

A visit to Rehabilitation Center for Blind Women, Trichirapalli

by Sriram Subramanian, January 4th, 2006

This visit is the third by an Asha-Atlanta volunteer after Ashok Narayan and Sathyan Subbiah visited the project in 2004 and 2005 respectively. It was arranged on short notice on the evening of January 3rd, and I was able to get last minute train bookings to leave Madras on the morning of the 4th and arrive in Trichy by 1pm, visit the Center and return by the overnight train the following night. Ms. Priya Theodore, Director of the Center, with whom I coordinated this visit, had a car arranged to pick me up at the railway station and Mr. Chandrakanth, who works as the Placement Officer received me at the station at about 1:15pm as my train was late and it was a short drive to Mannarpuram where the center is located.

At the center, Mr. Chandrakanth introduced me to Mrs. Theodore and there were two other guests, an elderly couple, in her office. They were also patrons of the center, helping the center in various ways and I was also told that they arrange for food for all the residents of the center on special occasions in their family, like birthdays of their family members. This was one such day and since it was already about half past 1 in the afternoon I had assumed that they had lunch(I had mine in the train) and it was all over. A little later I would find that I had assumed wrong.

Mr. Chandrakanth offered to take me on a tour of the facility and I left Mrs. Theodore and her two guests to walk across the hallway to a room where there were about 12 women working on their sewing machines. They were sewing surgical masks for which they had a contract to supply a local hospital. As part of his job, he explained that he had find buyers for the various products the women at the center make. The women here as well in the other sections of the center had various stages of visual impairment ranging from completely lack of vision to partial vision. On my request, one of them demonstrated how she threads the needle with the help of a nylon string loop. As I was talking to them, the elderly couple in Mrs. Theodore's office came across to meet me to say they were leaving and bidding adieu, I continued on my tour. Walking to the adjoining room, I met two women who were making envelopes and Mr. Chandrakanth informed me that they had won a contract to supply envelopes to local branches of banks. Next was the candle making where the lady patiently explained to me the intricacies of making the candles and how she had to be careful when the wax is still hot. Some things we take for granted, sometimes are huge obstacles to overcome for some others.



Continuing on the tour, we went into the baking section, where three women were banking buns(hamburger type), puffs(an indian pastry of layered flour with vegetable filling) and bread. They had contracts to supply these locally as well. We then went into the adjoining building, where they were reweaving wire mesh seats of chairs. I learned from Mr. Chandrakanth that they had won the contract at Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. Trichy for the year to repair their chairs. They were also learning to



weaving wire bags which are commonly used in India. The Center also has a store at the facility where the merchandise made by the residents of the center are sold to the public. There were also women engaged in block printing to make sarees and handkerchiefs, and also using handlooms to weave bath towels. Manimegalai, the lady at the handloom explained to me how the handloom works and how she keeps track of the different colors that need to go on the towels.



Next I went into a large room for use as a classroom, and in the adjoining room there were several typewriters as well as a couple of braille typewriters. Also were two desktop personal computers, where there was a special software installed that would “speak” out the key pressed, so that they would know what is on screen. The women learn typewriting and word processing on these machines as part of their vocational training. Not all of the center was for serious training. I could hear music and looking through the next room were two women, one of whom was singing and another playing the keyboard. The musically inclined learn and practice in here and they also have a music teacher who conducts lessons regularly. I was told they have performed on the local radio channel and also for their Founder's day in honor of the founder of the center Dr. Joseph Gnanadickam. More about him and the history of the center later.

Next, Mrs. Theodore called in all the residents of the Center together for an interaction and I asked them a few questions as to their experiences here and the interesting things they are learning. They too asked a few questions about Asha, and the chapter Asha Atlanta, and a few of them remembered our volunteers who made site visits earlier, Ashok and Sathyan and inquired about them.



It was about 230pm, and Mr. Chandrakanth led me in, saying I must join everyone for lunch. And only then I had realized that the special lunch, that was sponsored by the elderly couple I met on the way in was not yet served and everybody was waiting on me. I was later told that the couple left because they were hungry and could not wait for me to get done with the tour. I did not realize that and it was unfortunate that them and everybody else at the center were waiting on me to have their special meal.

That was agonizing for me, as not only the residents of the Center, the employees as also the generous couple sponsoring the meal were looking forward to the special meal and I caused them to wait. At that point I could not refuse their invitation to join them for lunch, in spite of it being the second one of the day, and a sumptuous lunch followed.

After lunch, I went back to the office of the Center along with Mr. Chandrakanth to look at the grade sheets of the students who appeared for the government conducted standardized tests that are conducted at the level of Grades 8, 10 and 12. Many of the students had secured over 75% and all those who appeared for the exams have passed. This is a tremendous achievement as the girls in the Center come from very rural areas of the state and typically have not even been allowed to leave home due to their visual impairment. This is where funds from Asha Atlanta have been put into use, for education needs of the women at the center. We have supported them for three years, 2004, 2005 and 2006 at \$2400 each year, to pay for teachers, exam fees, books and at times even for the children of the blind women at the center. Mr. Chandrakanth also showed me the expenses made out of our funds and they maintain a separate account to keep track of it. Most of it was as I mentioned, towards teacher salaries, exam fees, books, writing material and as I had mentioned, there were a few receipts for fees of the children of the blind women. I, for one, am comfortable with this, but it is a point to be discussed if our other volunteers have a concern about it.

Ms. Theodore also joined us and elaborated on the history of the center. Her father, Dr. Gnanadickam, was a well known ophthalmologist in the town of Trichy and knowing the difficulties faced by the blind, and in particular the women among them, on his 75th birthday decided to start this center for the rehabilitation of blind women. They started off with the mission to have a resident center that would provide boarding, lodging as also teach the visually impaired vocational skills so that they can make a respectable living and relieve them of their financial dependence. Typically the women stay for three years and learn the vocational skills that they are interested in and the Center either places them with a firm or helps them with the initial investment to start their own unit.

It was only in the later years that they included an academic program where they provided everybody with an 8th grade education and the ones who are academically inclined, with higher education. Many have done 10th and 12th, and some of them obtained college degrees and also graduate degrees as well. And one among them has a Ph.D., proving that there when provided opportunities, they can also be successful.

The Center also makes efforts for the women who may recover vision with a cornea transplant. They have raised funds for this purpose when an opportunity of a cornea transplant arose for the senior most resident for whom it may bring back vision. When Dr. Gnanadickam passed away a few years back, his cornea was given to a lady I met at the Center. Viji, the beneficiary of the kind gesture was a resident of the center and now works for them. It was nice to meet Viji and talk to her about recovering her vision.

All the women I had met so far learning vocational skills, reading, singing and participating in other activities were those who have been at the Center for at least a few months. Mrs. Theodore informed me that most of them when they arrive at the Center lack basic skills and it takes several weeks to months to get them to a position to teach them trade skills. Most of them are from villages, where they are locked up at home and are treated as a financial burden and thought to be incapable of supporting themselves. Most of them have not interacted with people and hence are very introverted and withdrawn and some cannot even walk without support as they are used to lean on the walls of the house where their movement was restricted to. At the Center, they teach them to walk without support and also on soft surfaces, like sand and grass, which most of them have never walked on before as they were confined to their homes. They

also teach them basic life skills, like talking to people appropriately, making a transaction at a store , talking on the telephone and using public transport on their own. This takes anywhere from a few weeks to as many as 6 months and only then are they ready to go through vocational and academic training. In three years they are out of the Center, with a skill that can sustain themselves and be financially independent and it is a transformation that sometimes is scarcely believable.

It was about 4pm and I took some pictures of the women working at the Center and also a group picture and it was time to take leave. It turned out to be a very good visit to one of Asha Atlanta's first projects and I am happy to see them sustaining their good work and the funds we contribute being put to good use.