

Fellowship Siddamma: Site Visit to 3 Irula Villages

Venue: Near Gummudipoondi, Kamarajnagar, Ellarmedu and Yedakandigai
Border of Andhra Pradesh & Tamil Nadu; About 2.5 hours from Adyar,
Chennai

Visit Date: December 6, 2018 Report Date: January 16, 2019

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The road trip: Siddamma picked us up from my house in Chennai at 9:30 AM in her old Innova (with over 2 lakh kms) with her driver Mohan. She had returned from a trip to Bharathi Trust the previous night. I had Vikram Iyengar, my husband (ex-ASHA volunteer) and my 3 year old travel with us. The 2hr:30min road trip comprised of some nice discussions about Siddamma's work and involvement of ASHA. We visited Kamarajnagar, Ellarmedu and Yedakandigai and returned home at 10 PM on the same day. Siddamma was travelling back to Bharathi trust the same night after dropping us off.

Highlights in 2018

Aval Vikatan Award: Siddamma received the "Aval Vikatan Award" for Real Heroes on November 24th, 2018.



Vikatan is a very famous magazine in Tamil Nadu. There were big cutouts of her on Airport Road. She received a gift voucher of Rs. 15,000. She was very happy to have been recognized and received several calls from farmers regarding organic farming training and support. She mentioned that she has had several farmers show up at her farm for training and that she hasn't charged them anything because most of the farmers who show up are poor and she

doesn't have the heart to turn them away or ask them for money.

In March she is going to have 200 farmers show up for training (through Aval Vikatan). She is requesting them to pay Rs. 200 for the training/food.

Please see youtube link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxtELRzo3kw&t=660s>

at 11:00 mins to see Siddamma receiving her award.

Gaja Puyyal: Siddamma talked about the effect of Gaja Puyyal (Storm) on Irula families in Cuddalore. About 149 houses had been completely washed away. She was needing atleast Rs. 7.0 lakhs to help these people with food, shelter etc. Many of them were evacuated and have been provided alternate land. Fishing is the main occupation for the Irulas; many of the Irulas were affected since venturing into open seas was deemed risky and banned for many days. Siddamma was working with Geetha Ramakrishnan, another social activist to help the affected Irula families.

ST Certificate: In Cuddalore, Saminagar, all the Irula families have now received the ST certificate and therefore higher education is possible for several kids. The ST certificate enables low/free schooling for many of these children.

National: Siddamma had 3 meetings with the government and National Planning Commission of India. The outcome of the meeting was that the Commission agreed that 1 acre of land per Irula family with organic farming training should be provided by the Govt to each Irula family for self sustenance. They are trying their best to implement this on the policy side; however, this hasn't happened yet. Siddamma along with the Sarpam Sangam heads are trying their best to facilitate this.

Irula Meeting in Delhi: Siddamma, Srinivasan (Sarpam Sangam Head) and Valli (Sarpam Sangam Woman Leader) had a meeting with the Scheduled Tribe Commissioner in Delhi. He had requested that a survey be conducted of the Irulas: with information about number of families, number of people who

have pattas. Srinivasan/Valli got all the information together and it was submitted to the ST Commissioner early 2019.

It was found that the budget allocated for the Irulas was not being properly utilized by the ST Director. The Commissioner talked with the ST director to make sure he was not being the bottleneck for the release of funds. Hopefully, the Irulas will see more funds being utilized towards their improvement with the release of these funds.

Details of our trip to the 3 villages

We picked up Valli and Srinivasan the ¹Sarpam Sangam head on the way. Valli seemed to be a shining example of the woman leadership that Siddamma has inspired. She is Siddamma's right hand and the head of Gummudipoondi Thaluk. She had a very good personal connection with everyone in the 3 villages we visited. She was also very well equipped with the information needed to get things done (patta, certificates, rights of Irulas).

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Village 1: We reached the first village-Kamaraj Nagar at 12 pm.



Village 1 Observation:

- There are 82 families with 35 families having patta. The families that have patta have a nicer brick house. The sarpam head of this Village is Yezhumalai who is a fisherman.
- More families will be getting the "patta" and new housing will be coming soon to this village.
- The houses are built by the local Irulas while the bricks/other raw materials are provided by the government. Papamma (>70 years old) helped build these houses.
- All the kids goto school (about 1 km away). They have bicycles to commute back and forth.
- There are regular monthly medical check-ups at this village
- We met a 1 year old that had a heart operation when he was 45 days old. Baby is now healthy. Valli and the local leaders were able to get the needed paperwork together to get the surgery done free of cost.
- They avail free LPG for their cooking needs.
- Most of the villagers are fisherman. There is 1 motor boat for 6 families. The boat costs Rs. 1 Lakh and runs on diesel. There are 50 families without boats in this village.
- It was refreshing to see that the current generation was aware of the benefits of not having too many children. When we posed this question, some of the mothers giggled and said they took their husbands to the hospital to ensure they had no more kids.
- The Irulas in this village wanted a common community hall for them to be able to discuss issues and possibly take refuge in incase of a calamity

- The women of this village wanted some fresh ideas to supplement their primary income from fishing. Seemed to be a recurring need in all 3 villages.

Village 2: Then we drove to Ellarmedu-the 2nd village with endless mango plantations-the main work site for the locals.



Teachers, Doctor, Nurse, Police, Lawyer in the making

Village 2 Observation:

- This village is close to farms growing mango trees. The villagers work at these farms and are also fisherman. The head of Ellarmedu is Jayashankar.
- There are 24 families in this village of which 12 families have patta and good houses.
- We met Satish Kumar who had done his MA and was studying to be a lawyer.
- Chinnaraasu and Satish Kumar help kids in the village by giving tuitions. All the kids (26) goto school. Chinnarasu and Satish Kumar indicated that they needed a hall with a tubelight/blackboard to teach the kids.
- Electricity/water was available in the village and not a problem.
- The women in the village expressed interest in tailoring classes. Some of them had made doormats with Sarees and they looked beautiful. Siddamma said that she would get in touch with stores in Chennai (like Re-store)to see if they would be interested in selling the door mats. The women also expressed interest in tailoring classes.
- The main problem in this village was that there were too many families living in one small house. Siddamma said that she would identify land for additional families and see what she could do to get them housing.

Village 3: Yedakandigai

- Everyone has a ST certificate in this village.
- All kids were going to school including the girl children
- Electricity/water was available in the village
- 24 families of which 20 families needed patta.
- Primary occupation: Fishing and working at the local farms.
- This village has no boats. The men folk currently rent another person's boat for Rs.10 per day to go fishing.
- It felt like not many people were happy in this village. Majority of them complained that they had too many families living in one small house. They desperately wanted additional land so they could move out. They seemed to think I was the messiah who could get them additional land. This seemed to be the recurrent theme in the last 2 villages and as Siddamma mentioned in a lot of other villages
- Siddamma said that they will be working on getting additional land for these families.

Overall Summary

- The village leaders along with the Taluk leaders are taking care of most of the village needs. Sidamma is very proud of the growing self sufficiency. She mostly involves herself at the policy level when it comes to land related issues because this requires the aggressiveness and weight that someone like Sidamma brings
- The villagers were thrilled to have Siddamma. There was genuine warmth, love and reverence for her.
- Thaluk leaders like Valli and Pappamma are shining examples of women leaders that have been inspired by Siddamma's leadership. They are bold and not afraid to speak their mind, take care of several need of the villagers and lead crucial meetings involving disputes and settlement of issues.

- School and medical help is accessible. All the kids in the 3 villages were going to school.
- All the houses had basic necessities like electricity and water.

Current Needs

- Atleast 2 boats needed in Yedakandigai
- School supply (board and tubelight) for tuitions in Ellarmedu
- Flood rehabilitation in Cuddalore
- Old Jeep of Siddamma's seems to be giving her many problems and is essential for her to get to places. May need to be replaced soon and she doesn't have the money for it.