Fellowship Siddamma
ASHA Austin, TX
Oct 2017

http://ashanet.org/project/
Kari Siddamamma

A life long social worker & activist
Who works for the
Upliftment of the Irula Tribes

- ASHA supported projects since 2004 & ASHA fellow since 2004
- Created social welfare unions / co-operatives & advocacy programs Eg. Sarpam Sangam
- Works tirelessly to raise awareness about bonded labor
- Has freed 1000s of marginalized bonded laborers from rice mills & generational slavery since 2004
- Provides education to children, women & farmers through Bharathi Trust (Since 1990)
- Awarded Trafficking in Persons Hero-2006
Who are IRULAS?

- Irula scheduled caste tribe of over 25,000 spread across Tamil Nadu and Kerala
- Primary occupation include catching snakes & rats, fishing and as laborers
- Mostly unrecognized by the Indian government & Panchayats
- Heavily affected by 2004 Tsunami, recent floods, exploitative labor laws and landlords
- Endemic child labor & domestic alcohol abuse
2017 August Site Visit
Conducted by Anjana Mohan-ASHA Bangalore

Visit to Two Villages
FLOOD Relief
SARPAM SANGAM
BTRC Farm
2017 August Site Visit
Bharathi Trust Resource Center Organic Farm

- Arid land bought for about 13 lakhs with help from ASHA in 2006
- Siddamma used Organic farming techniques to make land cultivable
- She has check dam in place to recharge the ground water
- Farm also used for meetings by the Sarpam Sangam during its inception
- Continues to train farmers in organic farming techniques at the Bharathi Trust Resource Center (over 1000 so far)
Aug 2017 Site Visit: Activities at the Farm

- Siddamma spends 10-20 days per month
- Volunteers, Students spend time and help out
- Trains farmers and government officials on organic farming techniques to ensure high yield rates and better soil quality over the years
- Few examples of her work include:
  - Lending Paddy Ladder to local farmers
  - Check dams to raise ground water levels
  - Sales channels for local organic produce
  - Lodging Irula families displaced due to land disputes and calamities who in turn return the favor by working the farm
  - Volunteers from a European NGO regularly stay and help out at the farm

Siddamma teaching students (& local farmers) some clever farming techniques (Seen here is a Regular Interval Paddy Ladder)

Siddamma educating a local farmer to stay away from urea use
By demonstrating thriving paddy yields at the resource center farm
Aug 2017 Site Visit: BRTC Farm Financials

- Grows and sells mainly Rice & Urad Dal
- Farm’s yearly income ~ 3 lakhs
- Employs 3 full time farmers and 5 helpers
- Farmers: 6000/ mo, Helpers: 250/ day
- Salaries amount to 3.10 Lakhs
- Siddamma also facilitates payment to cover:
  - Salary for Sarpam Sangam leader(s)
  - Her own expenses for domestic upkeep in Chennai & travel- ASHA Fellowship
  - Cost of farm upkeep if any

- Financial Shortfalls
  - Accountant and Sarpam Leaders not paid for some time now
  - Farm up keep is a seasonal operational cost (storms, hogs, etc)
Aug 2017 Site Visit:

Sarpam (Irular Thozhilalar) Sangam

**Siddamama**
Still presides over special cases, government policies, etc

**Sarpam Irular Thozhilalar Sangam**
(Now) Independent Irula Workers Union
Started by Siddamama

Regional Leaders
(1 Per 1-45 villages)

District Leader
(Organization & mobilization)

Village Chief (s)
Each village/ settlement

6 – 50 families

Villager talking about Sarpam Sangam & Siddamama’s Unending efforts to bring essentials to Irula villages

**Sarpam Sangam**: Stands for Cobra (Irula Workers) Union
Aug 2017 Site Visit:
Sarpam Sangam Work Examples

• Aid in getting land and house ownership documents
• Without SS more Irulas would remain without land ownership rights and face eviction
• In a low lying dengue infected area with lots of standing water, SS was able to negotiate resettlement of its villagers to higher land and better hygiene conditions
• Provide Medical supplies, community aid, clean water, Introducing policies, etc
• Fighting cases on behalf of Irulas

SARPAM comprises mostly of women leaders & the organization is becoming progressively independent
Siddamma takes great pride this
Siddamma’s Recent Flood relief efforts

- Cyclone & Flooding
  - December 2015
  - December 2016

- Provided food & shelter for over 520 Irula families

- Facilitated release of government relief funds to (otherwise) unrecognized Irula families

- Facilitated resettlement of displaced families to land allocated by government

- Ongoing efforts to get permanent ownership certificates for the land
Aug 2017 Site Visit: Flood relief efforts

- **Visited 2 villages: PuduKeechalam & Keezhapoondi**

- Villagers spoke about Siddamma helping with documentation for families to avail of medical services, vaccinations, medicines etc. transportation for health and medical purposes, hygienic and proper disposal of bodies.

- Villagers attested to the huge help from Sidamma during and after the floods, and ongoing facilitations and support. Village leaders (both women) talked about the provision of foods (rice, dal, puffed rice), stoves, medical supplies and many other items they all counted on for survival and to resume some level of normalcy.

**PuduKeechalam:**

- Villagers were grateful to have their Balvadi (school).
- It was evident from listening to her chat with the villagers that Sidamma was intimately familiar with their issues on an individual level and she knew details about many individuals’ situations, needs and concerns.
- She continues to work with the villages to get them to normalcy.
Villages remain in dire need

In PuduKeechalam:
- Clear drinking water is at the top of their list

In Keezhapoondi:
- Their biggest need is electricity connection by the Government.
- SS leaders would have time for this kind of activism if they weren’t using their time to struggle for their own livelihoods,
- Need to re-instate the SS leader’s salaries
- Need to open a Balvadi (school)
Other Funding Sources and Support

• No income from outside entities except Asha
  □ ASHA Seattle supporting a BTRC run school
  □ ASHA Purdue funded flood related housing project

• Farm volunteers pay for their food & lodging. However this doesn’t serve as substantial income for Irula related activities

• Sarpam Sangam receives one-time funding from various NGOs in cash and kind
  □ One example was the donation of 50 sewing machines to improve the earning potential of Irulas. Tailoring course arranged by NGO.
Summarizing the Need to continue Siddamma’s Fellowship

Ongoing and Future Work Plans

• Follow up work remaining from the flood/cyclone rehabilitation
• Irulas from Sorakapettai have been allocated land by the govt but have not been provided any housing yet
• Working on getting them ration cards and electricity
• Looking for alternatives to educate children from these communities.
• Similarly Irulas from Pudiya Gumudippondi have been allocated land
• She is working on raising money to build huts/homes.
• Working on getting compensation for kids whose parents have died
• Clean drinking water, electricity & balvadi for children in PuduKeechalam & Keezhapoondi
• Continuing upkeep of the farm and educating local farmers about organic farming techniques
• Advisor to the Unorganized Workers Federation Union which promotes worker’s rights and educates workers on existing government schemes
• Empowering women in the community to become economically independent and village Leaders
ASHA Austin is proposing to disburse INR 4,75,000 to cover Kari Siddamma’s fellowship from Jan 1, 2017 to July 31, 2018 (INR 25,000/month for 19 months)