

Grama Vikasa Saradhi – Site Visit Report

December 29th 2008

Project Details

Grama Vikasa Saradhi (GVS) was established in 2000 with the aim of uplifting the quality of rural life. The organization works mainly in villages in and around the Tattabanda Panchayat of Ravikamatham Mandal in Visakhapatnam District, Andhra Pradesh. The main activities include

- Support for senior citizens
- Empowerment of women through self help groups (SHG)
- Education

The education component consists of 2 schools in the villages of Kovilapalem and Gadabapalem. These schools have been supported by Asha Knoxville and Asha New River Valley through the calendar year 2008.

Project Page

<http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=888>

Volunteer Details

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Report

We (i.e. Ms. Prabhavathi of GVS, Werner (who was visiting the Bala Mitra Badis project), Seema Mundoli of Samata, and I) left from Vizag in our own vehicle at 7:00 a.m. on 29th December 2008. In terms of distance, most of the drive was on NH 5, southward from Vizag. This is an excellent road and part of the Golden Quadrilateral. After passing Anakapalle, we took a right onto a State Highway (also good) and followed Prabhavathi *garu's* directions to Kovilapalem. The roads got progressively worse and for the last kilometre or so it is just a very bumpy and potholed dirt track which made us realize that coming in a Maruti 800 was probably not the best brainwave for the day! In any case, we reached a grove near Kovilapalem at about 10:30 and parked, and had to walk for about half a kilometre to get to the village proper.

Kovilapalem is a small, interior village of about 40 families, located at the foothills of the Eastern Ghats. The school is the second building in the village that becomes visible, immediately after a temple. The school consists of a neat 4 roomed building (2 classrooms and 2 offices) and a couple of smaller adjacent buildings (teachers' accommodation, toilets). There is neat yard in front with a volleyball court and a vegetable garden. The land was donated to the school by a Kovilapalem resident (who was present) who wanted her child(ren?) to be able to study in the village itself.

Electricity connection is available for the staff quarters next to the school but not for the classrooms or the office. The wiring for the school was not done earlier as funds were not available. The electricity for the computer in the office is taken from the staff quarters. Water for the school comes from a hand pump about 300m from the school. This is the only source of drinking water for the entire village as well as the school. While there is another hand-pump in the village the water in it is brackish. The residents of

Kovilapalem are basically of tribal origin, but who are now settled in the plains. In one sense, they are caught between two worlds because they aren't accepted as "mainstream" by the people of the nearby "plains" villages. They are looked down upon by the other villages and are not integrated with them very well at a community level (no inter-marriages, common festivals etc.) There also appear to be disputes over resources such as funds for laying roads, buildings and digging bore-wells. On the other hand, the people of Kovilapalem can't go back to their old ways in the hills.

There are 3 main source of income for the villagers:

- Sale of cane baskets that they weave
- Working as labourers in nearby agricultural land
- Some of them have been allotted small tracts of land (< 2 acres) by the government. This land is leased out for growing *sarividi* or casuarinas trees, which is a raw material for the paper industry. The tree takes about 5 years to reach maturity, but the price that the middlemen pay for the wood is fixed at the time of the lease rather than at the time of "harvest", which given the uncertainties of today's inflationary economies, seems manifestly unfair.

After we arrived at the school, we met with the staff in the office room where they showed us various charts etc. that the children had made. While we were doing this, 2 classes were in progress in the adjacent classrooms. From the staff, we got to know that in 2007, after the founder of GVS Mr. Ramana Murthy had passed away, there was a point when the bank balance had come down to double digits and things had become very critical. A number of timely individual donations helped them ride out that phase, and this was followed by the Asha funding coming through. They were visibly grateful for this assistance from Asha.

We discussed a number of issues with the staff including the prospects for students leaving the school (go to a secondary school within 10 km radius), strategies for keeping the school financially viable (through corpus), other options for raising money etc.

After this discussion, we visited the two classes that were in progress. The children from I-III were in one section (taught by Ms. Satyavati) and the children from IV-VII were in the other section (taught by Ms. Balamani). The youngest children are not given a heavy academic workload; instead they are allowed to learn through playing in the classroom itself. The difficulties of trying to run 3 classes in the same room were evident and the teachers have to constantly context switch from one level to the other.

The younger children were shy to begin (barring a couple of highly energetic and enthusiastic specimens!) with and it took some prodding to open up. We went over some basic concepts such as multiplication tables, simple arithmetic, rhymes and songs etc. The overall impression is that the performance was "average", which given the remoteness of the school and the difficulties involved is not an insignificant achievement.

The children in the senior class were also quiet initially, but were very curious about Werner (who is tall, fair, ponytailed and Caucasian!) to the point where they mustered up the courage to ask him a few questions in English about his name, state and country of origin. We used this opportunity to try and understand why when it is noon in Kovilapalem it is only 8 in the morning in Werner's home of Dusseldorf.

After this, both classes got together and performed a short song and dance programme for us, taught by one of the volunteers from Germany who had visited the previous year. This was followed by a walk through the village where the GVS staff showed us how the baskets are made, where the original school building was located, and about how they used the Right to Information (RTI) act to get a Community Hall built.

By now it was lunch time for us and the kids, so we had our lunch in the office while the children went home to get theirs.

As we were having lunch, a cricket match got underway and the children were all full of energy and shouting and running around in the customary manner. They also became more approachable especially when we started taking photographs and walked back to the car with us to wave us goodbye.

From Kovilapalem, we drove to Gadabapalem and this took us about 20 minutes. Originally the GVS project started with 1 school and a rented van which would bring children to the Kovilapalem school. However, since another school started nearby, the need for the van was removed, and so the resources raised for that were used to run a new school in Gadabapalem where the need is very dire. The drive to Gadabapalem made the Kovilapalem drive look like a stroll through a park. Gadabapalem is even more remote and located almost literally in the middle of (a very picturesque) nowhere.

The people of Gadabapalem are also of tribal origin (from the Gadaba tribe). While Kovilapalem had *pucca* houses, Gadabapalem was just a hamlet of thatched huts (including the school). Once again land had been donated by the village, and once again there were the usual issues of disputes with the surrounding villages over resources.

The teacher at the Gadabapalem school was unfortunately not present since she had gone to her village for the delivery of her child. Instead, a temporary teacher had been found, but it was difficult to motivate anyone to stay in the village itself. The big asset that GVS has here is that the regular teacher is married into a family in this village and will therefore hopefully be around in the medium term if not the long term. It seemed like it will be very difficult to sustain this school if this teacher leaves for any reason, because of the utter remoteness of the place.

We spent a few minutes with the children (the usual multiplication tables, nursery rhymes in Telugu and English etc.) They seemed to be shy and less self-confident than their peers in Kovilapalem, but this is probably understandable because they have only very recently started becoming familiar with schooling and the classroom environment.

We drank some delicious coconut water and spent some time talking to the residents, before heading back to Vizag around 2:00 p.m. We reached the city by 4:30 or so.

Impressions

- There is definitely a need for schools in both these villages and GVS seems to be doing a good job in meeting those needs. They seemed to have gained the confidence of the villagers, given how the villages donated the land, helped build the school building in Gadabapalem etc.

- One reason why the system works as well as it does is because of the dedication of the GVS staff, especially the teachers. They don't seem like the type who can be easily substituted by someone else, because their motivation, especially in the face of the pressing problems in these areas, is very high.
- GVS is still pretty "raw" as an organization and they are learning their ropes as they go along. Perhaps the reason for this is that Mr. Ramana Murthy used to act as a buffer between the outside world and GVS and took up the burden of fundraising himself, shielding GVS from such matters as having to raise and manage money. In his absence, they will need all the mentoring and guidance they can get. Some of this is already happening via their association with Samata.

Recommendations for GVS

- The scale is not large currently and so there is a chance to plan the growth better. In particular, learn to worry about financial issues well in advance! Try to create a corpus and operate off the interest before growing. At the current run rate of about Rs. 2 lakhs p.a., a corpus of about Rs. 20 lakhs will be necessary. While all of it will not come immediately, start working towards it.
- The teachers are the biggest assets. Nurture them, keep them engaged, and help them improve.
- Since the scale is small enough, perhaps it is the right time to focus not just on providing education, but providing quality education through constantly improving the classroom experience. Hopefully if and when growth happens, the quality aspect will seep into the new schools as well.

Recommendations for Asha

- This is a project that at its current size is ideal for one of the smaller chapters. Since GVS seems to be an organization that is genuinely interested in making a difference, here is a chance for an Asha chapter to get more intimately involved and grow along with the project, and also to influence it.
- Go all out to help GVS retain and cherish the teachers. First off, seriously consider increasing the salary (from the current Rs. 2000 p.m.) to what a primary school teacher in a government school gets. It's the least we can do, given that these teachers are doing much more than their government counterparts.
- Take a more active role in the project. Help GVS by providing them exposure to other organizations, teacher training etc. Introduce them to other grassroots groups, visit as often as possible (it's a big morale boost for everyone when Asha visits), and make them feel like they are not just one isolated small pocket of people. This is a good opportunity for a "high quality" intervention, even if the scale is small in the short term.
- Consider putting money aside each year for the corpus. This will really help GVS in the long run, and is an eminently sensible thing to do.