

2 April 05

Conference call attendees Siddamma, Anand, Sanjeev.

The idea of the **resource center** to document community based knowledge. It also provides a platform to the community to try out for eco-friendly alternatives. One of the focus areas is the use of natural/organic cultivation systems and traditional seeds. The demo center would help communities experiment at the village level. Many of the old villagers feel that the young generation depend too much on pesticides and fertilizers and it would give them an opportunity to handle this through a demonstration of different techniques. Similarly, in agriculture the seed storage system is almost vanishing. The result of this is that many of the traditional seeds have disappeared and the mutated seeds have only a one cycle lifetime and can't be reused. As a result the farmers are dependent on companies for even seeds. Agriculture is one focus; the second is pottery i.e. the use of earthen pots vs. plastic. The third is a dairy the village dairies are almost extinct. The fourth is weaving the fifth herbs/honey and gum that the tribal people obtain from forests and the sixth is renewable energy. The collapse of local economies increases dependence on outside products and since the purchasing power is much lower than cities this results in worse living conditions.

The idea also it to then create a fulltime school for children who want alternative education along with literacy and develop their skills.

Q: Which area is the work being attempted?

A: Place is Gandhinagar between R.K.Pettai and Kallipettai villages. The area is between Vellore and Thiruvallur.

Q: Is the project aimed only towards the Irula community?

A: Aim of resource center is not only for Irulas but for society as a whole. It does have Irula communities too, but the issues of lively-hood are general to other communities as well. There are 30 villages around the area, lots of forests.

Q: Who are the people in the non-Irula villages?

A: Small farmers, weavers, brick kins workers and potters.

Q: In what capacity have these people interacted with Bharathi Trust.

A: With the Irula communities we have worked closely on human rights issues including defending their rights as scheduled tribe to continue their dependence on forests. They were often arrested for entering the forests. We have also worked on organizing them together to retain their culture, but be able to integrate with the rest of the society.

With the other people we have worked to coordinate the unorganized workers unions, which was started by Bharathi Trust.

We have not yet done a detailed survey to completely understand all the issues of the livelihood of the people and find out what resources or techniques are already present among the people. Part of the work is to document all this.

Q: What is the status of the resource center?

A: The first requirement is to have the land available for the activities. We have selected 10 acres of land that we plan to use and this was discussed with the owners of the land.

In the initial stage in 2003 Jayashree (Asha Seattle) and Shanmuga were with us at that time Seattle collected around 2.5 lakhs, but this was too little to purchase the land and could not be put to use. Seattle had the funds directed to a Balwadi in Senjiagram and indicated that they would be able to fill in later when we are closer to the target. This happened 2 yrs back. Shanmuga was also here initially.

Then last year we got to grassroots level and spoke to all the communities around and decided to implement it. I was invited to Europe to talk in the colleges about the Irula community and after it many students pooled in funds to the order of 7.5 lakhs and this is the current status. The total requirement is 14 lakhs+ registration. I'm looking to raise the remaining 5 lakhs required for the land.

Q: Can you get the land donated by the government since it is rural?

A: No the government will not give it to us.

Q: But, many charities do get grants from the government.

A: Yes, but we are not a pure charity like Udvam Karangal, we have to be involved in peoples struggles and sometimes we need to work with and sometimes oppose government actions.

For example, when we started the motivational centers for the children to integrate them into the government schools and asked the government for help they ignored us. But, when the motivational centers increased retention of children they now understand that what we do makes sense. We are now handing over the responsibility of the motivational centers to the govt.

At the same time, there are many times when the local admin is run by people who are easily corruptible by money and power and at these times we need to stand up and struggle for the people.

We cannot afford to get our hands tied down and not be able to respond to social issues in the area (e.g. extortion of workers by mill owners) and we need to have land that they cannot kick us out or have done us a favor.

In this initiative we are hoping to get the government involved with the solar and windmill system. We have spoken to the energy dept said they can help and support the activities, if they go well.

Q: What is your work looking ahead with the Tsunami?

A: The way I work, I work on organizing people and am directly involved in the beginning, but the leadership needs to develop locally and decisions made by the people themselves. The Tsunami work in Thiruvallur is now handled by the people themselves. Tsunami committee is already set up for the district one for analyzing the issues and keeping track of the government initiatives and another for execution from different villages. This is not yet established at Cuddalore and so I'm still here. I'm hoping that communities will take up responsibility themselves and I can just track their work. If the people need my help they know I'm there and I will be able to devote my time back to the resource center since it has been two years and we still have not been able to get it off the blocks. This effort is primarily centered at how people manage their livelihood and is just as important for the people affected by the Tsunami. If things work out they will be able to come here and utilize the resource center too.

However, first we need land and this is what I need to work on.

Q: Yes, what are the plans for getting rest of money?

A: Don't know yet, but if we are persistent someone will come forward to help us. I am still deciding. Jayashree was here for a few days recently, but didn't get time to discuss it with her.

Anand: It is possible for SV to take a look at it too. But, we need a formal proposal.

A: Certainly! I can send it to you. I'll send it to you on monday when I get back.

To do: Siddamma to send the proposal for the land to Anand by monday evening or Anand to keep sending emails till she does.

Q: Have you had a chance to visit similar centers?

A: Yes, the idea is not new. I had spent 3 months at the Neyyatingara resource center Gandhi Smarak Nidhi while doing diploma in social work. They are of course involved in a lot more things and we can't afford to do all that in the beginning. We will start with what we know and can do well. I would like to train my staff in such places so we can learn. I was also at Timbaktu collective where they are putting efforts for preserving traditional seeds that do not require so much pesticides. There is also Auroville from which we have much to learn.

Q: What do you think are the next steps?

A: The next steps are to:

- a) Purchase land
- b) Detailed survey of the villages, their traditional occupations that can be sustained by the villages themselves including cobblers, barber, milkman, etc. Understand how they have been using skills in community. Plan for next step based on these.
- c) Find key people to be stakeholders for resource center who have the experience to be able to teach skill to other villages.
- d) Go for cultivation system first. Not much money needed for it.

We will work on it for 2 yrs, to see how things develop and then move ahead. Think of how the production center will work, how we can distribute skills and services in community. See how much savings communities can make and analyze the effort then.

Q: What are the other initiatives were you involved with in the last year?

A: We worked on the **bonded labor** problem worked in Thiruvallur in Red Hills area. This is around 30 kms from chennai. There are 800 rice mills and over 10,000 Irulas are working there. In a rice mill the paddy – soaked, boiled, dried then trashed in machines to separate the rice from the husk. There is large amount of manual labor in feeding all the raw materials to the different phases of the machine, clean the waste and finally bag the rice. They received Rs.8 for each bag. A family of 4 work for 19 hrs/day for 4 days to make 30 bags of paddy. We calculated this to come around Rs.16/day/person. Minimum wages act is there, but not implemented in these factories. There is a Factory Act and all licensed factories are supposed to implement it. However, most of these mills are Unlicensed factories and they don't implement minimum wages. There are agreements between officials and factory owners to turn the blind eye to them. Owners made pact with the corrupt union and officials, saying that the let the workers stay on the premises and so can't give minimum wages. They drafted an agreement 10 yrs ago. We are now opposing this. If you are sick there is no allowance. Only a loan is forwarded to you and

that puts you in debt even more. Anyway, they would need loan for survival for so many things. Workers cannot move out of rice mill because of such loans. This is the way they become bonded laborers. To pay this loan some of the people have been working for 3 generations to pay off the debts to owners. These people cannot go anywhere, if they try, they are physically abused and beaten up by the goons. Also the police will catch them and take them back because they owe the owner. If you don't pay minimum wages you can apply minimum wages act.

Some of the Irulas leaders (sarpams) that we work with are ex-rice mill workers. They have been bringing up the issues of their colleges in Red-Hills for many years. We did informal surveys last year to find out what is going on and have been waiting for opportunity to be able to enter rice mills. With Asha's help we wanted to set up balwadi/schools outside the rice mills for the children of the mill workers, this would also have given us an opportunity to interact with workers. We even got the mill owners to agree, since they did not see their position being disturbed.

However, things moved very fast in mid Sep 2004 when workers beaten up badly in one rice mill. Almost 25 workers from different rice mills ran away and came to sarpam in Thiruvallur. Things got really heated and the the sarpams went and physically rescued 300 people from rice mill. Owners tried to kill some sarpam leaders. Government then got involved and said that if you want to release these people then you pay the loans back and release them. At the same time a woman was forced to work a couple of days after her delivery the whole night and she died of exhaustion. We are also part of the National Commission for Women which came forward to conduct a hearing on this action. At this time the National Commission for Human-rights also come forward to support in the struggle. Through NCW and friends we pushed in parliament to discuss this issue. It was discussed in the parliament for 30 mins. Working on the issue in many fronts finally put enough pressure on the local administration to make them act. The government paid Rs.20k to each bonded laborer and provided land them land too. Owners wrote off lots of loans they also increased payment per bag from Rs.8 to Rs.20. The 10 yr agreement has been cancelled by labor department and they took action against the corrupt people from labor department who signed agreement before. Almost 80 owners have also been prosecuted. Owners have been made to take license to enroll their names in the act. With state and central labor officers and sarpam people had discussion on this. They have created a vigilance committee to track the rice mills. Sarpam are also on the vigilance committee. Government will given us ID cards to enter all rice mills. With these i.d.s the owners can't stop us from entering the mills and keeping it like a closed environment as they have so far. Workers in rice mills gave reports that things have improved now. The physical abuse has stopped and the wages are being given.

Some of the bonded laborers released are really skilled people. Some are even educated. They are working with us as a ground and continuing to struggle against some mills in which this continues.

All this happened over last year, mostly over last six months.

Q: How much time can you spend working on the resource center itself?

A: Can spend 40% of my time on it. Most of the other activities will be managed by the ppl themselves. This is how I work.

Q: Can you indicate the other things you are involved with.

A: Upto 75% of village level work has been handed over to village leaders to take care of day to day problems. Tsunami work is being taken care of by the 2 committees.

Bonded labor work also there is help. Then there is the education activity (motivational centers) supported by Asha. Almost 9 schools mainstreamed to government schools. Two more going on fulltime. One will be handed over to govt. Other one will become government school in 2 yrs.

Q: Are you still receiving fellowship from cry?

A: That was long back. Not anymore. Asha fellowship also only came for six months and didn't come through.

To do: Anand will work to get fellowship for resource center work from SV.

Q: What is the situation with the children in the motivational centers?

A: Enrol them in government school, teachers do follow up work and work with children in the evening for one additional year as tuition center. Government school not that good, but no one there to support continuously and we have to go with some education before quality education. The biggest thing to ensure is that the government teachers need to come regularly to school. Interior villages teachers come only once a week. This we are trying to change.

In 3yrs they will graduate from 12th and we have to see what to do for them. Try to get certificate and get into reservation quotas and place them in jobs or training programs. Almost 2-3 children we have done that already and one is completing his law degree this year.