

Gandhigram Site Visit

Date: August 14,15

Done by: Santhosh C Padmanabhan (santhosh.padmanabhan@gmail.com)

Introduction and Background

The Gandhigram Trust was founded by Dr.T.S.Soundram and Dr.G.Ramachandran as early as 1947. Both of them were Gandhians and committed to Gandhiji's spirit of Swaraj (self rule). All the efforts of Gandhigram were orchestrated on gandhian principles. The Mission of Gandhigram has been based on -

§ providing access to affordable essential services to the rural community in health, education and social welfare,

§ co-creating knowledge with the communities leveraging their traditional strengths, and make them applicable for modern times and

§ ultimately strengthening the community by facilitating economic development programmes, creating livelihood opportunities and self-managed development programmes

The Trust's activities are spread over many districts of Tamilnadu that includes Dindigul, Karur, Theni, Madurai, Tirunelveli, Sivagangai and Virudhunagar. The central office is located at about eleven kms from Dindigul on NH7. The sub-centres are located at Sivasailam, Subbulapuram and Kasipalayam. The major areas of rural intervention by the trust include Health, Education, Village Industries, Social welfare (care and refuge), Village Extension and Rural Technology. Since, the trust has been around for a long while, its activities have expanded in breadth and depth over many years. Many social movements and rural development initiatives were inspired by Gandhigram. Some of the individuals/efforts supported by Asha also have been in Gandhigram before. Many aspects of the trust's goals are now institutionalized and each institution functions on its own for the most part. The Gandhigram Rural University which started out as part of the trust has now grown into a deemed university and has completely come out of the folds of the trust. The land ownership etc. are also separate. But, students or those associated with the trust do get a preference in the University for admissions.

Here is more information on the founders and the history of the organization -

<http://www.gandhigram.org/orgn/history.htm>

<http://www.gandhigram.org/orgn/ppl.htm>

Here is more information on the list of institutions set up by Gandhigram -

<http://www.gandhigram.org/orgn/div.htm>

My trip was primarily to look at Asha's possible involvement with the after school efforts in couple of the homes for destitute children and the support of teachers in the Santhi School for the Speech and Hearing impaired. Avvai Ashram and Santhi School are located in Sivasailam, which is a good 5-6 hours from Dindugul. I was unable to visit the efforts in Sivasailam because of the short time span we had. I decided to get an overview/idea of the efforts in Dindugul instead.

Neela

When I arrived at Gandhigram, Neela madam received me and gave me a background on Gandhigram's efforts. Sowbhagya illam is the home for destitutes and orphans. Neela was the superintendent of the home for many years before voluntary retirement recently. She is now the chairman of a quasi-government organization called the 'District Child Welfare Center'. She and her brother was orphaned at a very young age and they both

grew up at Sowbhagya illam. After her studies she decided to stay at Gandhigram and contribute towards the efforts there. She is single and continues to be closely associated with the home. She has been mentoring the new superintendent. She believes in creating more leaders and ownership of the efforts in a sustainable manner. This was the reason for her early retirement.

Shivakumar

Neela spared time for me and took me around Gandhigram to visit various efforts and also meet up with some of the key people behind the organization. We stopped to meet Mr. Shivakumar. He is the Auditor of the organization and is a full time worker who has been taking care of the financials and audit of all efforts for a very long time. He is a known hardworker who spends copious amount of time with managing all the financials.

Rajagopalan

We later met with the secretary of the trust, Mr. Rajagopalan. He is related to Dr.T.S. Soundram, one of the founders of the organization. He was a school going kid in 1947/48 when the institution was formed. In 1980, he decided to join the founders in social service. He wound up his work and settled in Gandhigram. He survives on his pensions. He gave an account of Dr.T.S.Soundram. He mentioned that she was the daughter of a millionaire (TVS industries) who was drawn towards Gandhi. She was inspired by her mother and Bharathiyar in the late 20s/early 30s. Though she was too young to be part of the freedom struggle, she was closely associated with Gandhiji in the development efforts later. We then discussed challenges and successes now since Gandhigram's inception. He mentioned that the over 6000 SHGs (Self Help Group) for women that have been established, microfinance, watershed development, employment generation etc. some of the recent successes. He mentioned how earlier central governance espoused by Nehru was top-down akin to the soviet model. He recounted an incident when Vinobha Bhave was invited by Nehru for a planning commission meeting. It was Vinobha bhave who pointed out that none of the folks in the meeting had ever been to the villages in India. He believes one of the primary purposes of Gandhigram is to prevent migration and strengthen rural economies. We then discussed what are the recent efforts of Gandhigram in this direction. He mentioned how the implementation of NREGA work has been carried on in full steam in many villages. He also spoke about the watershed development and improved agriculture returns that has quelled migration to a certain extent. The hospital, which is the very first effort of Gandhigram trains the people from villages to run their own village clinics. There are also other employment generation efforts that include teacher training, Siddha/ayurvedic center for medicines, labs etc.

Kausalya

Dr. Kausalya Devi is now the managing trustee of the organization. We met her later in the day. She was quite busy and even at this grand old age was performing surgeries. She is unmarried and lives alone. Starting out as a doctor in a government hospital after she came to gandhigram, she has been dedicated to the hospital all along. She gave a brief background on how she got involved with Gandhigram. She had been to Dindugul to attend a friend's wedding and out of a co-incidence had to meet Dr.T.S.Soundram. As the intended short discussion went over many hours, Dr. Kausalya was very inspired by Dr.T.S.Soundram and decided to spend time at Gandhigram. She is a very humble person and doesn't think too much of what she has been doing. She is known to have done long non-stop multiple surgeries (even for 52 hours). She is an inspiration to everyone here and shuns the idea of any special accomodation or facilities for herself. She has simple meals and a simple room/house for accomodation.

Sowbhagya Illam

This is the home for destitute and orphaned children. There are about 150 children in the home. The home is organized into cottages with each cottage assigned a house mother. The age groups of the children are also varied in each cottage. The elder children care for the younger ones in each cottage. Gandhigram is in the list of orphanages/institutions that the government or police sends the orphaned or destitute children to. The background of the children is never mentioned to other children or in schools etc. The parents of some of these children are in prison and this becomes a government assigned remand home for the children. We went around the campus and photos were taken. The house mother lives in the cottage along with the children. Children as young as 0-5 years live in the cottages. Their rooms are well decorated and lively. Funds have been donated for construction and maintenance of this home from various donors. A family of doctors in Dallas have even donated a building. Neela mentioned how different extra curricular activities and just exposure to other kids, brings about tremendous change in the rebellious children. When queried on if there was corporal punishment (especially in a gandhian institution), she replied that, though they keep reiterating the values to all the staff and teachers, its possible that house mothers might resort to it to maintain discipline. We took a tour around the library and also had a brief discussion on globalization, how it affected the local economies around dindugul etc.

Other institutions and employment generation

Neela madam took me on a tour of other institutions around the campus. There is an entire Deemed University right next door (Gandhigram rural university). The university gives preference in admission to children from the area and from Gandhigram. There are varied departments starting from rural technology to watershed management etc. Students do a lot of field work in the surrounding rural areas. They have been involved in training panchayat leaders, creating awareness about rights etc. There is a teacher training college that is run by the Gandhigram trust itself. A good percentage of the alumni of Sowbhagya illam are themselves teachers at various places. We then drove around the 'poor man's public school' or the english medium school run by the trust. Neela mentioned how offlate there is been so much demand for an english medium school, that the trust decided to run its own english medium school. We then toured the employment generation activities around the campus. We went to the weavers section. Farmers bring their cotton, that is pulled and weaved within the Gandhigram campus. The khadi initiative has been extensively worked on - farmer collectives, weavers' collectives etc. are organized. But, its not easy to get good rates in the market even with the government subsidies for khadi. The weavers are struggling and there are very few next generation weavers left. The other units include soap making, lijjat pappad making (the company has a tie up with Gandhigram and employs the women SHGs), pickle making, flour mill etc. The marketing and sale of products are also coordinated by the women SHGs. They have done a good job and there is considerable revenue from these units and it supports employment for a good no. of families. We then visited the Lakshmi Seva Sangham. This is a profitable business venture of the trust. It manufactures ayurvedic, sidha and yunani system of medicines for various ailments and purposes. We met a couple of doctors and also visited the Quality control lab. One of the recent alumni from Sowbhagya illam is employed at this lab. Neela mentioned that this institution contributes part of its profits for the running of Sowbhagya Illam.

Discussion over the phone regarding Shanti School

I could not make the trip to Siva Sailam to visit the Shanthi school for the speech and hearing impaired. Instead, I scheduled a phone call in the afternoon of Aug 14th with the Headmistress, Ms. Krishnaveni of the school. Here are the details from the conversation:

1. Why Asha funding and why not get support from the government?

The government currently supports the salaries of 6 teachers, 1 tailoring(crafts) instructor and 1 watchman. The management covers the salaries of 4 teachers, 1 office assistant, 1 computer instructor and 1 speech therapist(on a consultancy basis only).

Since, 1992 no posting or government appointments have been made to any government AIDed school. There has also been no grant assistance from the government. A G.O (government order) was passed which restricted support to any government AIDed school, except for the ones catering to mentally challenged children. Many schools, especially those catering to the physically challenged have filed an appeal. A German foundation supports about Rs. 500/month/child for 40 children. This is towards general living expenses or hostel maintenance. The management garners support mostly by donations (which are many times one time). They have already applied to the government requesting an appointment of one more teacher.

(Note: I had requested a copy of the application for our own understanding and learning.)

2. What happens to children after graduation?

The institution does do a follow up on its alumni. The headmistress promised to send us data on this from previous years. In general, many of them have taken up jobs in factories, IT sector or have had self-employment. The children have all come from various places in Dindigul district. The school also provides vocational training for 2 years after school and initial capital (machines etc.) to help them set up their own enterprise.

3. What is the no. of children in the school currently?

They try to maintain a ratio of 10:1. There was some confusion with regards to numbers given to us. On the call it was stated that there are 107 school going children and 13 students who are undergoing vocational training. Right numbers will be confirmed by the headmistress.

4. Is there a problem of migration? What can we do?

Due to available job opportunities many children move to the cities. Self employment can be very empowering. Tailoring instruction and helping set up shops are the initiatives in that direction. There have also been efforts to set up jewel shops etc. In most cases the migration happens because of jobs at factories or mills. In the end the interest of the children in self employment or other jobs is given importance.

5. What is the kind of vocational training provided?

Major areas are in Tailoring and computers. In computers, most training is related to DTP (Desktop publishing) and minimal skills. If they get a full time instructor there is a hope for providing 'certificate' courses. The computer training started only recently and there is no example of someone getting placed or setting up their own enterprise with this training. There are also other plans - Electrical, auto mechanic training etc. They will need to hire appropriate resource people for these plans.

6. Do you have regular PTA meetings? How frequently do children meet the parents?

We have a PTA meeting every month. Parents of about 20 children show up for these meetings on an average. It's too far for other parents to make it to the meetings. The children do go home when they get a 1.5 months vacation. Poor parents cannot take the children home, so they come to the school and stay with them.

7. How are these special-ed teachers trained?

They attend refresher courses organized by the government or other institutions. In Chennai there is a school for the hearing and speech impaired called the 'Little flower' school (near Gemini studio). Their training is the only government recognized training available. Many other training programs exist, but they are not recognized by the government. There is a need for a well trained/qualified full time speech therapist. One trip by the therapist costs about Rs. 5,000 (for 3 hours). Once a week would be required. But, due to resource constraints it's done only once a month.

8. Can you give more details on the budget items related to Computers?

2 new computer sets. A computer set includes printer, scanner etc. They will also need multiple printer/scanner for vocational training.

9. Can young children be rehabilitated and treated for this disability?

If identified at a very young age (0-5 years), there are chances for rehabilitation. From as young as 2 years, kids can get speech therapy. More efforts need to be put in for speech therapy when the child is very young. In the future with better communication skills there would be more opportunities for them.

10. How is Sign language imparted?

There is the Indian sign language and also other sign languages. There is no specific accepted standard for sign languages. We teach them the conventional sign language at a very young age. When they complete 10 years, they pick up other sign languages very easily.

11. Are reading and writing skills affected by hearing?

Yes. Having hearing aids has shown to improve these skills. An audiometrician judges the level and gives advice on the right hearing aid for the child. Children with partial hearing can make use of these hearing aids for better reading and writing skills. The government has stopped allotment of free hearing aids for kids. We can do 'induced' hearing for the completely deaf. But, that only helps them recognize what sound is, but cannot help them hear words.

12. What are the priorities?

Salaries and support for teachers, support for speech therapist (both in terms of identifying resource people who can take up full time employment and paying them salaries) and finally other aspects of the hostel facilities for the kids.

13. Action items -

The headmistress mentioned that she will send us - staff particulars (bio etc.), tracking info about the alumni of the school, exact info on class strengths, copies of applications for support filed with the government etc.

Discussion with Superintendent and teacher at Sowbhagya Illam

Pandiammal is the new superintendent of Sowbhagya Illam (after Neela). She had been on the job for the last 4 months. Prior to joining the home she was part of the water rights efforts in the locality.

The trust works with over 35 villages in dindugul district for water issues. They provide leadership training for panchayat leaders and also help in owning drinking water supplies etc. They stress on getting the community involved and promote local ownership of water resources. They set up various VWCs - Village water committees which consists of panchayat leaders, local leaders, teachers, nurses etc. They had sub committees in this which focussed on quality assurance, environmental protection etc. They also formed water user groups in all the villages. These groups collected water tax for the government, monitored water usage (to identify if anyone withdrew huge amounts of water through motors etc.) and ensured that people used only what they were allotted. She also worked with aspects related to NREGA and rued that there were implementation problems related to NREGA. There is also the problem of not finding any labor. As part of her work in these areas, they have been threatened by many powerful people/groups in the past. But, due to the presence of an organization like Gandhigram and support from many villages, they have been safe. She is an ex student from the rural university and did her M.Sc there. She said many students go to the villages for their field work and find the experience enriching. In the surrounding areas, alcoholism is not a big issue. Primary occupation is agriculture. The women SHG groups in these areas have been very transformative. There is now more representation of women in the local administration. But, all this has still not translated to perceptible difference in how

girls are treated vs. boys in homes.

We then discussed about the home. The children wake up at about 5 AM in the morning and study. From 6:00 - 6:45, they go about cleaning their rooms, the premises of the home, lawns etc. They leave for the school at 8:30 AM. They get back from school at 5:30 PM. They do a wash-up, freshen and have a prayer. From 6 PM to 8 PM, they have tuitions. Sometimes 6-7 they have spoken english classes and some go to music classes. Dinner after 8 PM, further studies and then sleep. In the weekends they have dance classes, drawing, computer training and also use the libraries. The really young kids go to the creche. The older kids also help with kitchen activities - the girls are trained for cooking as well. Some boys help out at the kitchen also. The children go on tours in the summers. They have been to malampuzha dam (in kerala), adirapalli falls (in kerala), cinema trips and also to theme parks. The cook in the home also comes from a difficult background and stays on campus here. This home is also a government recognized/ approved adoption agency. The District Child Welfare Committee (that Neela is part of) sends the kids who are abandoned or lost to homes such as this.

We then had a short discussion with Mr. Paramanathan. He volunteers time as tuition teacher for the kids in the home. He is pursuing his Ph.D in math and was inspired by his senior, Mr. Vinayakan who is a Ph.D scholar himself. They provide counselling for the children as well. I asked as to why there should be tuitions if the school is run by Gandhigram? While, these schools are better than government schools, they also have the pressure of covering the syllabus in time. There are 40 students in a class and not all kids learn in class. The home currently has 5 teachers for tuition and they need 2 more. The schools follow normal conventional/formal system of education. The school or the tuition teachers don't espouse any alternate techniques. The tuition teacher mentioned how it was tough to get the children to be attentive and create interest in them for studies. They mentioned how an elderly person could not deal with the kids and their pranks. He finally stopped coming. Most of the instruction and goals of the schools and tuitions are exam oriented. In these aspects its no different from government schools.

Interaction with children

Later in the evening I spent time with the kids alone. They all had a prayer session and sang some bhajans first. After the session we sat around and chatted. They were full of energy and I suggested that we do a QnA by turns. I let them ask me all questions they wanted and then started with mine. We discussed their daily schedule and I asked do they get enough time to play at all. They said they make the time to play. When we discussed cricket and football I asked if the girls join the guys and the girls vociferously demanded that they should be part of the games as well. We discussed some cinema and what the kids do outside of school - trips they go on etc. Then I gave them my notebook and asked them if they wanted to do a drawing session - they had to come up with suggestions of objects and I would draw them. They they tried their hand at the game. Many kids wanted to show their handwriting to me and wrote their names on the notebook. Some of them sang some nice songs and I recorded it and replayed for them. The elder kids did look out for the younger kids and helped them around.

Hospital visit

After sunset, we went to the hospital to meet up with Dr. Kausalya. While we waited for her to come out of the operation theater, Neela took me on a short tour around the hospital campus. The hospital was the first and primary effort of Gandhigram. They train people from the villages to be nurses and staff at the hospital. The healthcare facility is well known and lots of folks come here from long distances. They also have an artificial limb unit that is really famous and many physically challenged come here for custom made limbs, fitting and rehabilitation. All the staff live in the hospital campus, including Dr. Kausalya. I heard quite a few incidents about Dr. Kausalya's dedication to her work. After meeting with Dr. Kausalya, we left back to the home. One of the hospital jeep

drivers was a good friend of Neela and offered a ride back. He mentioned that his kids are going to school and he was worried about them doing well in their exams etc. There was a brief discussion on the current exam oriented system and how schooling has become too monotonous and rigorous.

Independence day events

I woke up in the morning and observed from the children from the terrace. They all had got up early and were cleaning the campus - sweeping, collecting leaves/foilage etc. It was the Indian independence day and everyone was getting ready to go for the gathering at the assembly ground. Everyone in Gandhigram assembled there for the independence day celebration and later had separate flag hoisting in each institution's campus. So, we all went there and there was only one simple 10-15 min address by one lecturer from the Teacher training college. No one else spoke and there was a quick salute, singing of the national anthem and we dispersed. The speech by the lecturer was interesting. She quoted perspectives of young children on Indian independence published on Young World, a children's magazine section of 'The Hindu' newspaper. She quoted one child being optimistic about what the future holds, the development in Science and what we have gained since independence etc. Then, she quoted how another child wrote about whether there really was independence with so much strife and suffering still around. She also spoke about how a child wrote about terrorism. She then delved into why is there a problem of 'terrorism' in the first place. Where is the culture of violence emanating. She felt the hatred that parents and family expose the children to in their normal day to day lives, in itself is a cause for many evils. She felt true independence can only be aspired for when we change ourselves within. After the independence day event I had breakfast and did a quick tour of the primary school (across the road from the home). Neela herself had studied in this school. Some of the buildings were really old. The toilets and mid-day meal kitchen was in bad shape. She spoke briefly about how this school might also need some infrastructure support. There was an independence day event scheduled in the school for which Neela was the chief guest. I didn't have much time left with me and had to leave. I conveyed my thanks, wished everyone and left Gandhigram.