

23 Oct 2005

Telephone conversation with Siddamma – Sanjeev Ranganathan

I had a few questions about the Sarpams and alternate education activities.

*Q: How many members are there in the Sarpams? What do they exactly do?*

A: In Tiruvallur there are 50,000 people who are members of the Sarpams. However, only a part of them, 5,000, are able to support the organization through memberships.

*Q: Are the people who do not pay dues part of the Sarpams?*

A: Absolutely, the funds collected are only used for the struggles of the people and in their time of need. Each village that is part of the Sarpam has 5 representatives with a minimum of 3 women. There are well over 500 leaders in each taluka. Each taluka has 3 leaders and we are working in 5 talukas in Tiruvallur.

The idea is to give people access to representatives that are answerable to them. The Sarpams is an open organization with open accounts. When we help the Sarpams get established we work with the villagers to help them select individuals to represent them. We then work with the village representatives to build leadership, understanding of their communities and engage in human right activities.

At this point Bharathi Trust has no staff that is overlooking activities in Tiruvallur and we are now working on getting the Vellore Sarpams to the same level. The role we play is primarily of an advisory capacity and the different educational programs we run in these villages.

*Q: What are the different economic activities that you had undertaken, in terms of alternate livelihood?*

A: We do not have much experience with alternate education. The issue of livelihood that we have addressed is a different one. Not that of lack of it, but of being treated fairly in wages. Lack of unity and exposure had got people to work at Rs. 8-10/day. The schedule caste communities are well organized and refused to work at such low wages at which point the landlords shift their attention to tribals instead. In over 300 villages this is the central problem. The effort is then to start a discussion of wages and communicate with other communities and agricultural people, the issue then becomes that of people standing for their rights. The men are presently being paid Rs. 52/day and the women Rs. 40. This is still lower than the minimum wages, but beyond a point the economics does not work for the landlord and they would go in for mechanization that really puts out everyone from livelihood so it is a balancing act for the landlords and the farmers.

Only few villages we were able to work with the government and bring about land reforms. This is indeed difficult since lands allocated frequently get snatched, which angers people and there is possibility of violence. At this point we need to provide the information about all government land and help them with strategy that are peaceful and legal. In case the people decide to squat and go and live in the land they need to be made

aware of the legal consequences and at times help them face the legal problems they get into for such actions.

We worked on alternate occupation primarily for migrating/seasonal laborers who moved from site to site seeking livelihood that put them on the mercy of what they got like people working in the charcoal industry, brick kilns, rice mills, etc. Alternate occupation would help them get over the seasonal off periods and help them maintain a community.

Alternate occupation on any reasonable scale has been a more recent effort since the Tsunami when many people lost their basic livelihood. Many of these are not necessarily enough to sustain themselves completely. We have had some success people have been able to get by with innovative things like make connections for events, vegetable gardens, small activities taken up as a few in a community with little investment has yielded great results. We have invested around 5-10 lakhs in communities to help themselves get back on their feet with the help of Action AID.

The ideal picture I have in my mind is that each village accumulate/get some funds and all village development should happen on their own and develop without government support.

*Q: What was your motivation to start the resource center?*

A: A small area that could accommodate some 200 people over time to survive off and at the same time help villages sustain themselves. Promote the different skills that people have so they can do work. We would also work with the children so they do not only depend on the government jobs. Small farmers are also becoming laborers, since they are unable to survive. Most of the small farmers are dependent so much on high-risk resources and they lose everything. The next year they do not get loan.

Youth and local farmers who want to learn alternative economical activity. Local skills and how can we promote it. Dairy farm needs to be there, vermiculture. Most of the villages have cows and want to be able to use cow dung and other products rather than rely on investment intensive resources. They need a place to try these things out.

*Q: Why was 10 acres required?*

A: 10 acres is for different activities, one part is cultivation another for pottery, school, milking animals. Scope of doing different things should be possible. We have located places where we will do what. Not only grow rice, but the different things that are required.

*Q: Will all the bonded laborers live here?*

A: They will have access to it and perhaps temporarily what we grow can be used for them, but this is not a long term solution. We cannot accommodate all these families. 10 people are living on the land and helping with the activities.

*Q: Any quick update on the resource center?*

A: We have been able to fill the well that has been dry for 10 yrs.