



# *Asha for Education*<sup>TM</sup>

*UFlorida Chapter*

Gators for Asha, 300-9 J W Reitz Union, P.O Box 118505, Gainesville, FL 32601

[www.ashanet.org/uflorida](http://www.ashanet.org/uflorida)

## **Payir-Asha site visit by Meera Sitharam on August 10, 2009.**

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Accompanying me were my 2 children, 6 and 9 years old. I have found that visiting with children not only helps with their education and exposure, but also give helps relax the mood of the visit. The transportation was kindly provided by Bharatidasan university (I am helping them set up an international visiting faculty program, and they have graciously provided transportation for my Asha-related visits). I brought with me a largish quantity of seasonal vegetables and fruits and biscuits as well.

Palani (Asha-UIUC and UFlorida) had just visited a few days ago, and Payir's director Senthil was expecting other visitors on the same day who were to advise him on watershed planning in the area. Having seen recently how much the Timbaktu collective had achieved in Anantapur AP in watershed revival and development (necessarily hand-in-hand with massive reforestation), over 25 years, I was interested in what these visitors had to say. Thenur is rain-fed and water problems beset the area. This year, the Kodai rains had failed and hence an entire crop season had to be abandoned, and this was very much on the minds of the Payir staff. It was starkly clear that a reasonable solution to the water problems was foremost on everyone's mind and knowing that everything else, the Asha gurukul school and government school intervention included, relies crucially on such a solution. So, I had no clear goals for the visit other than learning what I could about watershed planning, from the experts.

### Watershed issues

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I had some common sense knowledge about watershed issues, and had heard about the extensive watershed planning in Tamilnadu since the Chera/Chola/Pandya days. Until the British Ryotwari system punctured the fabric of village social organization, these watershed planning methods and construction and maintenance were deeply internalized by the community and woven into their daily life and the seasons. They continued with some difficulty even in the beleaguered and poverty-stricken British time, and the memory was clear at least in the minds of a few, until massive (well-intended) goverment intervention cheap electricity took over. Now that deeper and deeper boring and other Unsophisticated and inefficient relationships with water have destroyed the region's microclimate and have destroyed these memories and practices.

Commonsense indicated the following.

Thenur is almost due east of the Pachamalai drainage, at a distance of a few kilometers from the foothills. The prevailing slope is from west to east (as in most of Tamilnadu).



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Any system of water catchments and wells would have been accordingly planned. In the pre-electricity days, the draining rivulets/tributaries were probably well-marked and kept free of obstructions, with trees preserved alongside to prevent erosion and silting of reservoirs. Slopes would have been made gentle using occasional planned drops that are protected by dams that let low-water through, and hence can flexibly hold up to floods.

As it turned out, two of the other experts who had planned to be there did not show up.

Mr. Sivagnanam is a geographer who has some experience with NGO's and has evaluated the environmental impact of various industries. To get a feel for the local undulations and topography, a bicycle is probably best. But due to the midday heat and lack of time, Sivagnanam, Senthil (driving), Senthil (one of the Payir employees who knows the topography well and has memories of the of local lore) and I drove around and visited 3 local reservoirs two of which were at Puttanampatti and Kannapadi (a big one), and a recently planned pond. The reservoirs were being desilted by NREGA workers, but it seemed as though NREGA should be used for jobs that are not scalable and not performable by machine. Mr. Sivagnanam pointed out that there were many such jobs related to recycling of waste, for example.

As mentioned earlier, diverse forestation is a key ingredient of watershed planning and we visited the sacred grove (planted with support from the Feyerabend foundation) and which plans to bring all communities in the village together (along with the temple car festival). Different saplings had different survival rates as expected and this summer's drought indicated those that were particularly drought resistant. Vilvai and Vilam (two types of wood-apple) and Elandai (jajuba), and Vembu (Neem) and a couple of other local trees seemed to be doing well.

Over lunch, Mr. Sivagnanam mentioned that with today's cheap GPS technology, storing forest data tree by tree and storing any kind of geographical data related to watershed management experimentation would be relatively easy. And such data would be a huge help not only to find out what works and to troubleshoot, but also as a help to other NGO's that want to work on this model. He had brought a "home weather station" to monitor the micro climate around Payir to decide on rainfall, wind conditions, and thereby cropping patterns etc.

After lunch Mr. Sivagnanam showed us a 1:250000 topographical map of the area obtained from the CIA database, in turn obtained by a landsat global topographical server situated in University of Maryland. It was amazing in that it showed all the historical watershed structures in the area. Senthil showed us a 1:5000 map obtained from the



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Panchayat (from 1962) which showed the wards, roads, footpaths, Varis (rivulets), ponds (Kuttais), Eris (reservoirs) etc. The footpaths follow the contours generally, but no other Topographical information was available. The goal is to obtain a 1:25000 map from the town and country planning dept of Perambalur district. Sivagnanam mentioned that there was very good opensource GIS and map related software available, for example IRFANview, which is much faster than MS's faxviewer.

Energy:

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We talked a little about introducing solar cookers in Payir (parabolic), and in thenur (light fibreglass boxcookers that could be manufactured here for about Rs 1000 a piece), as well as other types of efficient biofuel stoves, and commented on the fact that such things need a lifestyle change although the technology is essentially already available. We also talked about solar outdoor LED lihts, and also a biomass generator to generate Payir's electricity, and possibly feed into the grid as well. In the meantime, I found out from my uncle Vasudevan (an energy specialist among other things) that the smallest biomass generator that he knows of generates 10KW using a gasifier and a diesel 4-stroke piston engine. The total cost would be under 5 Lakh, but would need quite a bit of biomass (woodchips).

School related issues:

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The gurukul teachers and the govt school intervention teachers were all busy with Mrs. Sivagnanam teaching them English. I got to interact very briefly with a couple of the gurukul kids -- they seemed a little bored. Overall there appeared to be less animated enthusiasm than last year, both in the kids and the staff, but this could have been the result of a very hot day and the overall feeling of disappointment due to the missed rains and the drought. In any case, I spent inadequate time with them, so I would not trust my discernment on this.

One question is:

What is the difference between the Rishivalley children's teaching method and ABL? Why not have ABL at the Gurukul as well. Are the plans still alive for the Gurukul to go up to higher grades?

Four of the Rishivalley teachers stil remain - 2 of them are employed in the Gurukul. 5 new ones have joined, they received training in SSA's ABL (Sarva Shiksha Abhyan's Activity Based Learning methodology) from someone in Srirangam. I spoke to two of the new ones for a ffew minutes.



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All agreed that there is now no opposition to ABL in the local schools except for the fact that the kids that need the most attention are those that have trouble concentrating. Also, many teachers don't like sitting on the floor among the Kids. Other than that, everyone seemed to think that ABL was a natural method and helped the kids teach themselves and their peers as well.

Senthil now also runs an afterschool for sports and play from 4:00 to 6:30, with mostly middle school kids from the Thenur school (30-40 of them) showing up at the Payir farm at a nearby playground.

Another question is:

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Are these kids somehow to be considered a parttime Gurukul? Will these kids somehow be involved in the entire forestation and watershed development and energy harvesting projects? That would be fantastic experience for them in pro-poor green development!