

## **TRUWDES School for Tribal children, Manjampatti Village January 6 & 7, 2012. Vijay Sappani**

### **Background:**

Manjampatti village is a tribal hamlet in Anaimalai Tiger Reserve, in Tamil Nadu -Kerala Border in Kodai hills. It is 2400 ft. above sea level located at 10°16'2"N 77°16'50"E. Asha for education sponsors the only school in the area that helps tribal children from 3-5 villages/hamlets nearby. There are no roads, no electricity, no schools, no running water, no ration shop or any of those facilities. The only way to reach the village is by trekking about 5-6 hours through the dense reserved forests, after taking permission from the forest department. The school has serious trouble getting teachers, one teacher was bitten by a snake, locals have died from wild animal attacks and the remoteness makes it difficult to get teachers.

Manjampatti is the main tribal hamlet in this hilly area, and the villages nearby are predominantly inhabited by tribals or "Adivasis" who live off the land. Major tribals groups are Pulaiyar, Muthuvar. Being in the midst of reserved forests, the people are forced to protect their crops from Elephants, Gaur (Bison) Wild buffalo, wild Boar, Deer, Panthers etc. Tiger Sighting is rare, Sloth Bear, Nilgiri thar live at higher elevation and are seen from time to time in the farm area.

The area is key for Sandalwood trees, a target for smugglers and the 'green' crop used by drug smugglers. Children are sold for child labour to work in nearby towns in textiles, food etc. Girls are married off as early as 13 years of age, even though its illegal, yet a tribal customary that is still practiced. All these barriers directly affect the school itself and there are many, who do not want the school to function so that they can continue to exploit the children. Then there are caste and different tribal group issues (SC, ST) that is sensitive

### **The Visit:**

I was there on January 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, to visit the school. We left Udumalaipettai in the morning by car around 10:00 AM. It was Alex, the school administrator, Radha, one of his staffer and me. We had to cross a couple of check posts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. We had to first meet the Forest ranger to get his permission to go to the village, as it is in the protected Tiger reserve. We crossed a couple of check posts and then after about 20 minutes of driving inside the Reserve, we reached Chambakad. From there, we had a few minutes' walk across a foot bridge. Porters came to take the luggage to walk across the bridge, as the horses are not allowed to cross, just as a way to create jobs. So the porters loaded the vegetables and other items purchased for the school on the two horses and we had two people come from the village on their motorbike. It was the best off road ride you can experience! The usual 100 cc city bike used to go in a small walking track uphill. There were several places we had to alight and walk. We stopped at the first tribal hamlet Talinjii tribal hamlet, our first stop. Here the tribal's live in a village and go to farms, unlike Manjampatti where they live in farms, so the village is spread out. Here there is a

sense of community by living together. They cultivate Rice during monsoon session and butter beans. They have one small shop in the village, where they sell very basic essentials and some stuff like biscuits. The village has a government school that Alex said is closed most of the time, It was closed when we were there, local villagers said its open usually but closed just today, though that did sound to be true. We reached Manjampatti village around 2:00 PM. We got introduced to the teacher and children there and started chatting. I spent about 30-45 minutes with the children talking about their school, fun stuff and different subjects to test their skill level and knowledge. The school, which is about 300 sq. ft. space is one room that's fits all students. There were about 20-25 students when we went, though I was told there are about 40 students signed in. All levels of classes are in that one room by one teacher. After our session, they had a break, when kids went out to play and around 4:00 classes were done. They were given biscuit and Horlicks. We spent some time taking photos and chatting up.

We then went to the kitchen, which is a two minute walk from the school and to the stream nearby. We spent some time talking to locals about the school, issues and other casual stuff. As it got dark, we went back to the school. Students came for night class. A generator was used for light. They have solar panels for a bulb, but a generator was needed for more of them. About 10 students came for the night classes. Dinner was also served to them. All the students who came were locals, some maybe because dinner was served; there were students who used to stay in the school, but not of late. It's mostly boys who come for the classes. Most of them leave by 8:00 or so. We spent some time chatting with a couple of village elders and then went to bed. We slept in the school, the facilities were basic, a mat, pillow and blanket.

## **Day 2:**

Next day, we went to the stream in the morning, that our washroom. Since we slept in the classroom, we had to wake up early, clean up and leave; when we came back classes were started. I spent an hour chatting with the students, mostly talking about subjects, questions, but also about the school, facilities, issues, their personal goals and of course a lot of fun things. Then they had their break and we spent some time taking photos outside. I talked to the teacher also separately and the students separately when Alex and the teacher were not present. We then decided to leave the Manjampatti just before lunch time. This time we had to walk and we decided to short path, that is less travelled and bike's cannot go. This path is considered dangerous and not used for some time now it has a few streams to cross. This path cuts off 5kms of walking and is far more scenic than the other path we can. We took a few pit stops, a short break at Talinji for some snacks and tea and reached the base around 6:00 PM. From there we got an auto to the check post where, Alex had his car and we left from there to Trichy.

Over all, the entire trip was an eye opener to the opportunities and challenges that exist with education in this kind of terrain and what groups like Asha can do.





## **Key findings and recommendations**

### 1) Structured learning and recognition for school:

All the students are taught at the same time by one teacher, that is class I – class VIII. Such a method is not the most productive, and yet the challenges are unmet. Within the existing infrastructure the school should look at dividing the classes between class I –IV and class V-VIII so that there is some teacher- student interaction and continuity of content. The school has one teacher and definitely needs another one. The teacher can be managed between class, playtime and project work at the back of the class. There is space at the back of the class that can be cleared and can break the class into two groups and encourage group reading and learning for the homework part. The school is trying to get recognition that will help children go for further studies, which will be good. Asha should enquire how it can help with the process. Having an additional teacher (that they used to have) will help. Two teachers should be minimum.

### 2) Go green in school:

The village is in the middle of a reserve forest, which means there is no chance for recycling and should use local resources. So use of paper cups /plates should be avoided and stainless steel plastic should be used more. Paper cups were used during breaks for giving Horlicks. Alex mentioned they tend to go missing. They will have to look at a system, if need to account for it on a daily basis. Children throw garbage behind the school. Suggested to set up a garbage bin to collect garbage and then dispose it off. Reusable plates/cups should be used. It's a highly environmentally sensitive zone, so the school should set an example on it.

### 3) Playground for school and sports equipment:

The school is on one acre land. The school itself is small and has a lot left over ground that can be cleaned up to be used as a playground. The playground might be a big pull to get children to school, that has a high dropout rate and many more who don't even attend school. Asha should look at additional funding if needed to get playground equipment.

### 4) Religious symbols in School:

Considering the sensitivities around caste, religion, the school should not carry any religious materials. Calendars, stickers with religious images should be avoided. Refrain from religious expressions in class or with students, unless needed. Issues of caste and accusations of religious conversion should not be taken lightly and properly addressed with the community. I referred it to Alex and suggested replacing the calendars with non-religious denomination ones.

### 5) Corporal punishment:

The teacher did use a stick, something not uncommon, best to educate them on it. I spoke to the teacher and Alex about it. In fact some students, who were studying in school in nearby towns, when asked why they left and came back to Manjampatti, some said they didn't want to get beaten by teachers. I referred that to the teacher, suggesting students might drop out and best to attempt at engaging them. The teacher said she just keeps it but not uses it.

6) Register and student: parent progress card:

I don't recollect if the school had an attendance registry. If they do, that's good, if they don't, they should. It's a nice way to engage students and have simple progress sheets that students can take to parents. It's important for parents to see it's worthwhile for kids to go to school. Have parent- teacher meetings at least twice a year, like during republic day and Independence day, invite the forest ranger or some village elder for flag hoisting and a parent : teacher session where students can demonstrate their learning to parents like pointing countries on globe, writing in Tamil/English, singing a Tamil poetry. Parents need to see the value of education, if not they will not feel encouraged and encourage students.

7) Student: parent teaching/name writing skill development:

The teacher should try to ensure every kid knows to write their parents name and help every person in the village know how to write their name (if they don't know) and they learn it through their children or someone else children. If they are using thumbprint, then they should all be using their signature and the students can teach them. Again just another (fun) thing to do for the kids and engaging the elders.

8) Leadership training:

Leadership training will help go a long way for encouraging the students in their education, but also in staying in school. Its two parts. A) The teacher should get regular annual training (Asha Chennai has something, contact Bhaskar) so that the teacher's skills are updated and remains motivated. B) There should be simple programs to encourage leadership among students. An interesting model I saw at PAT (Trichy) a project funded by ASHA is that they have a prince and princess every day (or week) who is in-charge of the class responsibilities (like class monitor), a nice way to keep the students motivated. In this case, it can also be a mentoring of sort by older students to younger students. In schools that have less resource, activity based learning helps keep children motivated and reduces work load for teacher.

9) Vegetables shed and storage:

The school stores vegetables in the back of the classroom along with other materials. There is a kitchen, but I was told there are issues of grocery, utensils going missing, so they keep it in the class. There is existing space in the kitchen, so they should use it (same as point 2) and only use reusable materials. If needed the school should get a small storage box or something appropriate to store the grocery, utensils in the kitchen and free up space in the school.

The other thing to look is, if a small storage room can be built next to the school that can also double up as an activity room. For example a microscope, globe, map, small mechanical tools can be kept there and students allowed using them with little to no supervision. It can also be used to store other school related materials. It was interesting to see the students were hiding their cricket stumps climbing up a tree, because they said it gets lost, stumps what are twigs!

#### 10) Customized school curriculum:

What I observed is that lot of students go and work in their family farm after school, dropout rate is high, and girls get married off as early as 12 or 13. There are some really talented, motivated students, whose families also want to see their children escape the vicious cycle of poverty they face in the village, but otherwise most students don't seem to have a chance of going to college or even beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade. One of the elements to consider is including a vocational curriculum that including agriculture or forest related. Payir trust, a project funded by ASHA runs a school for children with alternate curriculum and good model to check. They can get villagers to come and talk about farming, ranger to talk about forest and wild life etc. A lot of it, the older students might know, but the success will come in their ability to go beyond the existing norm, where they can improve the lifestyle of the village, like setting up a biogas (gobar gas) plant for electricity. Payir (run by Senthil) has several programs.

#### 11) Engaging Government:

There is a school in Talinji that I'm told is not functional. They have a concrete building and government teacher. Alex was suggesting that they are working to bring the children from Talinji to the Majampatti School. It might be better to work with the local government officials towards a mutual and joint education solution for the area. Alex has been getting his permit year by year from the local authorities. There is a good school in Talinji that apparently remains locked for most of the time. An often missed opportunity in India, is exploring the ability to work with government, in part, due to wide spread corruption and barriers. However Alex seems to be knowledge able and the government wants the villagers to get out of the reserve forest and a way to sell it to the government is to say that if the children go to school, the next generation will move out to the plains for better jobs.

#### **Conclusions:**

I was touched from the trip and desire to go back again and maybe stay longer next time. We in the cities and West, often take too many things in life for granted and looking for something bigger and more. Looking at their life is a humiliating experience and inspiring to see the children despite all their adversity, trying to get a decent education. It is equally inspiring to see the work of TRUWDES in this remote region that has helped many students get an education that otherwise they would not have.

The school has very basic infrastructure, but poses an opportunity that might help some of the children to go to college. Every student that manages to do that is a success story of what ASHA and TRUWDES

does and it is something to feel proud and delighted. That being said we cannot rest on our laurels and miles to go. A project like this is make or break for the children in that area. It is an absolute must that ASHA continue to support this project, coach TRUWDES in improving the school and future site visit by volunteers should plan for standardized testing of skills of students by grade.

The success of the school and concrete improvement solutions can be further developed by following standardized testing programs. Funding should be renewed and as always project goals set. The school has the potential to improve significantly and there is no reason why it cannot do it even within its existing resources. They may need guidance and assistance.

Photos link:

[Site visit to Majampatti school - 1](#)

[Site visit to Majampatti school - 2](#)

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