community to begin functioning independently. Mr. Chandrakanth, who holds the title of Placement Officer, is really a fountain head of information. He pointed out that the parents of residents have to be counseled to accept their children back into their homes. Apparently some parents look for some other center to take care of their children for an additional three years. Once shown that the women can be self-supporting, however, they often change their minds. Some residents have had arranged marriages while at the Center.

All the products made at the Center are often under contract to the end users. The Center has its own retail outlet as well, and local colleges and charitable groups are generous in providing locations for the women to display and sell their products. Those women “graduating” from the Center go back to their community and apparently set up shop with the new skills they have learned to make saleable products.

We met several women at different stages of their training. They were all quite willing to talk to us and curious about who we were and where we were from. *All were familiar with Asha and once they knew we were Asha volunteers, profusely thankful to Asha for its help.* The residents truly believe that the focus of the Center has expanded to include education up to 12th standard solely due to efforts of Asha. Most residents very much appreciated being at the Center. It is as if a light had been turned on in their erstwhile dreary lives. Now they had people to talk to, learning for their minds, etc.

There is a computer center with only three desktops with an instructor (also visually challenged), Nagraj. A bright and outgoing man, he explained the use of the software JAWS (Job Access With Sound) which includes an audio of words being typed. The users have to wear a headset to use the software. Nagraj pointed out that with so many students wanting to learn he could teach only three at a time. It seems an addition of another three desktops would surely go a long way in teaching more students.

Across from the computer center is a small classroom with several desks and benches. There were several women typing in Braille and they showed us how the machines work. It is not clear if that room is being used as a classroom at other times.

We found several women baking breads, cookies etc., in an oven. They were under the guidance of an apparently experienced baker. The Center has just one oven currently for baking buns etc., and such an oven currently costs around \$1200. We were told that there is sufficient local demand for them to sell twice the current production and this would easily double their income.

Ms. Radha is in charge of the educational aspects of the Center. A volunteer herself, and a former college faculty from Hyderabad, she teaches at various levels with the help of eight other volunteer teachers. She shared with us the challenge of teaching a visually impaired person who has never been to a school before. It is remarkable that under their care close to 110 students have completed 8th through 12th grades. The students get their lessons recorded in a cassette recorder and use it to access their lessons later for a review later. *There is only one tape recorder currently in use.* Since such machines are relatively inexpensive, perhaps Asha should attempt to provide ten to fifteen such recorders, one of which should have dubbing ability to make Ms. Radha’s work easier as well. This would go a long way towards the education of these women. Two women were getting ready for their exam that day and doing their last minute review, and seemed quite confident. They were preparing in a small makeshift room. Our assumption is that the classroom is used for larger number of students.

We had a wonderful visit. The students sang and danced for us and gave us a chance to peek into their hearts. This institution is a viable one having been in continuous existence for 34 years and solid in its operation. It is unfortunate that Asha has not funded them for the last two years because of the lack of a site report. It occurs to us that an annual site visit could perhaps be dispensed with in favor of a report

every two years without concern for reckless disregard of the Asha funds. Needless to say Asha could safely continue its funding to this Center and increasing it if possible in light of our earlier comments.