

Site visit by Melli Annamalai, Asha Boston

On February 14th and February 16th, 2026

The new Seed Narpanigal building is now complete. This was the first time I was visiting after it was completed and fully in use. While a bulk of the funds for the building came from the other funding partner, Asha Boston's funds came at a critical time (in late 2024) to complete the electricity and other finishing work. Now that this building is complete Asha Boston no longer has to fund the monthly rent for the centers.

It is a bright and inviting space, with plenty of room. I remembered how the first centers were on rented open rooftops (open terraces) where the volunteers would create a temporary roof. When it rained it was difficult to have classes. From that point till now, Seed Narpanigal has come a long way indeed, with the help of Asha Boston and their other funding partner in Switzerland.



I had been having many discussions with Karthi (the key person at Seed) about how as formal education in most schools slid more and more into rote memorization, the Seed Narpanigal centers should focus on the ability to think critically. One such activity has been discussions in a debate format for the children, and one such debate was organized when I visited.

The topic was "is going to a formal school necessary for education?" The group was split into two, and each side spiritedly debated their point of view. Interestingly the side that was more "pro" formal schools had more younger children, who said that they like to go to school, their teachers taught them new things, and they liked playing there. The other side said there are many ways to learn today, including YouTube videos, and a formal school might not be necessary, and a student talked about how in her class when someone asked a question about a mathematical proof the teacher sent everyone a PDF and asked them look at it on their phones, instead of using the board and explaining it to them. This student said she can find the PDF herself, why does she need to go to a formal institution?



Some of the younger children were very impressive, in how articulate they were. I hope we can continue to encourage them to speak, to debate, and to dream. It was a nice interaction with all the children.

On my second visit I spent time with the volunteers (college students) to drill down into what the real state of academics was today. They shared that mobile phones have become a real distraction, and it is sometimes hard to keep a child's attention on one thing. In general there were many distractions nowadays, and education is seen as a certificate you get in school or college, not as a learning process. The distractions have made it challenging to interest the children in learning about anything outside the textbook. And the rote memorization continues to get worse. In every school teaching has become looking at a list of questions from the question bank and marking the answers. Government schools (with less funds) mark the answers in the textbook, while better off schools print the questions and answers as handouts for the children. We have to reverse this at the centers, this notion that learning is only questions and answers.



We then had a discussion on how Asha Boston can help address this. Perhaps we will have English and Tamil classes, so as to focus on the basic language skills first. For the Tamil classes we would make it a "story discussion" session where students would read a story and then we would discuss it, and also ask them to write about the story. We will start there and see how much we can encourage the children to

think outside the textbook. This will be an experiment. The new Seed Narpanigal center has the equipment, including a large screen, to have decent quality video calls.

The local government school enrollment (within Karumbalai) has increased to 150+ (it had fallen to less than 30 before Covid, during Covid parents started moving their children from cheap private schools back to the government school), which is good, at least parents are not paying monthly fees for their children. 60% of children at the Seed Narpanigal centers are from that school. A good goal is have the Seed Narpanigal centers completely compensate for any gaps in that school, so that the parents continue sending their children there, and use the help of the Seed Narpanigal centers to make up for quality issues.

Photos link: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/9BoKfpt2QYLeoAYT9>