

Siddamma's visit to US

Austin

(Write up by Gaurav Agarwal, Asha Austin volunteer)

Day 1

Siddamma had come here to the US to interact with volunteers/activists who were working for the rights of the Katrina victims in New Orleans. Siddamma had experience in disaster relief and rehabilitation after the tsunami had affected the communities along the Tamil Nadu coast. A group of volunteers from New Orleans had visited her in Chennai during the early part of the year, to learn from her work. She was invited to New Orleans to teach the people, how to organize themselves to make themselves heard by the government.

I had met Siddamma on her previous visit to Austin in February 2006 (actually she had stayed at my place during that visit :D) and her enthusiasm and passion for her work really inspired all of us. Last time she spent two days in Austin, and all of us barely slept an hour or two each day. We were all amazed by her energy and we were all eager to learn as much as we could from her - about her experiences. On that trip she exerted herself too much and we did not know to stop her, and thus as a result she fell ill because of too much traveling and too much exertion. So this trip was more carefully planned with fewer stops and longer breaks in between.

Her trip to Austin this time was from Sept 1st to Sept 3rd during the Labor Day Weekend. She was to stay in Santhosh's new apartment and I decided to setup camp there too. After some last minute grocery shopping, Santhosh and I picked up Siddamma from the airport in the afternoon. She was very excited about her trip to New Orleans and she told us about her experiences there - There was a conference organized in the New Orleans and Mississippi area, but she told the organizers that she would rather spend time on the ground, meeting the affected people, than spend time closed up in hotel conference rooms. So over the period of a week, she went and met a lot of local people and activists.

It had been the second anniversary of the Katrina storm but not much was being done for the affected people. One of the biggest concerns seemed to be the new plans of development for the city of New Orleans. The public housing which was in pretty good condition after the storm, was fenced off and people were not allowed to enter the area. The city was planning to tear down the housing and come up with something else, so the former residents were asked not to return for another 3 years. Most people felt that this was done to drive out the under-privileged, primarily black, population. The city officials felt that the poor neighborhood did not fit in with the image they wanted to create for New Orleans.

She met an individual (of Indian origin) working for the rights of the immigrant laborers in that area. There are agents in cities like Bombay who collect large sums of money on the promise of good work and money in US. When many of these laborers get here, they realize that there is no work for them, but since they have already paid such large amounts to get here, they cannot go back. These people are then exploited by being lower than minimum wages and being made to work long hours. Their living conditions are deplorable. This was almost the same as the problems faced by the laborers in the Middle East. This particular individual was trying to organize the people working in these conditions so that they could demand their rights and would not be exploited. I think this is an article about an incident in the Gulf Coast - <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2007/03/9865.php> and another article about the abuse of guest workers in the US - <http://www.splcenter.org/legal/guestreport/index.jsp>

After resting for sometime, Siddamma spoke to a couple of volunteers/activists from Austin, whom she had met at the conference. One of them told her of organizations she should visit in Austin. One of them was the **Rhizome Collective** - <http://www.rhizomecollective.org>. We called to check if they were open and then we left to visit them. From their website - the Rhizome Collective is a non-profit group and "an Educational

Center for Urban Sustainability and a Center for Community Organizing."

We met someone working the land and went up to speak to him. He had joined the collective very recently and was happy to show us around. Siddamma spoke about her experience with working on the land and trying organic agriculture. At this place the land was very small and was meant to be a place where people could experiment and try out things.

- We saw a polyculture pond - <http://archive.rhizomecollective.org/Images2/Photos/Tour/polyPond.jpg> . Here the idea being to build a small water-based eco-system - with some regular plants, water plants growing there, fish, frogs, dragonflies living in the water tanks.
- Next we saw a bicycle shop called **Bikes Across Borders** (<http://www.bikesacrossborders.org>) - "a non-profit bike shop that repairs salvaged bikes & offers bicycle & bike trailer workshops". Since 2001, they have sent over 500 bicycles to Cuba, Mexico, and Central America. The bike shop is open to all and I think they even have a program where you can make your own bike from donated parts, after you have volunteered for a certain number of hours. (There was another similar program in Houston called the **Workshop Houston**: http://www.workshophouston.org/programs/bike_shop.php . It was even covered by PBS - <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/320/earn-a-bike.html>)
- As a part of the bike shop, they had built something like a stationary bike to which one could attach a grinder. They had an attachment which could be used to remove corn from the cob. All this had been built from scrap metal or old bicycle parts. (Siddamma thought that this application was very unique and that it could be used in the village to extract oil)
- They had some rain-water harvesting structures, another structure to treat the household waste-water,
- There was the garden as mentioned before where several fruits, vegetables and herbs were being organically grown. They also carried out vermi-composting.

(Please check their website to read more about their efforts or even better, go and visit them)

We spent some time speaking to more volunteers and from one of them we learnt about another organization close by called **Casa Marianella** - <http://www.casamarianella.org> . It is a shelter and home for immigrant laborers. Having nothing planned for the evening we decided to go there. So within six hours of being in Austin, Siddamma had shown us places we had never heard of or seen.

There was only one volunteer that evening and he was busy taking in a new resident. There were lots of residents around but most of them only spoke Spanish and other Latin American languages. So we waited for a while outside and then sat in the living area. While we were sitting there waiting we saw a number of residents walk through the living area. All of them took the time to smile and greet us. It was fun communicating with one lady - she was saying something in Spanish and we were talking in English and all of us were using hand gestures to try to explain what we were saying. We finally managed to introduce ourselves. I was amazed by the strong feeling of affection and sense of community I felt in that group there. I have never felt so comfortable in a group of strangers in this country.

After the volunteer had registered the new resident, we spoke to him about the organization and the program they had there. They help immigrants by providing them with food, shelter, clothes for at least a month. There are English classes held, contacts of lawyers for legal counseling, some over the counter medicines for the residents. At this facility nightly occupancy is 21-30 people, and the average length of stay is 30 days. The majority of persons leaving the shelter are able to find stable housing when they leave. A short video tour of the house can be seen at - <http://www.casamarianella.org/video/CasaMarianellaTour.wmv>

The new resident they had taken in *Ravi**, was from Nepal. There was another girl *Aarti** who was acting as

the translator. Aarti was also a Nepali and had in fact she had lived at Casa Marianella when she had come to the US. Ravi had been held at a detention center while his background was checked and once Casa Marianella heard about it, they paid for Ravi's bond to be released and he was brought to Austin. Aarti helped Ravi get settled and made sure he had everything he needed. Aarti was comfortable in talking in English and Hindi, and we spoke to her at length about the place.

(* - names have been changed)

She said that when she had come to the US and Casa Marianella, she neither know English nor Spanish, but she managed to pick up both these languages very soon. She was very grateful for the help she received here and ever since she had found a job, she paid a small amount to Casa Marianella every month and she also volunteered there. She said that all the residents after securing jobs, paid a small amount to support the house - something like \$10/month. Aarti spoke about how she wanted to learn nursing and she was planning to join a school for nursing. She was currently living with her family and she got health-care through Medicaid and collected Food Stamps from the government.

While we had been waiting to talk to the volunteer, I was wondering how we could volunteer to help here. Language seemed to be a barrier to me and I wondered how useful I would be without the knowledge of Spanish. I was surprised to see Nepali residents and at the same time I realized that I really could volunteer and help out. Nepali citizens most times understand Hindi and this was one way we could help. I soon realized that if the will to volunteer is there, I could definitely find some way to make myself useful. I also learned that once a week, they collected old clothes and sorted them out for use by the residents.

Siddamma was very excited to meet Aarti and she wanted to put her in touch with the person she had met in New Orleans who was working with immigrant labor. After this we got home and made dinner, while we discussed what we had seen during the day. There were so many opportunities to volunteer locally and learn. I guess we just needed someone to show us the way.

Day 2

Next morning Siddamma made some amazing breakfast and lunch. (Seems like she did not trust our cooking). The Asha volunteers came for an early meeting to meet with Siddamma and learn about her work. First we saw a documentary she had got from New Orleans. It described the struggle of the people who had been displaced and were now trying to return to the city and their homes in the public housing project. The documentary can be seen online - <http://www.advancementproject.org/ourwork/other-initiatives/hurricane-katrina/video1.php> . Siddamma spoke about what she learned in New Orleans and drew parallels to what she had seen in India after the tsunami. As an example, the fishermen community which had lived along the sea-shore were not allowed to return on the pretext of their safety. Now the sea-front properties were being given to developers for the construction of resorts and hotels.

Siddamma spoke about her work in India, especially related to the projects supported from Asha Austin. She spoke at length about the Resource Center and was even carrying a whole bunch of photographs. She said that she was from a farmer family and she could see how things had changed in the last few years. Agriculture has now become a very risky business with high input costs which forces the farmer to take loans at very high interest rates. It has been this debt which has been the cause of most farmer suicides in the last decade. The high input costs come from buying - GM (Genetically modified) seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides - all of which are very expensive. For example when a farmer buys GM seeds, they have to buy a certain brand of fertilizer and pesticide along with it, each of which is very expensive. At the end of the year the farmer cannot even save the seeds for next year as the seeds from GM plants are engineered not to work. So in case everything goes well, the farmer will make some money and pay back his loans. But in case something goes wrong, say, the rains fail, the farmer has a lot to lose. Another problem over the last few years has been a shift from food crops to cash crops. Most farmers have started growing cash crops and nothing else, based on the promise of greater returns. This, according to Siddamma, is a big problem as the farmers are now dependent on the sale of their cash crop for the food. In case of food grains, even if the

farmer cant sell them in the market, the family at least has something to eat.

This is where the resource center comes in. It was with the idea to show the farmers nearby, how traditional means of agriculture had lesser risk and was more suited for small land-holdings. Siddamma spoke of how one needed just a pair of cows on the land to make the whole system sustainable. Apart from providing milk, the cow urine and cow dung have numerous uses on the farm. Cow-dung can be used for manure and also as a fuel for cooking. The cow urine mixed with cow-dung, buttermilk and some other secret ingredients (:D) can be used for making a natural pesticide. Food for the cows - you can provide the paddy and other organic waste that is generated on the farm. By adding cows to the farm, makes it almost a self-sustaining eco-system.

Siddamma showed a bunch of photographs from the Resource Center. The photographs helped us visualize what we had been talking about all along - the check dams, the bunds, the cow shed, the raised platform for the paddy, etc. Over the last year they have had a very good crop of groundnuts and sunflower. Siddamma told us how their work, was raising the interest of the neighboring farmers and many of them had dropped by to see what was going on there. Many of them even decided to try out some of the techniques on their own land. This was exactly the objective of starting the Resource Center and slowly but surely the results can be seen. The next step is to try to get the "Organic" certification and make their produce available in the local market.

After the Asha meeting, we all went to the university for a talk organized for Siddamma's visit. Siddamma spoke about her various projects and her experiences and there was a good discussion about the resource center. There was a video recording of most of the talk which will be put up online at some point. (Contact Santhosh or me if you want a copy of the video). After the talk a bunch of us met up again at Santhosh's place, where the discussions continued. Siddamma finally trusted us to make dinner.

Siddamma spent a good amount of time talking about the tsunami housing project. They had worked on low-cost housing for the families who had been affected. We saw a whole bunch of pictures of the houses and they were quite impressive. It was a one-room house with a kitchen and it was a pucca house built with bricks. The bricks used were compressed bricks which were made in the countryside and were much cheaper than the bricks from the kilns. So not only was it cheaper but it also provided work to people in the community. Most of the construction of the house was done by the family for whom the house was being built. This way the labor cost was substantially reduced. In many of the houses the roofs were made of cement/brick and this was the most expensive part. In the future Siddamma was thinking of using earthen tiles for the roofing. This would not only provide employment to the rural potter families but would also save a lot of money. Another unique feature about this project was that - the house was in the name of the woman of the house.

During the discussion Siddamma came up with the idea of "Build a Home" just like the "support a child" programs we have. She estimated that a pucca house could be built for as low as Rs 50,000 or about \$1250. She said that people could support the whole construction costs or part of it and they could provide the donor with updates and pictures. As we were discussing this Siddamma and all the volunteers became more and more convinced and excited about this idea for low cost housing. There was some talk of including the government at some stage. (A more detailed proposal of the same will be drawn up and you could contact Santhosh or me if you are interested in this).

After this we decided to call it a day, as Siddamma had an early morning flight to Seattle. We packed everything at night and got to the airport on time. It was difficult to believe how the last two days had flown by and I wished Siddamma had a longer stay in Austin but I guess that also would not have been enough. She invited everybody to visit the resource center and stay for atleast a couple of days. There is only rule there - you have to work to get food :D

The pictures from the visit will also be available soon.

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Impressions of the visit from the audience

"To me Siddamma came across as a bold, brave, and smart lady, who has spent years after years working with the under-privileged in releasing bonded labourers, education and upliftment of irula tribes, tsunami relief, and women empowerment, relentlessly fighting with government, zamindars, and whoever she had to for their rights. It is one thing to hear about individuals like Siddamma and another to meet them in reality. I really appreciate her work and zeal to fight for a cause that is not hers.

The impact of her efforts can be clearly seen by looking at the change in spirit of the communities she has worked with and the change in attitude of government and local authorities towards social issues. The communities in these areas are more close-knit than before. They come together in masses to show their support even for an individual, in a non-violent way. The government and local bodies take her more seriously, rather than writing her off as a trouble-maker. It is really impressive for an individual to such a status in society without being part of the political/administrative system of the country."

"Siddamma was very communicative and lucid for a field worker. This can be used to an advantage by publicizing her organization among the general public. Its difficult to be a women activist."

"Since my association with Asha, I never got the chance (never tried to also) to see any projects or be a part of any conference calls with people from India working at the grass roots level. So I think I never got the chance to realize how true all of this was. Not to say I do not realize the issues faced by say farmers or the problems faced in trying to work towards changing things for the better. But I truly believe and I am sure many would agree, that its one thing to make an intelligent conversation about it and another to see it or even feel it.

Meeting Siddamma made things seem more real. I could not relate to the problems she faced as a child. But I know she went through a lot. One thing I could understand about her was her strength and the belief she had in the work she was doing. One other thing that really stood out for me was the discussion about how she was doing things and whether she believed there was a better way to do it. I liked her response wherein she said that it may or may not be the best but its better than continuing the same way. This I derived largely from the discussion over organic farming. My point about her is really that, she was willing to try out something different and was making a practical effort in doing so. It just was not something she came up with to see if it works. It was feasible too. If her idea works, many more farmers can afford to sustain themselves."

Seattle

(Summary Provided by Saurabh, Asha Seattle volunteer)

Siddamma's Seattle visit was a wonderful learning experience for all of us. This time, apart from our website(<http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/talks/siddamma.php>), we also posted the event information on various websites, including [Sulekha.com](http://www.sulekha.com) and [Seattleindian.com](http://www.seattleindian.com). The upshot was that a public radio journalist contacted us and conducted Siddamma's interview after the talk.

One of our volunteers, Soumya, uploaded a video of the talk on google videos (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7570218833273874962>). We are going to upload the information

on our website soon. Though this video only covers about 1 hour of the talk, we had a very interesting question answer session.

The subjects of our conversations with Siddamma were similar to the one's at other chapters. We all had a great time with Siddamma at Jayashree's house where we had dinner together and watched a documentary. I had to leave, but I think the other folks had even more fun.

Chicago

(Summary provided by Anita, Asha Chicago volunteer)

Siddamma visited Chicago from the 5th evening to 8th morning. Her talk was scheduled for the 7th evening. On 6th I took her to the Shedd Aquarium to see how museums connect to schools and have educational programs for children. She was very fascinated by this. In the evening, I also took her to a teacher workshop that was conducted in UIC on mathematics education and she found the whole set up interesting. We talked about how the trainings here look so different from anything that one gets in India and perhaps in the long run it would be a good idea to provide such training for teachers in colleges. On 7th we went around searching for a camcorder for her and I also took her to my community garden plot. The evening talk was attended by a total of 10 people and there were several very interesting discussions. She shared her background and then went on to talk about the Tsunami Rehabilitation, Sarpam, the rice mill struggle, the New Orleans trip, the resource center and organic farming and so on. We had dinner at my place and the discussions went on till 11pm. All in all I think everyone learnt a lot from interacting with her. We may have a longer article on the talk in the upcoming newsletter and I can forward that once it is ready.

Detroit

(Summary provided by Mani, Asha Detroit volunteer)

We all enjoyed Siddamma's talk. She came to Detroit on Saturday, and we met a few volunteers for dinner that night at a local restaurant. On Sunday, Siddamma talked about the items that everyone else has mentioned - Irula tribes, Rice-mills bonded labors, Tsunami relief efforts, Organic farming and low cost housing initiatives. The Detroit chapter appreciated and thanked her by extending a small gift - books and DVD. The talk was attended by around 15 people.

Sunday night after the talk we went to another volunteer's home for dinner, during which we talked to her in detail about our Kuvempu project, which she has a lot of history to. We took some pictures that are available at our web site.

Boston

(Write up by Melli Annamalai, Asha Boston Volunteer)

I had zero success putting her in touch with other orgs, partly because it was a weekday I think. But I was able to show her a bit about how the political process in the US works. I live in New Hampshire which plays a key role in the presidential primary process, being an early voting state. We get to interact with the candidates and participate in the process at a very grassroots level. Candidates are visiting the state every other day. Siddamma would have loved to do attend such a meeting and meet a candidate, but the timing of her visit was really bad being around September 11th, all candidates avoided campaigning around that date. However we had a good discussion on the process, I showed her some photos (see nhprimaries.blogspot.com if you are interested - Siddamma took a copy of my photo with Edwards to show their MLA saying that she wanted them to see how presidential candidates in the US interact with people, even non-whites :)), and also showed her recorded videos of candidate debates (which also she found very interesting). In addition it happened to be the Nashua (the town I live in) mayoral primary elections on Sept. 11th, and I took her there and she watched while I voted. She was very struck by how calm and orderly the elections were (no "bandha" as she said). She was also struck by how my neighbor called me in the morning to remind me

about the elections - shows the generally high political awareness and participation among New Hampshire residents.

Her talk at MIT was well-received. It was a very rainy day contributing to lower attendance than expected, but those who attended really liked it, and we all had dinner afterwards which I could tell she really enjoyed. Most of those who came for the dinner were AID Boston folks and I think it was good for her to connect with them. Some followup things were discussed. I think they would be interested in participating in the low cost housing effort and other work done by Siddamma.

CNJ

(Minutes taken at a talk given by Siddamma in Rutgers University)

Introduction about Katrina problem and involvement:

Siddamma's reason of US visit – to meet activists working for affected people in Katrina and do fact finding mission – met them in World Social Forum – in New Orleans the govt wants to develop the region as a tourist spot etc and not interested in rehabilitating the poor people (mostly black). In India, there is some organization, some skill to fight with Govt and ask for rights – even post tsunami mostly NGOs helped. Since independence we have been fighting for our rights. The Katrina folks want to learn from these experiences.

People in New Orleans want to come back to their homelands – state has responsibility – Govt says we can't allow you to come back (for safety measures) – alternative – public housing (bad conditions) – even in India – govt is not rehabilitating the Tsunami affected fishermen and are planning to develop the area to tourist attraction. Planning to call big trawling companies (from Japan) and do fishing – so better revenue for Govt. In Biloxi, Mississippi – people are not allowed to come back – but hotels and casinos are given permit to continue and build new places.

Govt is not providing transportation for rehabilitation and they are poor – people are staying in super-domes with very bad facilities – no toilets etc – tensions – shootings – 6/8 deaths have taken place inside these domes.

Tsunami – fishermen who are rehabilitated in distant places – poor illiterate people who can't take up other occupations so easily. So they still have to fish. So people can't be rehabilitated just like that. In Katrina people have been sent to different states.

In USA, there is no media exposure – people don't come to know – in India at least there is some grassroots protest and some activism done towards branding the politician as corrupt (even if no subsequent action is taken) – but in USA people are not organized – don't know how to lead an organized struggle.

Introduction to Siddamma and her early life :

Involved in Asha till 1999. Was introduced to Asha through Ski (one of the 3 people who founded Asha)

Siddamma – from Karnataka (Kuvempu) – her parents had 11 children and she is the only educated one – wild bear attacked her as a child – severely mauled - to this day she carried marks of those injuries - and her parents felt that only education will ensure her a future – came to B'lore for higher education - saw slums – met women called Margaret who was running a school for rag-picker's children. Saw issues of eviction, drugs etc – realized that education is not just basic abcds – her activist spirit was discovered by Margaret – she joined institute (SEARCH) which gave innovative training (10 youths/year nationwide were chosen by this institute) – teachings of this institute: analyze issues (poverty) and see what to do – how to work with communities – send to different NGOs and see how they work – identify your own skills etc different kinds

of training given in this institute – came to Chennai to a Abacus school – met her future husband there and decided to settle in Chennai – met other activists – slum issues – worked 8 years in Chennai slums – dowry deaths – proceeding in legal

Involvement with Irula Tribes :

Irula tribes –from Tiruvalluvar - had many problems – landlords set one of their houses in fire – police did not accept their petitions – they came to this institute - it was decided that Siddamma would go to them – went there – was shocked – took almost 2 years for her to understand their socio- economic structure, their problems –

Background: Traditionally Irulas lived in forests and their livelihoods was from the forest they used to think the forest as their own – skin snakes, collect herbs etc – in modern India the new forest act was passed– no one could now claim forest as their own –after the rule was passed the Irula's could not lead their traditional ways. Some people were bought by landlords for agriculture – some of them were sent to coastal areas for fishing – some of them worked in rice mills

Govt left them like that – no plans – no place to stay, water etc – Irula settlements were in very interior villages – no roads etc – no education – 100% illiteracy rate – so more exploited – if they didn't work in landlords land – police used to come and jail them. Wages were Rs 8/day (1996) – strong feudal set-up

Realized that there should be an organization for them – they should have dignity as human beings – she stayed with them and ate with them – gained their confidence. In 1996 CRY sponsored her fellowship (Rs 4000/month) – helped her in traveling – she explored how to help them – formed organization called Sarpam – people should become self sufficient – now Sarpam is a systematic organization – district level, taluk level, village level. Illiteracy was a problem – how to explain them the laws that they could help them – Siddamma spent 6 years and effort etc – now 50,000 people are part of this movement – can manage themselves – talk to the Govt – self sustaining model. If landlord of one village does something – others come forward – spread to 3 districts now – Govt has to listen to their voices. 1998-2005 – the Dutch Govt supported her work

Siddamma also worked with children and education levels have improved. Police can't easily harass Irula villagers now. Faced huge resistance – many cases registered against her – fought them in the court – one e.g. of a case that went on for 2-3 years – accusation that she is converting people to Christianity (her husband is Christian)

Issue of Bonded Labor in Rice Mills :

Rice Mills – some Irulas were working as laborers – were more like bonded laborers – Sarpam folks went and mixed with laboreres inside the mills– gave them info about Sarpam

Paddy processing unit – some children had accidentally died there – in India most of the rice mill owners are highly rich and politicians. Workers in these mills didn't have the most basic rights and were in fact bonded laborers.

E.g.: A woman- 3 days after her delivery was made to work – even for the delivery she was not allowed to go out - people in rice mill are not allowed to come about – stay inside the mills and work – in debt – debt is so high (Rs 80000 present debt with interest for original loan of Rs 1000 that maybe the grandfather had taken and now the grandson has to work to pay off the debt) – the woman died due to infection – owners didn't allow the husband to go out and do cremation – he had to finish his work first.

Siddamma fought against the bonded labor issue – Govt says that people are not chained – so no bonded labor – Siddamma lead large protests – media exposure – She and Sarpam approached National Commission

of Woman – lots of power – can form jury and summon to court for public hearing (workers will tell what happened and owners has to respond) - Swami Agnivesh was in jury (freed many bonded labors in North India)

In public hearing – very moving – woman and children came and cried in the mikes and told tales of misery inside the mills – the issue went to Parliament – Govt was forced to free the bonded labors - 8 of the past owners have been jailed

Swami Agnivesh has filed PIL saying that bonded labor exists in India – SC asked states to respond (17 states inc TN) – states have said no – so if now it is proved yes – big problem – in case of rice mills – most are illegal – not registered – workers are not documented – workers are not paid minimum wages (Rs 86) and they are paid Rs 14.

So as per the act, the Govt had to release them and pay Rs 20000 and give them certificate and land and housing – Govt has released 850 families – Govt gave land and formed a village for these freed laborers (SK Nagar) – the leaders of this struggle (including Siddamma) escaped murder attempts – but now the landlords have seen the power of Sarpam etc and don't touch her

850 rice mills affected – 50 mills closed down – so all rice mills in TN are now registered as there was lot of media exposure

Education, Rehabilitation etc of Irula Tribes :

Siddamma started a school immediately and worked with the children of these bonded laborers (Asha Austin supported)

Minimum wages not yet implemented but pay is raised (Rs 72), no harassing etc – rice mill workers etc are members of Sarpam

In schools – new curriculum made – to make the education relevant - so that the child learns faster and stays interested (don't teach letters first and then words – teach words directly – saw all letters with E taught first) – 2000 children enrolled in Govt schools – teachers from the same communities have been promoted

Community takes care of schools – if food is there – if teachers are coming etc

See to it that the child has some quality and then send to Govt schools – emphasis given that girls should come to schools – flexible curriculum so that during peanut season etc the leeways are given.

We made it clear that community should get involved in education and schooling – if community is interested and willing to share the responsibility then only Siddamma helps them- community has to decide what school to build, who will be the teachers etc – Sarpam will not get involved – after 3 years the community should see to it that the children should go to Govt schools.

Govt schools have praised these schools and the teachers – some of the Govt schools have come to these schools to learn more about effective schooling techniques.

What is the future of this community? IT etc – community certificate given so that they make use of the quota and get into the mainstream of society.

Organic Farming Initiatives :

Some policies in India are bad for land – pesticides etc introduced in name of Green Revolution (urea, nitrates etc) are harming the land – more production is needed- is the argument of Green Revolution – but even if the food quantity has been increased the amount of poverty has not – chemicals used in bad for land and bad for health

So Siddamma wanted to set up model agricultural lands and cultivation is done as per the traditional Indian farming – fundraising done in Europe and money has come to Bharati trust for this – main thing needed in a cow – no money needed for anything else. Leaves and cowdung is sufficient – Rs 2000 and 2 cows per family in this model villages – 6 families leave here - 13 acres of land – rainwater harvesting done here – food made for local consumption – lot of crops that the Govt is not encouraging in India are grown

Dutch Govt co-finance agency has supported her work.

Is there an effort to raise awareness in mainstream media in India – she couldn't do due to lack to time and bandwidth – she said that genetically modified seeds are already been introduced in India and she opposes this

Other bonded labors – brick kiln workers and coal mine quarry workers

Sarpam – union – so that they can take up community based activism – very independent – taken a decision not to attach with any political party – 25 main leaders (50% women) hundreds of taluk leaders

Bharati Trust – an NGO which can't take up community based activism

Irula's was encouraged by Sarpam etc to stand for Panchayat elections and 10 of them got elected this year – big achievement

Education – is it just running evening schools – after he/she has worked whole morning – child should first enjoy their childhood – they should get to play

Let the child go to school – Govt. schools – even if they are bad – because historically this community has never gone to schools - maybe the next generation will improve – like a hungry man will get satisfied with bread and does not need Biriyani.

Low Cost Housing Initiatives :

500 houses for Irula people were built after Tsunami – first time they have pucca house – initially Govt did not publish their name in list of affected people – Siddamma etc fought and got them rights – after these tsunami houses were built – Siddamma felt that these could be expanded - low cost housing scheme for them being considered by her about \$1200 for a house – the tsunami houses was built in 3 months

Govt has given free 2 acres of land to Irulas – but not eligible to get any loans for them – no electricity – so planning to set up a windmill – talked with Govt. dept and also got technical expertise etc

Misc :

The tribals know how Asha fundraises etc – how they get their money

Make movies about the Irula's

UN has invited her to talk about bonded labor

Then US Govt wanted to meet her (US main consulate officer in Chennai came to her and spoke) – US gave her small award.

Still many Irula villages have been reached – want to reach them first so that they set up Sarpam etc and then spread to other states etc

Imp thing about Asha – you know where the money has come from – some agency had sent money to her to give money for activism – she is suspect about their motives – but she trusts money that comes from Asha

Donor base in India – during emergencies there is money coming – in other times – there is no regular base – but bags of rice etc are provided

Education is not just syllabus based – some skills imparted – they can directly appear for public exams

3 offices of Bharati Trust– Thiruvalluvar, Cuddalore (will be closed because tsunami work is over), Velore

Every year – plan of the year ahead – meet with Sarpam leaders each year.

Resource Center – award winning, famous organic scientist involved

Planning to make a cooperative society and get Govt. to give subsidies

Brinjal etc in India are genetically modified

Seed bank etc will be developed in India and given to common people

NYC

(Summary provided by Sharad, Asha NYC volunteer)

As for the sequence of events/itinerary, here's a rough idea:

- Wednesday, September 12th - Sharad picked up Siddamma and dropped her in Jersey with Joydeep.

- Thursday, September 13th, 11.00 pm : Siddamma arrived at Nitin Khosla's place in Jersey.

- Friday, September 14th, 9.00 - 9.30 am : She came into NYC with Nitin and Neil took over. They met with the Deputy Commissioner of Urban Planning and Development downtown in regard to low-cost housing for the tribals. Discussed the housing in NY (some history) and potential future world-conferences on low-cost housing to bring together people from all over the world to collaborate on it. They went around NYC, took the ferry to Staten Island. In the evening had dinner at Saravanas with some of the volunteers. Returned to Nitin's place.

- Saturday, Sep 15th, 2.00 pm - Nitin brought Siddamma into the city for the talk. Talk details in the article attached. After the talk, Nitin and Siddamma did some shopping and left for the airport.

NYC's Article :

On 15th of September, fresh from the success of Indian Ocean concert Asha Volunteers of NY/NJ Chapter organised a talk/interactive session with Siddamma (While like this author many tried to address her 'ma'am', she said she prefers to go by Siddamma).

Siddamma who was visiting the US to attend a conference on Tsunami and Katrina took time out to talk to Asha Volunteers across the country. Siddamma, an Asha Fellow and a grassroots activist who has extensively worked with the Irula tribal communities and has been instrumental in the release of over 2000 bonded laborers from the rice mills in Red Hills near Chennai, shared her experience with a group of eager Asha Volunteers in New York.

Siddamma who has been conferred several awards and honors in the past few years including "Heroes Acting To End Modern-Day Slavery", has also been invited by many government agencies from several countries to share her experience. She has also addressed the UN as part of the presentation on "Tsunami Response: A human Rights Assessment.

It was a breezy afternoon welcoming Fall to this part of the world. There was something incredible about her presence in the room. Virginia Woolf would have shed a tear or two had she been in that room that day. Siddamma began by briefly introducing us to her background and how she got involved working for the people's rights. Born in a family of 11 children, Siddamma was attacked by a bear when she was 7 years old, which cost her right eye and some cosmetic injury. However, she describes this incident as a boon in disguise. She gleefully chuckled and recalled "I was sent to school as a consolation, whereas my other sibilings were married at an early age". After attending college in Bangalore, Siddamma was armed with the necessary education. She started working as an activist and took up the cause of upliftment and empowerment of Irula tribal community that was exploited as the bonded rice mills laborers by the landlords. Since 1990 to date, Siddamma has worked extensively to organize the Irula community to represent themselves and their rights and in the process has rehabilitated the adults by re-skilling them while ensuring that the children of these families get mainstream schooling as well. Her experience in re-skilling and re-employing the freed labourers is an example of how free communities work and can easily fit into class room Economics.

This particular anecdote of Siddamma is an instance where she defied authority and that too, head on: She was invited by the District collector, a young lady in her early thirties for a 'peace meeting', in which the DC was to hear the views of both the parties, the landlords and the laborers and their representatives independently. And to her surprise she found the landlords present in the Collector's chamber. She walked out after trying her best to explain to the young officer that the grievances of Irula workers could not be discussed in the presence of the very landlords who were unjust and unreasonable. This experience of hers demonstrates an underlying grit and strength of a lady that stems from her conviction in fighting for human rights.

Listening to a person who single-handedly fought for the cause of bonded laborers against all odds and started an enormous movement that served as an example to other villages to fight for their rights was a humbling experience. Her spirit, motivation and dedicated efforts to make a difference in people's lives has been a tremendous inspiration for all of us to realize that even a small initiative on our part can still bring positive changes in the society. To quote Asif, an Asha volunteer who aptly puts across his thought "The experience was very inspiring. The fact that she alone can bring about so much change in a community like this made me wonder how better this world could be if we could do our bit to the society"

Currently, Siddamma is working on creating a community resource center that would serve as a platform to the community to try out organic farming and to build up vocational skills of the community members. While the West is coming to grips with its 'green guilt' and the new economies of the Orient are polluting their way to progress, this initiative of her probably might go unnoticed but she is sowing seeds for the richer soil for the generations of Irula communities.

Towards the end of the meeting, Sidamma also enthusiastically shared some pictures of the work that has been done at the community level with the building of a school for children, and her experience in educating the community to practice organic farming. And she did invite all of us to visit her model community – on one condition, if we are ready to get our hands dirty and work for our food !!