

Mahila Action
Site Visit Report

Project Details

<http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=274>

Volunteer Details

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Report

I visited "Mahila Action" on Monday, 18 December 2006. Their offices are located in an ageing building in the busy, commercial Dabagardens area in the heart of Visakhapatnam city. The premises are owned by the family of Ms. Swarna Kumari, the head of Ma, and the family is allowing the organization to use the building. Apart from the office itself, there are classrooms (2 for primary classes, 2 for vocational training), kitchen, bathroom etc. I was received by Ms. Swarna Kumari, and since I had already read up about Ma, we skipped any detailed introductions to Ma and directly proceeded with the visit. First, we visited the classes being held in the office building itself. There were about 30 children split between classes 3 to 5, with a large proportion of girls. These children are from the neighbouring Kobbarithota slum. Most of their parents are labourers, mechanics, auto drivers etc. Some do not have any parents. A few children's mothers were CSWs, and one child reportedly had a genetically transmitted illness of some kind (I did not get into the details...)

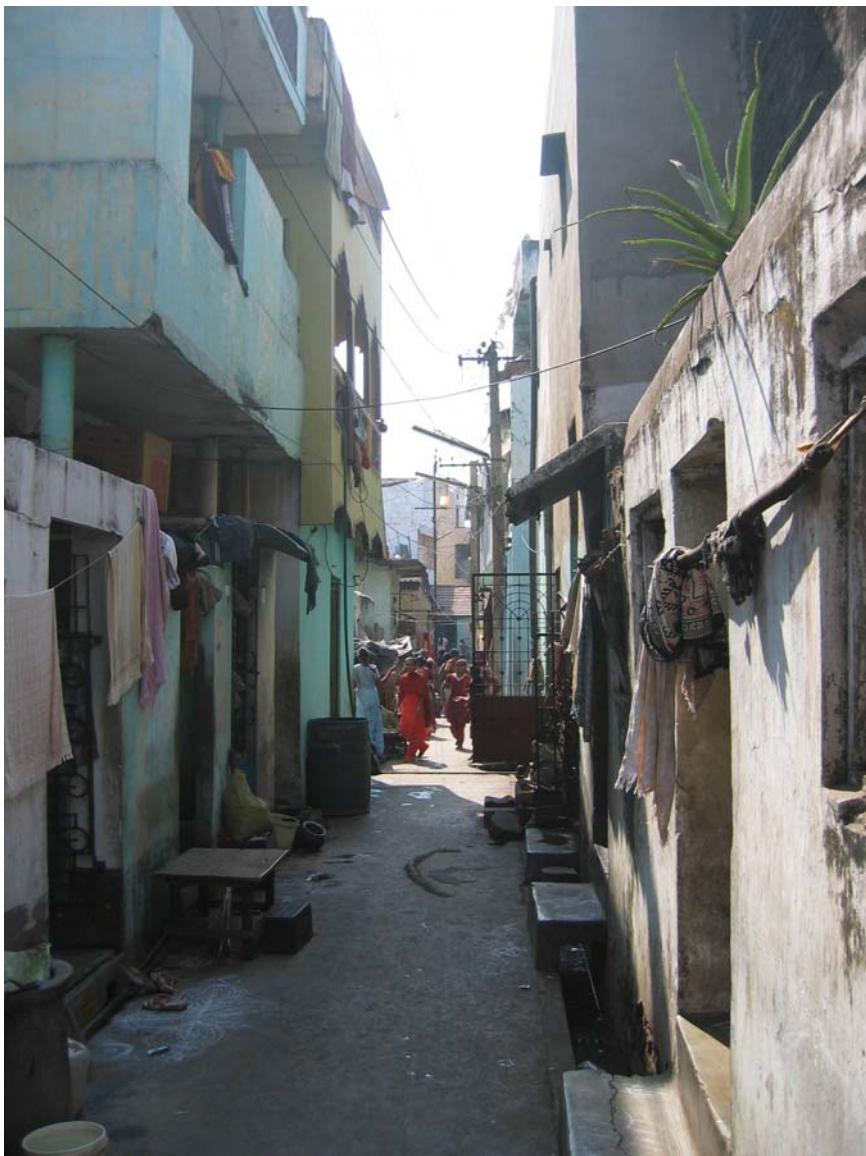


Children at the bridge school in the Ma office

These children are taught according to the state syllabus. Some of them are old enough to be in higher classes, but are in lower classes, because their education levels are not commensurate with their ages. One of the issues they have with joining the government school is that a kid old enough to be in 5th standard will feel awkward in a class full of 1st standard or 3rd standard. The classes being held at Ma are meant for these kids to bridge the educational gaps so that they can fit in at their correct level in the regular school system.

The children were relatively quiet and shy compared to other such children. A couple of them responded enthusiastically to questions and probing. They all live within walking distance of the school, and attend from 9 to 4. They are given lunch at the school, and all expenses are borne by Ma. We also went to one of the classrooms where a vocational training session was in progress. The trainees were teenage girls/young women and the subject was a kind of embroidery for which there is a great demand in the market nowadays. Ma provides the training and gives the graduates a certificate which helps them find jobs after they leave the programme. They are able to earn a few 1000 rupees every month with this skill, and are able to run their own businesses.

After spending 30-45 minutes at the office, I accompanied Ms. Swarna Kumari and Ms. Radha (her XO, I guess!) on a walking tour of the Kobbarithota slum. This is like a "conventional" slum that we imagine in all respects, except for the fact that all the houses are *pucca* houses, as opposed to thatch, tin etc. The houses are lean-to and crowded very close to each other, the drains are open, and women were cooking their (delicious smelling!) lunches in the lanes between the houses. There's a lot of hustle and bustle, and what also seemed like a noticeable number of youngish men idling in the area. This neighbourhood also doubles as a red light area, and in general is infested with petty criminals etc. Apparently it is difficult for outsiders to venture into the slum without being challenged by the locals, and the reason I was able to walk around was because I was accompanied by the Ma folk.



Kobbarithota



Kobbarithota

We visited a dilapidated government owned building inside the slum where a number of girls who had been taught by Ma were waiting for us. They talked about some of the problems they faced personally (poverty, illness, issues at home). In general, they were very supportive of Ma's work. One particularly striking remark was by one girl who had been studying at the Ma run classes. She said something to the effect that Ma had already done its bit for them, and it should now focus on other groups/children who haven't been touched at all. It seemed very generous of spirit coming from a teenager. There were a couple of other girls who'd studied till 12th, but couldn't afford to go to college (even government college is beyond their means). One girl is working part time and using her earnings to pay her college fees.

After this visit, we walked back to the office, and took my car to an area near Madhuravada (I've forgotten the actual name of the locality, will try to get it from Ms. Swarna Kumari!). This outside the core city itself, about 30 odd k.m. away from Dabagardens. During the highway widening programme (part of the work on the Golden

Quadrilateral), several poor people who lived in hutments along the old NH-5 were effectively forcibly relocated. Everything they owned was piled into lorries and they were dumped outside the city, with promises that alternate housing would be provided. This did come to pass after some time (couple of years, I think), and a number of (somewhat Soviet architecture like) buildings were built. The men work as auto drivers, small time mechanics, electricians etc.



Madhurawada houses

We reached the houses around 12:30 in the afternoon, and met some of the ladies of the households. Most of them were unhappy with their lives in the new homes. The main issues they have are:

- There isn't a functioning school nearby, the nearest one is a 4 k.m. walk away (via shortcuts which are impassable during the rains). There was a government school set up for these communities but it was shut down after a few months. Even during the time that it ran, the teachers were negligent and irresponsible, and the children never really learnt anything. Almost everyone present was quite keen that their children go to proper schools, there seems to be a genuine need in this area.
- They're now so far away from the city that a bus ticket to the main bus stand costs Rs. 14. This means that if they have to work in the city, they'll have to pay close to Rs. 800 per month, just to travel. Previously the women also used to work and contribute to the income, but now that has become impossible.

I was witness to what was effectively a Ma meeting in progress.



Madhurawada meeting

A few concrete items came out of this interaction

- A plan to follow up with the local authorities on why the existing school stopped functioning
- A promise to look into whether a school of some sort could be started
- A promise to set up a tailoring school for the womenfolk. The machines and training will be supplied by Ma, but the women will have to find/rent the premises. Although Ma could afford to rent the place also, they were quite insistent that there be at least some concrete contribution or buy in from the women into this initiative, so that the sense of ownership is greater.

There was a very enthu girl (circled in red in the photos!) in this group, who was quite insistent, almost desperate to study. She was ready to pack her bags, leave her family and come back to the city with Ms. Swarna Kumari, if she could study further. She said she wanted to be a collector.



Madhurawada kids

After this visit, we drove back to the Ma office, where we finished up by my asking some of the questions sent by Asha-DC, and chatting a bit more with Ms. Swarna Kumari and her colleagues.

Asha-DC Q&A

Q1: How many bridge schools are currently being run for existing projects? & How many students are in these bridge schools?

A1: 1 school, on Ma premises. 30 students.

Q2: Why government schools are better? Are the government schools of better quality?

A2: [This question is a bit mysterious :) - Ravi] No, they're not.

Q3: Once into government schools, what kind of support is provided for the students to continue studying?

A3: Tuition fees, proposed computer education. Perhaps the most important things are that they keep in touch with the children in the government schools, and act as motivators.

Q4: Of the 3 slums targeted, which ones are inhabited by sex workers and which ones by migrated workers? How many of the children will be identified from each of these 3 slums?

A4: Kobbarithota has the sex workers. The number of children will depend on funding.

Q5: Can the children from the bridge schools go to private schools?

A5: Depends on whether they can afford it.

Q6: What are the timings of the bridge schools?

A6: 9 a.m. - 4 p.m., with a midday meal

Q7: Age group is identified as 9-18. What would be the background of these students? Have they been identified?

A7: Children of slum dwellers

Q8: If the age group is 9-18, are these students school dropouts? (Specifically the students of age >14 who are of high-school age)

A8: Not really dropouts, in the case of the Madhurwada children. There the problem is more of a lack of school.

Q9: Plan B - If no support from Asha, will this project take-off?

A9: At this point, dependent on Asha funds.

Impressions from the visit

Pros

- Ma seems to be an organization that is well established in the area, and has managed to earn the trust of the communities (at least the women), from the way they interacted with each other. It was familiar, yet respectful and there was a sense of involvement from both sides.
- Focus on girls, especially in the Kobbarithota area. If the girls manage to learn some useful skills and learn how to be independent, this by itself would be a significant achievement. This initiative tries to address the issue of trafficking at the source, in one sense.
- Unlike many organizations, Ma doesn't seem to be personality centred. Although Ms. Swarna Kumari still is the public face of Ma, and does much of the networking and fundraising, her colleagues (such as Ms. Radha) seem to be competent in running the show on their own. In fact, I asked this question explicitly, and that is the answer I got.

- The SHGs seem to have been enormously successful, and today the total savings is in excess of Rs. 1 crore. Seems like a fantastic achievement, and shows what Ma is capable of achieving.

Cons

- Ma is somewhere between a "professional" NGO (with all the smoothness of operation, contacts, publicity) and an "ideology" based NGO (with core values as the motivator). All NGOs are both, to some degree or the other but (strictly in my opinion!) "ideology" based NGOs tend to follow through with plans one way or the other, even if funds don't materialize.
- Ma's core competency is not education. As such, the schools they set up won't be any different from other "regular" schools. They may certainly be better than government schools in terms of quality and commitment of the teachers, but I don't think they will start off with alternatives to the regular type of curriculum and teaching methodology. Of course, this is not to say that they won't be open to suggestions, as far as these areas go.
- All said and done, it still seems like a relatively top-down organization

Conclusion

Ma seems to be a good kind of organization to get involved with, after due consideration, with the usual checks and balances in place. They are certainly very competent at the operational/logistical aspects, and seem to be doing good work in other respects too. Couple of things to note:

- The project proposal that has been presented is a bit dated, in the sense that the target area is not Kobbarithota any longer, but the children in Madhurawada. This may mean some reworking of the proposal by Ma etc.
- It will be great if we can find a way to support some of the individual girls who want to go to college etc., via Support-A-Child type things. There certainly seem to be some keen students and potential stars there!