

Report No. 13

Project Name: Bhagavatula Charitable Trust (BCT)
Contact Info: B.V. Sreenivasa Rao
Chief of Liason
Haripuram phone: 08931-83770
Email : bct_ylm@pol.net.in
Getting there: Haripuram (about 30km from Vishakapatnam)
Previous Asha volunteer visit: Sangeeta Sriram
Asha's association: BCT has recently sent a proposal to Asha; Ram Tekumalla of Asha-Houston had asked us for a site visit
FCRA clearance: Yes (No. 010 350014)

Site visit date: April 4, 2002
Time spent at project: 2 days
Report written: April 22, 2002
Visited by: Preeti & Raj Chauhan (for questions/comments, email--
chauhr@yahoo.co.in)
Photos at: http://photos.groups.yahoo.com/group/rp_trip/lst

Background of the project

BCT is a well-established organization, which has been in operation for more than 30 years. Dr. B.V. Parmeswara Rao is the person behind the efforts of the organization. In 1967 Dr. Rao returned from the USA with a PhD. in nuclear science. After spurning numerous job offers, Dr. Rao settled in his village of Dimili, AP. After much opposition from the villagers and the government, he was able to motivate and get the support of the villagers to start a high school in Dimili. The land was donated by villagers and villagers contributed ("shramadan") financially to build the school and the school was ready in one year. In the past 35 years BCT has worked for the integrated rural development in the Yellamanchali Tehsil (near Vishakapatnam, AP). BCT has successfully experimented with a number of different ideas and has implemented more than 100 programs in the villages it works with. Dr. Parmeswara Rao is very well-known in the field of rural development and has been sought by various dignitaries including previous Indian Prime Ministers including Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Although Dr. Parmeswara Rao is no longer involved in the day-to-day management of BCT he is still actively working on a couple of his initiatives. Dr. Satyamurty is the secretary of the organization and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the organization. Vishakapatnam district has 42 mandals and BCT works in 3 mandals (Achutapuram, Rambilli where its Haripuram campus is located, and Yellamanchilli).

BCT and Education

BCT has focused on education since the very beginning and has even worked with government and international agencies to educate children in very large numbers. For instance, in 1997 it was part of the IPEC (International Program for Elimination of Child Labor) and then CLTP (Child Literacy Training Program). Between 1988 and 1994, BCT was the nodal agency that coordinated the functioning of 700 NFEs in 27 mandals. It currently operates about 104 full-day Non Formal Education Centers (NFEs) in 50 villages that have an enrollment of about 5,000 children. In addition, it runs a project management and resource training center, and a residential school for 162 children (6th thru 10th class) at its Haripuram campus.

The Visit

We reached hot and humid Vishakapatnam by train in the early afternoon from Guntur, AP. We had called our point-of-contact and brother of Dr. Parmeswara Rao, Sreenivasa Rao earlier and had informed him of our visit. Mr. Sreenivasa Rao was very hospitable to us during our stay and took us around Vizag, BCT (and its various efforts), and accompanied us to another project near Vishakapatnam, Vijaya Pratham. Since it was already 3pm by the time we washed up we decided to spend rest of the day sightseeing in Vishakapatnam—the port, seaside drive, etc.—we found Vizag to be a very beautiful and charming city.

However, next 2 days at BCT were quite hectic as we were introduced to a span of activities that BCT is currently working on. We met and spent valuable time with a number of its volunteer-workers, children, teachers, Dr. Satyamurty, and Dr. Parmeswara Rao.

Day 1

On April 5th at 8am we left our hotel for the main campus of BCT at Haripuram. On the way to Haripuram, Mr. Sreenivasa Rao gave us a very good historical perspective on Dr. Parmeswara Rao and BCT. BCT's Haripuram campus is off the main road and is built on a "waste-land" which has been leased from the government. However, the campus looks anything but a wasteland as BCT has cultivated the land using local resources. BCT has planted thousands of trees over the years and the greenery that has sprung around the area is quite amazing.

- (i) After arriving at the Haripuram campus we went to see Dr. Parmeswara Rao in his room. Dr. Rao in his mid-sixties seemed like a very simple man and his room reflected that. We also met his son, Sriram there and whom got to know well in the next 2 days. Dr. Rao asked a few questions about our visit to BCT and to other projects and what we hoped to gain out of it, etc. (Answers to which we are still grappling with but fortunately for us we had to leave his company quickly to see some of the schools before they closed!).
- (ii) We then went to see two of its NFE centers in the neighboring villages of Dimili and Teruvupalli. Each school had about 50 children who were busy studying. Preeti's fluency in Telugu enhanced our interaction with the children and the teachers. At Teruvupali, she told the children that she did not know how to write Telugu and wanted one of them to show her how to write her name. Before we knew every other student was forwarding their slate to us after writing "Preeti" in Telugu. The children also sang a couple of Telugu poems and songs for us. Of the 104 NFEs being operated by BCT, about 25-30 have land given by the villagers to construct a school building. We then went to the newly constructed school building at Dimili and the one being constructed at Teruvupali. The design of these buildings is similar to other building at BCT in one important way—the roof construction does not use any iron rods for support, instead it is curved like a dome and is made of brick which is set in cement. This reduces construction cost significantly and the structure is sturdy since the weight is supported by the walls of the building. The villagers volunteer their labor for the construction of schools. The construction cost is about Rs. 50,000 per classroom. At Teruvupalli a number of the villagers walked with us to show the construction of the building. 93 of the 104 NFEs offer classes up to Class V and about 11 of them offer classes up to Class VIII. On our way back to Haripuram we stopped to see the Dimili school started by Dr.

Rao almost 30 years ago and which was later handed to the government for its functioning. However, the school deteriorated in a number of areas (In 1996 Dr. Rao initiated Fast-Unto-Death to bring about placement of 8 teachers and a capable headmaster for this school. His and others' earlier efforts to bring about change with respect to this school had failed. His fast effort succeeded on 7th day when Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu intervened. This only goes to show that bring about any positive change is a struggle even for somebody like Dr. Rao who has been working in the area for 30 years and has a very high profile.)

- (iii) We came back to Haripuram for lunch. We ate lunch with Dr. Parmeswara Rao, Mr. Sreenivasa Rao, and Dr. Satyamurty. (Dr. Parmeswara Rao asked us "why papad is eaten before lunch". Obviously we had no clue--he informed us that black pepper in papad induces generation of saliva which helps digestion)
- (iv) After lunch we went about 1-2km from Haripuram to see an adjoining farm and the BCT school for deaf-dumb children. We met with some of the most amazing children of our trip so far—absolutely charming and beautiful. They started communicating with us without any inhibition, especially the younger ones. The first child we met with communicated non-verbally to Raj that the camera he was holding was very good. The girls kept asking Preeti why she wasn't wearing a bindi and even offered to get her one. There were also a few adults but were mostly quiet in our presence. We first saw the vocational training center—younger adults working on sewing machines. Then we saw the children go to the classroom and write sentences in Telugu including their names on the blackboard. The teacher who has little formal training in teaching deaf-dumb children has done a remarkable job in teaching and working with the children. We also noticed that these children were also involved in planting a kitchen garden. We then saw the farm there and a number of innovative techniques BCT has employed in the past few decades. Much of land there has little top soil and a lot of rocks. With some innovation it has been very successful in planting cashew tree plants in that terrain.
- (v) We then came back to the Haripuram campus and went to see its resource and teacher training center. By this time it was raining hard and there was no electricity. But with the help of a torch light and some very enthusiastic teacher-training coordinators we were provided with a good overview of the curriculum that has been developed by BCT over the years. The curriculum and resources are based on the Rishi Valley method and has been enhanced over the years. On display there were also a number of activity-based learning games and items.
- (vi) After a cup of tea we were asked to join all the residential students in a semi-open hall at the edge of the campus. This meeting place has sand on the floor and a roof overhead. This program was organized so we could see what type of activities children participated in and it also gave us an opportunity to interact with the children. We went and sat behind the children on the floor. At the BCT residential school the students are sent back to their villages on a regular basis on various "missions". The students perform plays and songs for the villages on a number of social themes including education, hygiene, corruption, their rights, etc. In addition, students are also asked to stay in a stranger's

family for a day or so as a house-guest. This is another effective way of disseminating information through the children. During this program we witnessed some of the plays and songs that the children perform when they go to villages. There was a good mix of humor in the play and overall the performances were quite delightful to watch. At the end of it all we were asked to come in front of the children and then we had a quite a good session of interaction with them. Initially, we asked them a number of questions like what do they like about the residential school, what they want to do when they get older, etc. The children would get up, say his or her name and their respective class and then answer the question. Then it was their turn to ask us questions. The girls were more anxious to ask us questions (some of the boys were interested in getting their photograph taken!). They asked us whether we were married (most expected question!), where we were from and since the Principal had mentioned to them that we were from Asha they wanted to know what Asha was. At the end of it all, Mr. Sreenivasa Rao asked us to give the children 2 pieces of advice. We were not quite ready for preaching to children and deferred it saying that next time we meet them we would have it for them. This program had already delayed the dinner for the children for an hour and soon this assembly was dispersed. We then went to see the children eat their dinner at the dining facility. All the children sing a prayer before eating and their concentration was high as they didn't skip a beat even after the room became dark as the electricity went off during their prayer.

- (vii) Before our dinner we had a 45-minute conversation with Dr. Satyamurty on BCT's education initiatives and long term plans. (This conversation was based on the white-paper Dr. Satyamurty wrote, "Development of Schools", 26th Feb 2002). On the requirement for running the NFEs -he spoke of the need to establish a corpus fund, payment of fees of at least Rs. 30 per month per child by the parent and other sources of funding including government to meet all the financial requirements for running the NFE. A corpus fund of Rs. 5 lakhs per NFE and 10% return on it would sustain the NFEs. This Rs. 5 lakh can be used by the villagers as long as a 10% return on it is assured. He is searching for innovative income generating ideas that would ensure such a return. We were scheduled to continue our conversation with Dr. Satyamurty next day at 7:30 am. We found Dr. Satyamurty to be extremely intelligent, analytical, and very detailed.
- (viii) We had dinner with Mr. Sreenivasa Rao and retired to our room which is a guest-room for visitors at BCT. Later in the night, Sriram stopped by (with a lot of bananas!) and we talked to him for a few hours about his experiences and BCT.

Day 2

- (i) We got ready around 7:30 am and continued our conversation with Dr. Satyamurty. (Dr. Satyamurty's room was next to our's). However, our conversation was interrupted by a phone call to Dr. Satyamurty that informed him that his sister had just passed away. It was an awkward moment and we discontinued our conversation at that point.
- (ii) At about 8:30am we decided to attend the morning assembly for the residential students. Unfortunately for us, the Principal of the residential school reminded us in the front of the school that each of us had to give the students 2 pieces of advice. We obviously hadn't

thought of anything profound to say but we both somehow managed to something sensible before the assembly (at least we think?!).

- (iii) After breakfast with Mr. Sreenivasa Rao and four architect students (2 from AP and 2 from France) who are volunteering at BCT we took a tour of the farm at Haripuram campus with the farm manager, Mr. Sharma. Soon after that we saw the vocational training facilities (sewing machine and wood works) of the residential school.
- (iv) Our afternoon was busy as we went with Dr. Satyamurty and Mr. Sreenivasa Rao to see their building center, Junior College, and KVK (Kisan Vikas Kendra). The building center is their office to design and experiment with different styles of low-cost construction. The Junior College (11th and 12th grades) is an old movie theater that was acquired by BCT 8 years ago for Rs. 7 lakhs. Currently it provides training to 16 students in areas such as electrical wiring, computers, technicians. It plans to expand into the area of crop production and home science. Right now there is no funding or corpus funding for the Junior College. Ideally BCT plans Junior College students to be residential which would allow for income generation for the financial support of the Junior College. The Junior College can accommodate up to 160 students. Finally, we visited the Kisan Vikas Kendra (Farm Service Center) which BCT operates but is funded by the government. This is a resource center for farmers that provides information, training and guidance in a number of agro-related areas such as plant protection, small agro-business development, animal husbandry, etc. We found out the 1 KVK per district is mandated by the government across the country. There are 365 KVKs in 520 districts in India.
- (v) After lunch we were given an opportunity to spend some time with Dr. Parmeswara Rao. We had an inkling as to the nature of our conversation after our brief meeting with him the day before---he began by asking of what we had learned from our project visits about development and education. We felt awkward and embarrassed as he listened to us novices talk about development and education. He later said to us that he wanted to know how young people like us thought about these issues. Fortunately for us, Dr. Parmeswara Rao spoke at length about his experiences and his opinions for the next couple of hours. The highlight of these are listed below—
 - To better understand the Indian village he asked us to read the following quote of Mahatma Gandhi during his first trail in 1922.

“Little do town-dwellers know how the semi-starved masses of India are slowly sinking to lifelessness. Little do they know that their miserable comfort represents the brokerage they get for the work they do for the foreign exploiter, that the profits and the brokerage are sucked from the masses. Little do they realize that the Government established by law in British India is carried on for the exploitation of the masses. No sophistry, any jugglery in figures can explain away the evidence that the skeletons in many villages present to the naked eye. I have no doubt whatsoever that both England and the town-dwellers of India will have to answer, if there is a God above, for this crime against humanity which is perhaps unequalled in history”

According to Dr. Rao, even after 80 years this quote of Gandhi still reflects the reality of rural India as there is total exploitation of villages.

- He commented on the idea of education. According to him, it is a process of learning and understanding nature; practicing in what you believe in; it is a process of ideas
- There are 7 kinds of poverty: spiritual, bodily, mental, cultural, economic, political and societal. Normally, economic poverty alone is referred to as poverty but until all the poverty's are tackled either simultaneously or one after the other, there cannot be integrated development.
- "It is very difficult to understand India. How can one fathom a country that is 5,000 years old"
- "I am not qualified to speak of poverty. I don't know hunger. How can I -- I have never seen my child go hungry for 3 days"
- He spoke of an incident in 1979, which helped start a self-help group for women. He was making a typical round in his jeep of one of the villages when one woman stepped in front of the vehicle and begged him as two of her children were starving and her husband had already sold their 1 acre of their land. He had no answer for her but asked her to save from her daily wage. She said she can only save 10 paise per day but he insisted even that was enough and that she should save. He met her 6 months later and she had saved Rs. 500. That was one of efforts in forming women's self help group.
- On the topic of rural development he said that although he had worked on more than 100 different programs in the past 30 years he thought they were all short term in nature. To bring about a longer lasting change one has to allow people to grow and more importantly, leadership to grow. "The more you give more the void". In many ways, one has to "unlearn" one's previous ways while working for rural development.
- Dr. Parmeswara Rao is now working on rural development from a spiritual perspective. This spirituality is nothing but a belief in ourselves, he says. This spirituality is for spurning villagers into action and changing their attitude about themselves and their community. He is implementing this idea in "Balmandiram" where he is trying to transform the villagers' lives through the children. This is being performed in 150 villages and the response has been "wonderful". For example, the children are asked to pray for 30 minutes. Of which 15 minutes are devoted to a prayer of 2 different religions and the next 15 minutes is devoted to a pledge. The results of this have been promising—in one village males of one village moved their liquor shop to the edge of the village and then eventually closed their shop in response to daily evening prayers in the village.

We relished our time with Dr. Parmeswara Rao and in retrospect, was the highlight of our visit to BCT.

- (vi) Last but not least, before we left BCT in the evening we had a chance to play cricket with the residential school students. This was thoroughly enjoyable except that anything wide of the leg stump of my bowling by the 10-year old umpire! (they are watching too many one-day matches!). The BCT car dropped us off near a bus-stand where both of us took an extremely crowded jeep (Trekker) back to Vishakapatnam. The latest Telugu songs

inside the jeep were being played inside the jeep (and rather loudly) and there were at least 5 young adults hanging out from the back—was quite an interesting but still enjoyable trip back to Vishakapatnam.

Funding

BCT is requesting Rs. 13-17 lakhs per year for 2 years and after that it hopes to manage the affair with a large corpus fund. BCT and Mr. Sreenivasa Rao have been in touch with Asha (Project Confidence Team) to elicit financial support. After asking him which was the most critical portion of the funding requirement, Mr. Sreenivasa Rao mentioned that Rs. 6 lakhs for Training and Resource Center was the most urgent and significant funding need.

Opinion

We were impressed with BCT after seeing its different facets and accomplishments. We have no extraordinary concerns about the project. We, however, did find BCT somewhat of a hierarchical “top-down” type of an organization (and may be all large successful NGOs have to become more structured in the long run). Our guess is that there is probably some disagreement among the leadership of BCT as to which direction to the organization should take and how to inculcate a new generation of leadership.

An Asha-star team (Project Confidence) approach in realizing BCT’s funding needs seems very appropriate. The team needs to understand their requirements for running the NFEs in the longer run and assist them in raising a large corpus fund.