

Site Visit Report, Bharathi Trust – Kuvempu Project

Rohit Hippalgaonkar, Apr 12 and Apr 13 - 2026

The visit aimed to assess operational conditions of Vidya Kendras and the Tailoring Center, understand staff and beneficiary experiences, financial flows and governance issues, assess community conditions, discuss leadership and succession readiness, and identify opportunities for improvement. During the visit, I met a number of staff members, Mrs. Siddamma (the founder and main operations responsible for Bharathi Trust that manages this activity), current students at multiple Vidya Kendras and the tailoring center, past education grant recipients, and some parents.

Financial Irregularities & Governance Concerns

In a meeting requested by the staff members and held at the Shivaganga office of the project on Apr 12, multiple staff members that I met aired grievances against the former Kuvempu project coordinator, Dr. Geetha. They aired their grievances about her coercion and control over the finances and operations. Dr. Geetha was removed from the organization in November 2025, when Mrs. Siddamma took charge. There were multiple instances of what was reported as financial mismanagement related to education grants. Multiple cases indicate systemic issues in scholarship disbursement.

Several examples were provided. In 2022, Mr. Kiran was granted ₹80,000 as part of a scholarship for him to pursue an MBA, but ₹65,000 was reportedly taken back from him in cash (where he was made to withdraw cash from an ATM). Delays from his end led to verbal harassment of Mr. Kiran. In the case of Etchaghatta staff Mrs. Ratnamma's daughter, Kirtana, of the intended ₹ 30,000 scholarship, ₹20,000 was transferred to office boy Jagadish's account. Jagadish was forced to pay this in cash to Dr. Geetha. In another case, Sasikala (staff at Hulluru vidyakendra) received ₹17,000 to support her [M.Com.](#) program, of which ₹10,000 was reportedly taken back in cash by Dr. Geetha. Pavitra's brother had taken sick (at Tekalavatti) and received a ₹10,000 check to cover medical expenses. However, ₹8,000 was taken back immediately (by forcing him to withdraw via ATM from his account). Mr. Subeet was supposed to receive ₹17,000 to support his B. Ed. studies, and was coerced to return all of it. Upon asking why he returned the money, he mentioned he was too scared to talk.

Gowramma (staff member) was allocated ₹25,000 but received only ₹3,000 - a similar case of her being coerced to remove money from her account via ATM. In one case, scholarship money was returned to the Kuvempu Trust account instead of being provided to the beneficiary. Nayana was denied a PUC scholarship in 2021, because she chose to go to a different college and not SRS PU College (the college of Dr. Geetha's preference). She was not able to get educated and is now working as staff. A

few more such examples of coerced partial return of scholarship, salary and medical expense money were described. Ms Sruthi, who was working at Sondekola vidyakendra, took leave from October, 2024. She was given no salary for another 7 months, i.e. up to May 2025. After she rejoined in Jun, 2025 she was paid at a fresher-level, meager salary of Rs 2,000 per month.

A couple of long-time staff members, Mr Devendrappa and Mr. Lokesh, were fired for questioning Dr. Geetha's methods.

Staff members also described concerns related to pay and working conditions. They reported receiving no increments for the last four years, while Dr. Geetha increased her own salary from ₹10,000 to ₹20,000 despite minimal presence at the Vidya Kendras. She was barely present at the Shivaganga office, according to staff. They also mentioned suffering arbitrary salary cuts, including a five-day salary cut for Mr. Nagaraj (another long-time staff member, since inception of project) after he helped his son in Mangalore. A salary cut for Veerabhadrappe (an experienced staff member leading two Vidyakendras) was reported for being ten minutes late (and then work an hour extra later), and no salary for the day if he was more than 30 minutes late.

Additional governance concerns were also raised. Staff were reportedly asked to return petty volunteer expenses. Mr. Yogesh allegedly discouraged reporting of financial misconduct to the Lokayukta. Dr. Geetha was also reported to have asserted (upon being questioned by Mr Lingaraj, Mr Veerabhadrappe and Mr. Ranganatha) as to why she was asking staff and students to withdraw money and give to her), "This is my family trust - you are simply an employee, and don't ask me questions." Jagadish and Swetha (working at Shivaganga office) were reportedly required to perform Geetha's personal work.

Tailoring Program and Center – Update, Operations & Issues

Over 300 students have participated in the tailoring program and benefited from the skills acquired since 2017. The tailoring center is located in one section of Mr. Prakash's house, a long-time staff at the Kuvempu project (who helped to set it up in initial days). His sons Mr. Vivek and Mr Vinay, are active in running the overall project. The program is a free, 3-month program, aimed at helping students acquire new skills. The teachers were Mrs. Manjula and she was being assisted by Mrs Jayamma.

During the visit to tailoring center (Apr 13), only newly enrolled students were present at the centre. Most of these were female students from 15 years of age and slightly above, and they seemed happy and engaged. Due to areca nuts being a crop grown locally

and providing employment, students who are daily wage earners from that activity are typically absent during collection season (Oct–Jan).

Currently, the center has 22 machines in total of which 2 are embroidery machines. There are at least 12 active students in any given session. One student, who had failed at her PUC exam, has a child, and is reliant on tailoring for livelihood stability.

It was communicated to me that 16 past participants paid ₹1,000 each to Dr Geetha. Some of the collected fees were diverted to the Kuvempu Trust bank account, which is not affiliated with Bharathi Trust. In some instances, the course extended from 3 months to 6 months if the students didn't pass the first time and students were unfortunately charged a fee again. There was a mandatory requirement to produce an item for the Kuvempu Trust to receive a certificate. It was reported that the items made by students were either received as a personal gift or sold later by Dr. Geetha. The teacher, Mrs Manjula was being paid Rs 5000 per month for the last 5 years without an increment, of which she was asked to return Rs 1500 per month to Dr Geetha.

A sewing machine was acquired at ₹12,000 to train ladies from the rag-picking community (at Chitrahalli). The actual cost of a machine is only about ₹5,500 according to the staff running the tailoring center. A receipt of this event may be available and should be checked.

Upon being asked whether this center really needs to keep running, and whether students really need it - students expressed: "If we were well off, why would we come here? Rich families would not need to send female family members to this, they do not need the supplemental income. We do."

There is a high demand for embroidery training, from those who have been trained on regular sewing machines. According to Mrs. Siddamma (head, Bharathi Trust), embroidery machines could be arranged through a tie-up with the government - a similar arrangement is helping with another NGO in Chennai.

Shivaganga - New Building Progress

Asha Detroit approved the building of a new training and development center for the project in 2025, next to the main office in Shivaganga. The previous tailoring center is a makeshift arrangement in the extension of Mr. Prakash's house, a long-time former co-ordinator.

The new building is planned to be two floors, with place for class-rooms (evening tuitions), a new and larger tailoring center, a computer center and for storage. I met the architect, Mr. Niaz, a senior professional and a long-time colleague of Mrs. Siddamma (from her other volunteering efforts). Construction is being overseen by Mr. Vinay (son

of Mr. Prakash) on a daily basis and Mrs. Siddamma periodically. At the point of the visit (Apr 12, 2026), the foundation was already laid and work was progressing beyond that.

Vidya Kendras and Tailoring Center Visits

Apart from the tailoring centre, I visited four Vidya Kendras on Apr 13, 2026 - these are evening tuition centers for students attending government schools from grades 1 through 7. The centers visited were Chitrahalli (a rag-pickers community), Hulluru, Etchagatta and Sondekola, and spoke to a mix of staff and students.

1. Chitrahalli

This center is a hut, with a mud floor and a tin-roof shed. The mud floor is unusable during the rainy season and needs to be upgraded. Children were extremely enthusiastic, sang loudly and gave several hand-made souvenirs to me. While the center is a welcome addition to the rag-picker community and engages the children - it is in clear need of an upgrade. Mrs. Siddamma, who is now running Bharati Trust, emphasized that community contribution and buy-in for upgrades is necessary to ensure long-term ownership and upkeep of the center.

2. Etchagatta

This center is being managed effectively by experienced female staff, Mrs Rangamma and Mrs Gowamma. They were planning a summer camp at the time of the visit, where students pick up computer skills and do a hands-on project.

3. Hulluru

Things are running smoothly at this center due to the working-level staff. Ms. Shashikala and Mr. Subeeth are running this center. Some improvements in terms of walls needing painting, etc are required.

4. Sondekola

This center's walls require painting and the girls bathrooms need improvement. At the time of the visit 2 of the 3 staff members were present. Children were energetic and engaged. This center was also planning for a summer program activity. Part of teacher

salaries were withheld by Dr Geetha here too - this needs to be verified with local staff, Mrs. Siddamma and rectified to extent possible.

Leadership & Succession Planning

With the most recent two coordinators (Dr. Geetha and Mr. Prakash) removed from the organization due to mismanagement, there was discussion on who would fill the management gap. Mrs. Siddamma is currently in-charge of the project, with the key help of Vinay, Vivek and other key staff. Several potential successors were identified, including Mr. Veerabhadrappe, who was preferred by Mrs. Siddamma, with others being Lingaraj, Jagadish, Subith, Sasikala and Ratnamma.

Mrs. Siddamma, who is also an Asha fellow, is confident that the collective ability of the staff to transparently report daily progress openly will provide a level of visibility that is accountable to all the activities conducted by the organization. Currently, there is no lead coordinator as such. She intends to groom future leaders across both genders.

Overall impression

The Kuvempu Project continues to have a deep community impact, especially among vulnerable children and women seeking livelihood skills. It is clear that students at each evening tuition center are engaged and benefit from the activities. It is also clear that the female students at the tailoring centers value the skills imparted and use it as a second source of income to the family. The perception is that the working-level staff are committed and are running the centers as smoothly as possible.

However, significant governance and financial integrity issues prior to December, 2025 were brought to Asha Detroit's notice during this site visit. These require urgent attention to protect the intended beneficiaries, staff, and the long-term credibility of Bharathi Trust.

The key risk noticed was centralized control by Dr. Geetha that contributed to coercion and fear, and staff morale issues stemming from salary cuts, lack of increments, and personal exploitation. The extent of her financial misappropriation can only be discovered through a detailed audit, which Bharathi Trust wishes to do for the last five years.

Recommendations

- Conduct a financial audit of all scholarship and tailoring center transactions from 2019 to 2025.
- Decentralize decision-making and let the local co-ordinators at each Vidya Kendra continue to run the show. The local co-ordinators seem invested in the community.
- Reduce dependence of the Kuvempu project on Mr Prakash and his residence - he was removed from the Kuvempu project, but still is an influential figure in the Chitradurga community. His sons, Vivek and Vinay, are key pillars to help run things smoothly and are impartial.
- An option that could be explored is having a central project co-ordinator on a rotational basis from among the above candidates, i.e. one co-ordinator for 6-8 months (to limit centralization of power/ authority in future and keep transparency)
- Individual Asha Detroit volunteers can check in from time-to-time with specific Vidya kendras and the tailoring center, and issues like whether staff are getting paid fairly, and so on. The contacts for Veerabhadrappe, Vivek and Vinay have been passed on.
- Immediate return of laptops and other electronic resources (bought through Asha funds) by Dr Geetha. Some of these were already returned by her on Apr 13 (and handed over to Mr Vivek), but a few more still need to be returned.





Images 1 & 2: New Building Construction (Next to Shivaganga Project Office)

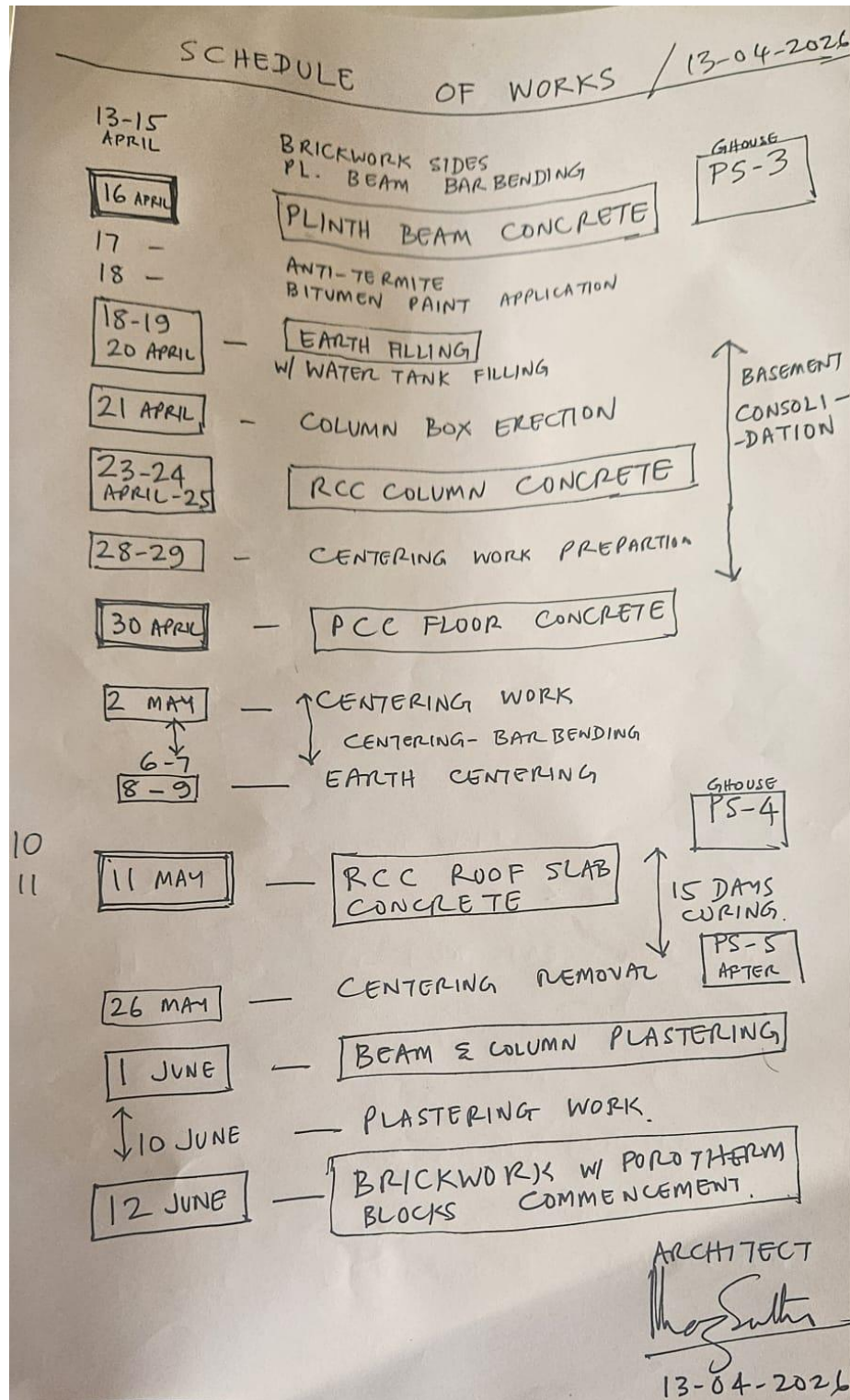


Image 3: New Building Construction Workflow (Next to Shivaganga Project Office)



Images 4 & 5: Hulluru Vidyakendra



Images 6,7, 8: Chitrahalli Community Vidyakendra



Images 9, 10: Etchaghatta Vidyakendra