

Introduction

Asha Bangalore supports the fellowship of N.Mutyalappa, who is the sarpanch of Mushtikovila village of Anantpur district in Andhra Pradesh. You can read more about his involvement with the '[Timbaktu Collective](#)' (An Asha supported effort in the same region) and his current role at <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=854>

We (Sriram, Arthi, Anita, Sanjeev and Santhosh) visited Mushtikovila on May 24th and 25th. We reached the Timbaktu and got accomodation in a guest room. The entire campus is sensitive to how the community lives in tandem with the environment. there were mud houses with thatched roofs, solar energy for lighting etc. and simple accomodation. Plastic and non-recyclables were not encouraged. After a healthy organic lunch we waited for Bablu, Mary, Mutyalu and everyone else to come back from a Paryavaran Parasa (Nature Festival) organization meeting at Penekonda (about 1 hr from Timbaktu). Once everyone arrived, we got introduced to each other and after some chit-chat, we decided to spend some time having discussions with Mutyalu at Bablu's house.

Saturday afternoon discussion

Muthyalu had a friend who had come along with him. He introduced him to us. He was elected the sarpanch under the quota for backward classes in a neighboring village. Being new to his role, he had difficulty in dealing with his responsibilities. He came in touch with Muthyalu at a meeting of sarpanches in the zilla. Since then, Muthyalu has been helping and guiding him through his rights and responsibilities as a Sarpanch.

We discussed the efforts related to NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). Muthyalu described how he worked on getting the administration to recognize the folks who needed ID cards, then alloted work for everyone with ID cards and everyone was paid in full for their work. At many times he had to struggle to make the system work. As part of the discussion he also mentioned that the good implementation of NREGA in the rural districts had stemmed the migration and helped people return loans they had accumulated over the yrs from money lenders. At the same time, agricultural labor in the rural areas had now become tough to find. NREGA has increased the bar on pay scale and people are not interested in working at minimum wages or lower for agricultural labor. This has tilted some farmers to go in for using machines in their farms for cost and convenience. He also talked about the current policies of the government like the 'Indiramma Yojana' (an housing scheme for people below the poverty line).

We also discussed aspects related to transparency of the Sarpanch office. Muthyalu mentioned how the previous sarpanch was corrupt and transparency was never a norm. In their term, they have posted all information, including finances for everyone to see. They strive to maintain records of everything that they do.

Visit to Desiltation effort and village



We visited the village on Saturday evening. The Mushtikovilla tank supplies water for over 480 acres of fields. The primary use of the tank water is for agriculture. The de-silting had to be done because the depth of the tank was being reduced due to the silt deposits and water would flow away. Once the desiltation of the tank was done through NREGA, there was a question of distribution of the silt. Silt makes excellent top soil for agriculture and everyone wanted a share. This was distributed in a democratic manner. The tractor rentals for post-digging and related costs of transportation of silt was taken care of by the government under NREGA (60% manual labor, 40% equipment & machinery). The tank holds rain water and three habitations surround the tank and come under the Panchayat of Mushtikovilla. The village also monitors the Kalpavalli forest through the Vana samrakshna committee. Initially Timbaktu had helped reviving the tank. But, they had no funds and couldn't do much with about 10 feet of silt deposit in the tank. Fish cultivation is also done by around 180 families through the tank. The Collector of the area is putting in an effort to revive tanks in all of the Anantpur area. Muthyalu then showed us an irrigation channel and how a sluice gate opens to let water through in the irrigation channel.



We then visited the school in the village. Since, the school had not yet opened, they had put up a dehusking machine in the premises. This was a machine contributed by an organization working with the government. This organization supports the farmers in the area with procurement and other processing. We met a lady who is employed by the organization. We then took a look at the school. There were four rooms. Additionally, a room had been constructed recently behind these buildings by utilizing a govt scheme available. There is no kitchen for the mid-day meals, funds for the kitchen had been allocated with the previous Surpanch, but never made it to the school. The condition of the old buildings was not very good. But, Muthyalu mentioned that they would clean up the area before school starts. The

toilet facilities are not adequate. Part of the issue is that the only water available is in a hand-pump in front of the school and the toilet is located in the back of the school. This is especially an inconvenience for older girls from other villages.



We then gathered at a common space in front of a lady's house. The lady was the president of the women's self help group in the village. Many villagers started coming in for the meeting. There were about 35 people at the gathering. They also got the record books for the NREGA work there. We then had a discussion with the villagers on their experience with NREGA, what ails them currently and how things could be changed. A lot of migration from the villages was happening before NREGA. But, with the advent of the act migration has come down by 75% (as estimated by Muthyalu). They mentioned that they don't have a form of sustenance for the rest of the year (only 100 days supported through NREGA). They would have to depend on seasonal agricultural labor which was not consistent enough to create sustenance for them. Many folks spoke about their personal experiences. They all had loans at interest rates as high as 24%. A Dalit farmer had a loan of Rs. 10,000, a major part of which he repaid through the NREGA employment. Most of these loans were taken due to high cost of healthcare, livelihood and higher education of kids. About 200-300 people from the village were/are employed through NREGA every day on an average. One of the women mentioned that they were being paid disproportionate wages (Rs 25 per day) for coolie work before they made use of NREGA. She felt that this at least provided them sustenance and they didn't have to migrate in order to survive. They start the day early in the morning and get done by noon. The women come back to do house work. Some of the villagers also had to take loans because of their crop loss due to wild boars. A lot of groundnut crops were lost due to the wild boar problem. The wild boars in the area have multiplied by a great amount in the recent years and they attack the crops in the hills and fields. We asked about the purpose of NREGA apart from providing livelihood and villagers talked about many tasks that they felt were useful including bunding to prevent soil erosion, desilting of the lake, etc and how they perceive the impact to their lives. We asked about what would happen if the NREGA scheme were to be pulled back by the government. If they were planning to use the fact that they are loan free or may have some cash in hand in future to start their own enterprises. The villagers suggested that the wild boars were taken care of there wouldn't be a need for NREGA. There is a list of 75 different works that gram sabha can do through NREGA. Controlling the wild pig population cannot be achieved through this. They had discussed the idea of building a 3 ft wall - but, according to government norms only 1.5 ft wall could be built through NREGA - this wouldn't suffice to keep the boars out.

We discussed the payments through NREGA. They have now been paid more or less on time and it is done through the post office of the village. Muthyalu has ensured that all hierarchy of officers is traversed and the payment has been transparent and on time.

We then discussed the status of the schools in the village. The teachers come in time from CK Palli (Chenna kotha palli - bigger town on highway). There was no accountability earlier. Now, things are better with regular attendance. We asked the women in specific about whether their children went to the schools, and what they thought of it. They said that their children went to the schools and that they thought the children were being taught well. There is no high (+2) school in the village. After the upper primary schooling, if kids don't go for high school they start working in the fields. The girl children invariably drop out at this stage due to the distance to be travelled (8 kms) and the need to do house chores. The NREGA payments can help with sustenance and loan repayments. But, its not enough to support the education expenses of children beyond the 10th std.

We then tried discussing skills and livelihood other than agriculture and NREGA. One of the people used to be a potter, but he stopped making pots 10 years back with more use of plastic. The villagers mentioned that so far they have not had trouble in finding work under NREGA.

Social audits of NREGA work has greatly helped reduce corruption in the implementation of the act in the mandal as a whole. The villagers also mentioned that accusations by the previous sarpanch on Muthyalu have all been resolved in an open Gramsabha meeting.

Sunday morning visit to NREGA work areas and forest



The next day morning we went to Mushtikovilla again and met Muthyalu at his residence. He took us to an overhead tank to get a bird's eye view of different aspects around the village. We observed a diversion drain from far. We also figured the location of the tank and the huge acres of fields that the tank supplied water for. He mentioned that popular crops in the region for the season were Ragi and Sunflower (Not all of them were organic though). There were brick kilns near the tank area and Muthyalu mentioned that folks use the silt to make bricks in small furnaces (just piled bricks made out of soil) to use for building homes. Muthyalu then pointed to the hills and said there is a lot of farming activity there too. But, they have faced a lot of the wild boar problems there. He said that the wild boars problem takes over all discussion and its tough to address important issues like education. We then discussed the issue of 'naxalism'. Multhyalu mentioned that according to police records this

area comes under naxal prone region (due to vicinity to the forest). He is sure that no village youth are involved in any naxal activity. The naxals had once come forward to adjudicate a solution to an inter village problem. The village folks had unanimously refused to allow their involvement. They did not want to associate themselves with such groups and were confident about solving their own problems. They have been left alone since then.



Mushtikovilla Panchayat has been selected by the state government to make an ideal panchayat and has been issued this scheme for all BPL individuals in the community. The scheme offers subsidized housing and allows for people to get paid (through NREGA) for working on constructing their own house which allows them to offset the investment required. The bricks were available at a subsidized rate from the government, but the number were limited so for what they are falling short they are making bricks locally.

We later had breakfast at Muthyalu's residence. After the breakfast, we left to visit some of the NREGA work and the Kalpavalli forest. We were accompanied by two NREGA mates (One of them was Ramesh) appointed by the panchayat. We first visited the Dryland horticulture regions. We also observed the farm ponds created through NREGA. Bullock carts, drums and buckets were used to create the farm pond. The run-off water from nearby fields are collected in the farm ponds.



We later visited the Kalpavalli forest. This land is basically the revenue department's waste land and does not come under the forest department. This means that the government interference is the least. Thanks to Timbaktu collective, many 'Vana Samrakshana Committees' (Save the forest committees) have been formed in many villages surrounding the forest. They help in regeneration and protection of the forests. At times there are families that live off the forests. But, they don't do anything that can threaten the very existence of such forests and don't destroy them. There is a caretaker who is appointed by

the VSC. He monitors the forests from morning till evening. The caretaker ensures that no one encroaches the forest land to cut trees. He also monitors for man-made forest fires, picks seeds obtained through natural forestation, dibbles seeds to promote forestation, protects the forest land from grazing. The school kids and women's group also help with dibbling seeds for forestation efforts. We met the caretaker on our way to the forest. We then walked through the forest. We first observed the rock-filled check dams done with the help of the Timbaktu collective. We decided to walk down to one of the many streams in the forest. As we walked along, Muthyalu pointed to various plant/tree varieties, explaining what they can be used for etc.

We located a nice spot next to a stream to discuss various aspects of Muthyalu's work. Muthyalu gave us a nice synopsis of how Timbaktu collective got involved with Mushtikovila village. Timbaktu had started its efforts in 1990 when they got land in this area. At that point they were not aware that the soil was not good for agriculture. Once they realized this they got involved with a lot of regeneration efforts. Their idea was to stop interfering with nature and create a conducive environment for the ecological systems to work. In 1992/93 they started reaching out to neighboring villages and communities. They spoke to villagers from Mushtikovila about forest regeneration. There are lots of hills in the area and lot of support was required to regenerate forests here. Initially no one believed them. But, gradually the village started realizing the benefits and importance of regeneration. The protection of these forests was to leave nature undisturbed and control forest fires, which almost always is man-made in this area. As the forest regeneration took place in a more organized manner, many benefits were perceived. The dalits, tribals and other socially backward sections of the society could live off the forests in a sustainable manner - for e.g. the dry grass collected from the forests could be made into brooms to be sold in the market. They can make in the range of Rs. 200-300 per day. Even during droughts people have taken fodder from here for cattle. Once the village was convinced about the regeneration and protection of forests they all formed the 'Vana Samrakshana Committee' (Forest protection committee). This representative committee also has a savings account and everyone contributes to it. The caretaker for the forest region is paid through this account. The caretaker's role has been very important. He also protects against overgrazing which can be a sensitive issue. In one incident, he got injured in a skirmish with folks from a neighboring village. They couldn't grasp the idea of forest protection. After a common hearing the village came around and understood what mushtikovilla villagers were trying to do. So, they joined the effort and formed a VSC too. The villagers have also had other problems related to protection of these forest lands. They had to fight issues concerning the forest department which wanted to take over the regenerated forests, bringing it under their jurisdiction and forcing the villagers out. In another instance, there was a proposal by a company to set up windmills in this area. The windmills would occupy a lot of space, taking out greenery. They could also undermine the villagers' ownership of responsibilities.

Since muthyalu became the sarpanch, his role has been very helpful for the VSCs. The gram panchayat has fought plans of the forest department and also the wind mills. The panchayat has also given land for the VSC. Muthyalu himself has been involved in the regeneration efforts all along and has adequate background on these issues. Currently, they are scoping out opportunities to use NREGA work for forest regeneration efforts.

Muthyalu then explained his role in different efforts related to NREGA. A field assistant is appointed by the government for NREGA work identification. There is no compulsion on this

assistant for no. of employees to be identified. So, the tendency is for the field assistant to identify lesser workers as it would mean less work for him or her. In the first instance the field worker here wanted to employ only 20-30 people. Muthyalu had to work with him and identify more folks (about 1200 in all). There were many struggles. Firstly, people of the village had lost faith in any effort related to the government and were not confident of the money coming to them. The people do see the need for such a scheme, but the village was not sure how to use it. After some social audits confidence in the system grew. In another instance the field assistant did not have enough technical background to sanction a particular NREGA work. So, Muthyalu stepped in to traverse the hierarchy starting from the MPDO to Project director in the state administration (Hyderabad). Finally, the principal secretary in Hyderabad was reached through contacts from friends. He immediately contacted the local administration and measurements etc. was carried out to get the work started. The belief in the act grew as soon as the first payment was made. A meeting was organized and a lot more folks wanted to be listed under NREGA. Now, there is a gap between demand and actual work available. The NREGA mates are appointed by the gram panchayat and are paid Rs. 80 per day if 40 or more people work in a day. They also take responsibility and co-ordinate in case of emergencies/accidents etc onsite.

We then spoke about current learning from the implementation of NREGA. One primary concern is that it cannot be used for farming in someone's land. So, the shift of labor has been consistent and detrimental to agriculture dependant on manual labor. Muthyalu also believed that this act at this point is useful as 'relief' for the villagers to get out of debt. The loss of skills and jobs in other fields (because of mechanization - for e.g. in agriculture) is not a good development. There is scope for this policy to go haywire. There needs to be some long term vision and thinking for sustainable options. The other aspect is the inevitable revision of agricultural labor rates.

After this discussion we headed back to the village.



When we headed out to visit the second school in another habitation. This is a primary school. The school term had not yet started and some kids were playing cricket there. The toilet again was not in good condition. This school has a mid-day meal kitchen and class rooms. This school was more spacious and had a playground. Muthyalu mentioned that lot more work needs to be done with regards to education in these habitations. On our way

back, we stopped to meet a farmer who crossed us in his moped. We spoke to him about his farming and the effect of NREGA. He mentioned that manual labor is hard to find. We then asked him about why he would want to move to mechanization. He mentioned that the math worked out better for him. If he had to pay Rs 6,500 for manual labor to get done in 5 days, the same work could be accomplished by spending Rs. 4,000 and in 3 hours. We asked if the refuse from the processing (like the husk) can still be used as animal fodder when using machines. He said there is no problem of grease or any such thing and its possible. He had six acres of land and felt larger the land its better to use machines. The average cost for machine rentals is about Rs. 1,500 for every hour.

On our way back to Timbaktu we discussed the real bad state of the road to Mushtikovilla. The roads cannot be made under NREGA. No contractors come forward to even take up the work as they fear that this is a naxal area. The naxals are also known to demand commission or impede such kind of work.

We finally reached Timbaktu, had a nice lunch and left soon after some discussion with folks at Timbaktu.