

Chilla Site-Visit Report

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July-August 2009

There were 3 visits: first one on July 18 where I met with Anil/Roja, the kids and some other visitors; next on Aug 8, when I met with a couple of ANANNIA board members; and finally a visit to the Sree Chithra home for poor to meet the two kids who have been moved there. I found all the children at Chilla in high spirits (as usual!). The three kids at the Shree Chitra home looked a little less cheerful (but not sad either).

July 18 2009:

I visited Chilla for a couple of hours today. Apart from Anil/Roja and the kids, I met two mothers and the teacher we talked to during the telecon (Renjini) and her husband. I'll try to visit again and meet with ANANNIA board members.

Here are a few things from my visit:

- They are writing a fairly large proposal for a central govt scheme called Ujjwala, as advised by the local social welfare dept. However the scheme is intended for children in red-light areas, and since Kerala doesn't have areas which would fit that description, it is not clear how much chance they have. (The social welfare dept wanted them to try because the funds allocated to Kerala never get disbursed, so possibly a proposal geared towards the Kerala situation would get accommodated even if it doesn't exactly fit the scheme's requirements.) Anil has promised us a copy after they finish writing the proposal.
- They have 7 new applicants ready to move in. They are not in a position to admit anyone until fresh funds arrive.
- Of the 5 kids who moved out, 3 of them moved out to a government run home (called "Sri Chitra Home"). Part of the reason for Chilla letting them go is that their mother has been a difficult person to handle -- not entirely co-operative and has often been involved in police cases which have been affecting Chilla also. The social welfare dept folks suggested sending the kids to Sri Chitra Home. But the kids have been doing extremely well in school and in arts. Apparently, the kids have been thriving in the new environment, having become pets of the care givers at Sri Chitra Home.
- The other 2 kids moved out with their mother who is now "rehabilitated". Anil/Roja helped her avail of some benefits offered by the govt for scheduled tribes. She has a house and a job now.
- In fact arranging permanent housing for the mothers (and thereby the children) has been one of the major activities of Chilla (though it is not something that shows up in their budget). The help is in the form of helping the women claim their inheritance from their parents (who don't want to be associated with them any more, but can often be coerced to give the woman's due share to her), and/or in applying for help under various govt rehabilitation schemes.

The next woman they want to help is "Aneesh's mother." Aneesh studies in the 6th standard, and has been in Chilla for about 9 years now. The woman dropped in while I was at Chilla and she was planning to stay there tonight. She had some serious health problems (both her hands were shaking all the time), and she would start crying every time she started telling us about her situation. Among other things, she lost her temporary shelter in the monsoon, a few days back. A house will certainly help her and her 3 other kids (who are not in Chilla).

- Though they don't see any immediate means to build a permanent house for Chilla, they are worried by some recent legislation that would make it mandatory to have such a permanent facility. Apparently, individuals housing kids in rented apartments have often been found guilty of child abuse, and hence this government strategy to distinguish between legitimate organizations and shady arrangements.

- Anil estimates 37 kids have passed through Chilla so far (over 9 years or so). Currently Chilla has 10 kids, ranging from those who arrived less than a year back, to those who have been there almost right from the beginning. The kids who are not with Chilla any more are all in safe and sound situations (including one girl who got a job, got married, has a house and now has a baby).

- Anil has a new job, which involves him being out of town for a few days every week, but lets him stay at home for the rest of the days.

Saturday, Aug 8, 2009:

I met up with ANANNIA chairman Raghuthaman and another member Ajith, as well as Roja and Renjini (the teacher). (I had met all these people at earlier occasions.) Anil was away.

- ANANNIA folks are very involved in all the decision making, planning and strategising.

- They are not so involved in the day to day running of the home.

- Buying land/building a house is ANANNIA's idea rather than Anil/Roja's. In fact, Raghuthaman sounded much more sure/confident of this plan than Anil/Roja did, when they told us about it. He thinks that if they get started, they would be able to eventually raise the requisite capital from local donors. He sees this as an important part of the plan to make Chilla independent of donors like ourselves (in particular, by removing the rent as a recurring expense), and also to make them more eligible for various govt. grants that come up from time to time. One drawback though is that they'll have to move a little farther from the heart of the city.

- All the fundraising ideas Anil/Roja mentioned (like the "friends' gathering" which got 150 potential donors to show up, the proposals they are writing for govt grants etc.) are planned with the active participation of ANANNIA folks and other friends of Chilla (like Renjini and her husband).

- Regarding the 5 kids who were moved out: 2 of them (who I might have mentioned as staying with their mother) are staying at a home run by nuns (their mother belongs to the particular community supported by the home) and Chilla pays a monthly fee for them; these kids get satisfactory care and attention (7 nuns for 14 kids). But the 3 kids whom I'll

be visiting tomorrow are not so fortunate. They are staying at the govt run Sree Chitra home, as directed by the local social welfare dept body (following the police troubles their mother was getting into); Roja looked very disappointed at the level of attention these kids are getting (240 kids, looked after by govt paid care givers). But their schooling seems to be going well. I can report more details after meeting them.

- They were all uniformly apologetic about not keeping us posted about moving the 5 kids out. The ANANNIA folks don't have/use computers at home. Renjini, the teacher, says that she can get her husband Prakash (whom I met last time at Chilla) to send us important updates on a timely fashion. They already have a volunteer for maintaining/updating their website (<http://indiachilla.blogspot.com/>), and Roja said some more updates would be posted soon (but this won't of course have the kind of details they can tell us directly). I will get all the relevant e-mail addresses and make sure Aravind/I/stewards are kept updated.

Sunday Aug 9, 2009:

I visited the 3 kids at the Sree Chitra Home. The children's home, with some two-three hundred kids, is part of a larger govt run institution (along with homes for poor/sick etc.). The kids are doing alright, though they all said they liked Chilla better. I couldn't meet any of the caregivers at the place as it was a Sunday, and they were not there. The kids' mother visits them regularly and Roja also goes there once in a while. They are also planning to bring the kids to Chilla for a week during the Onam vacation. It was evident that there is much love between the kids and Roja. Don't quote me on this, but I suspect there is a fair chance that the kids would return to Chilla at a later point, esp'ly if the kids don't keep happy at the new place.