



A Letter From

Mrs. K

The Mitra Residential School, Kachapaju

a unit of the
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Dear friends and fellow-travellers,

It's been almost two whole years since we last managed to bring out a newsletter from MRSK. Our apologies for this silence. May we please make up ? 2006 and 2007 have been years of hyper-activity, and we in the Mitra team have been chasing our tails. Anyway, that's the excuse at any rate. Welcome to this epistle ! We hope you enjoy this.

We begin, as usual, with the History & Geography ; or should that be the Genesis & Exodus ? The next page recounts the story of the birth and genealogy of Mrs.K. If you are an old-timer in the family, feel free to fast forward to the News Update Section on Page 3.

The Background

Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack (CHB) is a 150-bedded mission hospital, started in 1954 by a Danish doctor, Elisabeth Madsen. Bissamcuttack is a village in the hills of South-West Orissa, one of the most beautiful but needy parts of India.

The Community Health Department (CHD) of CHB seeks to improve the health status and quality of life of the people of the region.

Its operational identity **MITRA** (Madsen's Institute for Tribal & Rural Advancement) works with nearly 12,000 people in 51 tribal villages.

The 16 most vulnerable hill-tribe villages in the Mitra area have formed an informal association - **Malkondh Anchalika Sangho (MAS)**.

The **Mitra Residential School, Kachapaju (MrsK)** is a joint venture of the MAS and CHB; a dream initiative to give the children of 16 hill-tribe villages a fair chance at life.

History or Her-Story

The original idea of a school for Adivasi children was first conceived in a Community Dreaming Session in Kachapaju village, in May 1997. With constant pressure from the community, sustained by visionary leaders like Judhisti Saraka, and the encouragement and support of CHB led then by an equally visionary Dr VK Henry, MrsK was born in July 1998. We began with a dream in our hearts and practically nothing in our hands. Two families of Kachapaju village gave us some of their land in the forest. The people of 16 villages, along with the staff and students of CHB, offered their voluntary labour. CHB contributed money for construction materials. Over the hot summer of 1998, a simple building was erected by about 350 volunteers. And MrsK was born. The first batch of 15 boys and 15 girls joined Grade 1 in July 1998. We added a class each year, until we had capacity for 150 children ; 75 boys and 75 girls, in grades 1 to 5. MRSK has now evolved into an indigenious campus of learning.

This is how it runs. Admission is open only to children of the 16 Maalkondh villages in the MAS. Each village has a quota of seats, based on the number of families. Seat allotment is by picking lots from amongst the applicants of each village. One fourth of the children come everyday from their homes in three nearby villages. The others are from distant villages, and therefore stay at the school as Boarders. The School calendar runs according to the culture and festivals of the

tribe, under the guidance of the parents and the MAS. The school provides the children with education, food, clothes, bedding, books, recreation and health care. The parents contribute a jointly agreed amount – Rs 350 for Boarders and Rs 100 for Day Scholars – per year, in installments, in cash or kind; they bring beans or rice or chickens or eggs or whatever is convenient for them. The actual average cost per child per year is now about Rs 6000. So the school literally runs on love and fresh air.

News Update

Highlights of the years 2006 and 2007

A lot has happened since the last newsletter came out in January 2006, and we'll try to update you on as many things as possible.

Our fourth batch graduated in March 2006, having successfully completed grade 5. It was a proud moment for the parents to see their wards receive their certificates and green woolen shawls. The shawls are a gift from friends at Kurukshetra Mandal, Dehradun.

Come April 2006, and it was time to welcome 31 new students to grade 1 in MRSK. We also introduced a 5 week pre-primary education syllabus for them, in the beginning of the session.

On the 30th of April, MRSK hosted a gathering of over 800 people, to inaugurate the first double-storeyed building in the hills. The Girl's Hostel is on the ground floor, and there are 5 Staff Houses upstairs. How this came to be is a story in itself. Suffice to say that we began with just Rs 75,000 in hand, and finished 11 months later with a



sparkling new building : all of 5000 square feet of floor area; and our friends, Bharath Builders of Rayagada did it for Rs 22 lakhs. And all of that came bit by bit from numerous friends in unbelievable ways. If you say there is no God, you probably need your head examined !

THE MITRA RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

In October 06, 58 of our old students got together for a reunion, a time to catch up with friends in other schools, and have some fun on the side.

In the same month, the 5th graders were taken on an exposure trip to Gopalpur-on-sea. You should've seen their wonder and delight on seeing the sea!

November 2006 was a mixed bag. 111 parents volunteered their labor to repair the approach road to the school in what has now become an annual shrama-dan (donation of labour). On the other hand, Likmo, a 1st grader from Jerpa village, had to be taken to hospital for surgery by the same road. She had developed intestinal obstruction and needed an emergency surgery. She made a speedy recovery and is doing fine now.

Persolit, Denmark, through Bodil Jensen, sponsored the purchase of furniture for the office and staff houses, as well as two pedal-powered devices- one, a cycling electricity generator, and the other, a cycling water pump.

Dhruva Seshadri, an IT Engineer by training and a Creative Dreamer by nature, joined us for 6 months to help out. With his guidance and with support from our friends, Ramani & Ravi, we purchased a laptop computer for the school. It goes down to the hospital 18 km away for re-charging, and makes it possible for the school to prepare education materials, reports etc. We also moved the Mitra TV and DVD Player to MRSK recently so the kids can watch a movie or interesting CDs from time to time.

As part of our efforts to constantly improve and upgrade the educational experience at MRSK, evening meditation was introduced to foster spiritual development. Essentially a time for introspection, the students mentally analyse the day's events and their own behaviour.



We celebrated the New Year, 2007, by taking the entire school on a picnic. In February 2007, the 1st and 2nd graders were taken on a short train ride from Bissamcuttack to Muniguda. Imagine their excitement when they saw a train for the first time! And wonder of wonders, they got to ride in it too! What fun!

The Education Program team of Asha Kiran Hospital, Lamtaput visited MRSK in March 2007 as part of an exposure trip.

Our 5th batch of students graduated in March 2007, each receiving a certificate and a blanket, both proud possessions of the young graduates. All 21 of them got places in various schools for higher studies.

The new academic year began in April 2007, with 30 students joining 1st grade.

We are now in our 10th year of existence, and 10 students from our 1st batch are now in 10th grade ! They have always been very special for us. They got together in typical MRSK style, passed a resolution in writing, requesting us to allow them to spend their summer holiday at MRSK, for special coaching in Math, English and Science. Do pray for them as they prepare for the Matriculation Board Examinations, due early in March 08.

Obituary



All of us were saddened by the demise of 17-year-old Dombru Tuika in August 2007. Donbru was an intelligent young man from Daklguda village, who joined us for a year, as a tuition teacher for 6 young people, who had previously failed their school finals. A sincere, hardworking person, his commitment to the students was absolute. So much so, that he continued to take tuitions even after 5 boys dropped out for all sorts of reasons, and there was only one girl left in his class. That girl, Kirchu Kadraka, went on to pass in second division and is now attending college.

Dombru then left us and moved to Gunupur to continue his college education. He fell sick there, and died a few days later. A tragic loss to his family, and to all of us who knew him . Kirchu stands testimony to his dedication and sincerity.

Stock Taking At Year Ten.....

This year, we had a young doctor from Vellore with the unusual name of Liaquat Roopesh Johnson, working with us for 6 months. Two years after his under-graduate training, he is clear that his chosen line will be Community Health. But before he got into the details of specialized post-graduate training, he wanted hands-on experience in a grass-roots community programme. He therefore came to Mitra & Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack in May 2007. We asked him to look at MRSK and put down his findings for all of us. This is his feedback to the wider family – Mrs.K's cousins, children and grand-children.

Dr LRJ Speaks:

This being the 10th year of Mrs.K's existence, we decided to evaluate our performance over the past decade. It's easy to applaud ourselves and get carried away by the fact that we've made it this far. Therefore, we need a reality check to see whether we're on the right track; and how close we are to reaching the dream.

Evaluations involve comparisons (in this case between the situation "then" and "now"). We've looked at changes in literacy rates, enrolment in schools, our share of the literacy pie, etc. We've also obtained feedback from different sources in order to get an idea of what the community feels about the school-how they perceive it rather than how we feel they perceive it. For those who are new to the family, we begin with the baseline situation of 1997.

Some Statistics :

Indicator	1997	2007	The Change in 10 Years
Literacy Rate (above 6 years)	7.6 %	26.7 %	3.5 times
Female Literacy Rate	1.2 %	13.8 %	11.5 times
School Enrollment – Boys	49 %	78 %	1.6 times
School Enrollment – Girls	16 %	65 %	4.1 times
School Boy : School Girl Ratio	75:25	55:45	Close to target of 50-50

MRSK Output Data :

No. of batches admitted so far :	10
No. of students admitted so far :	290
No. of students admitted in the first 5 batches that passed out of school :	147

Out of these 147 :

No. of Children Dropped Out : 26 ($26 / 147 = 17.7 \%$)

No. of Children Died : 2

No. of Children presently still at MRSK : 6

No. of Children Completed Grade
5 successfully at MRSK : 113
($113/147 = 76.8 \%$)

No. of MRSK Graduates who are presently
in High Schools : 82
($82/113 = 72.5 \%$)

This statistic is an indirect indicator of the quality of education provided at MRSK since access to the residential high schools is now quite competitive and based on performance at an entrance exam. And only those who were comfortable and able to hold their own in the new schools would continue studies. Barring financial constraints and family problems preventing further studies, this gives a fair estimate of how successful we've been in equipping our students with not just a good education, but survival skills too. Of course, one must remember that for a first-generation school go-er, competing with children from more privileged backgrounds is no child's play.

So far, only one teacher out of a total of 9 staff members has left MRSK in these ten years, and that too, for further education. This is hopefully an indication of the level of job satisfaction and dedication in the team.



Spin-Offs:

MRSK now is the educational hub for an interesting initiative called AQTE – Adding Quality To Education. There are a number of government primary schools in the 51 villages that Mitra works with. They can be classified into non-functional, dysfunctional and functional. Quality is a distant dream. Mitra has tried to use the MRSK as a resource to add quality in selected schools, where the community is interested to get involved in giving their kids a chance at life. The deal was that only in villages that requested for assistance, we would select, train and place AQTE teachers on behalf of the parents. The teachers would “assist” the government teachers in functional government primary schools, and would have to do it themselves in non-functioning schools. The teachers would stay in the village itself and would be paid an honorarium by a village committee. MRSK undertakes education content management for AQTE – including the training of teachers in child-friendly, value-based education, continuing education of teachers, standard setting, curriculum creation etc

Over the last 30 months, 33 AQTE Teachers have been trained at MRSK in a tailor-made curriculum created by the MRSK Team. The AQTE phenomenon that began in July 2005, now caters to 396 children, in 19 villages, through 16 AQTE teachers in 14 government schools. Asha For Education (MHV Chapter, USA) and the Schellig Family through NMZ, Germany are supporting us in the AQTE initiative.

Another initiative Mitra launched in 2007 was Project ECCNE – in partnership with Unicef, Orissa. Twelve villages opened pre-school centres called Milla Kahini Basa or Childrens Play Places. They are managed by a young lady of the village – called the Sishu Didi. The Batch of 14 Sishu Didi's that included two of the MRSK Teachers wives, were trained by Mitra, and MRSK hosted part of this training.

So over the last two years, MRSK has become a platform for outreach in education, where the lessons learnt and experiences gained have overflowed to other schools and other initiatives. And that's the way it should be. The MRSK magic thereby reaches many more than just the direct beneficiaries.

What do the stakeholders say.....

Judhisti Saraka, Village Leader, Kachapaju village:

This was his dream ; and he has given so much to take it forward. What does he feel ten years down the line ?

one literate person. MRSK has changed that. It has significantly improved literacy levels in MAS area. People from villages outside MAS area come to see the school and go back determined to not only send their children to school, but to try and start their own school as well.



Today about 32 children from this area are studying in Model High School (one of the best schools in the district). This wouldn't have been possible without MRSK.

MRSK is a good school, without which we may have never seen so many changes happen in our village.

Earlier we didn't know Oriya and lacked education. It was easy to cheat us, and we'd get abused in the market-place for not speaking in Oriya. Through MRSK our children now know both Kuvi and Oriya. We can go to the markets boldly now.

Education gives us dignity and respect from everyone; it increases awareness and enhances the understanding of issues which affect us. We need it to accurately communicate with government officials, and to write applications/ letters."

On the differences between MRSK and Government Primary Schools:

"In Government Schools, the medium of instruction is Oriya, so it is difficult for our adivasi children to understand things.

Students are often abused and beaten by the teachers. Many of them become socially maladjusted, lack concern for others, and are more likely to take to alcohol in later life. The quality of education is poor. The children forget their own culture and language, and become misfits in their own villages. They look down upon, and sometimes even disown their adivasi roots/ background. They become incapable of comprehending the problems of the village and usually lack interest in the village activities."

"In MRSK, since this is an Adivasi School, it is very different. Our language, Kuvi, is the first medium of instruction ; so it's easier for the children to understand and learn. There is no corporal punishment; the children are well adjusted, loving and caring. The teachers are adivasi themselves; and have a very close relationship with the students, and can accurately assess each

child's state of mind. The children are taught about the adivasi culture in school. Not only do they learn Kavi songs etc, but they also develop respect for the adivasi culture. Therefore, they can understand the problems of the village better. This is also why they become interested in village matters. This inculcation of cultural values is very important. MRSK students have good leadership potential."

What is his next dream for the future of MRSK ?

"Upgrade to 10th class so that more children can continue higher studies in the MRSK ethos. At present not all MRSK graduates are to continue studies beyond 5th grade."

Conclusion from Dr LRJ:

It's heartening to see how MRSK has become a focal point for change in the community over the years, and taken on roles we'd never envisioned. We started on this journey of faith with dreams and little else. We're fortunate to see our dream become reality. We are a work in progress, and still have a long way to go before we can accomplish what we set out to do 10 years ago. But we're on the right track, and with your support, we'll reach there in the near future. In the words of Robert Frost: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep; But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep; And miles to go before I sleep."

Parting Words from the Mitra Team.....

Our country and our region is in a state of flux, with a lot of competing pressures staking claims on the minds of young people, pulling them into diverse paths. For the children of the Malkondh villages, it can be rather confusing; both exciting and dangerous. What is right and what is wrong is increasingly difficult to tell. The best we can do is to provide children strong foundations in an atmosphere of love, honesty and dignity, equipping them with the basic tools of primary education - knowledge, skills and values. They will have to find their own way in the world.

Mrs.K, and all the work of Mitra – in primary health care, education, womens self help groups, early childhood care etc etc, - is so crucial, in the context of the crazy world we live in. Something that has much greater meaning than the visible nuts and bolts.

Thank you so much for being a part of this movement. For helping to make this happen. For sharing the journey with us. Please continue to walk with us. And let's keep in touch.

Sincerely,

Johnny Oommen
Team Leader, Mitra

Chandrasekhar Ray
Principal, MRSK

And the whole MRSK Team

*Jaysen Kumbrika, Rajendra Tuika, Manoj Wadaka, Jagannath Kolaka,
Akkumajhi Gogeranga, Brunda Hikoka, Ratnu Kutruka,
Drinju Hikoka*

and all the 143 children of Mrs.K !



*If you would like to contribute to the cause, please make your cheque/demand drafts payable to “Christian Hospital, Bissamcuttack”. For those in India, you can ask for an 80G receipt which can be used for IT deduction. For those abroad, if you wish to transfer money through the bank, our Swift Code is IOBAINBB001 (Indian Overseas Bank, 762 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002). Send the contribution along with a covering letter stating that this is for the Mitra Residential School, Kachapaju. Please contact us for any more info needed. **JO & CSR,** jamoommen@sancharnet.in or mitra.chb@gmail.com*