

## **Project Pearl – A site visit report**

**Dates:** 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2010

**Asha Chennai volunteers:** Sivasankar and Bhaskar

**Photos:** <https://picasaweb.google.com/chennai.asha/ThoothukudiSep10>

The aims of this trip were:

1. To visit all the three schools we are currently involved in, and to meet & interact with Asha teachers, government teachers and children in these schools.
2. To visit the two Asha Chennai libraries.
3. To meet with Asha Chennai teachers and plan out the academic year.

### **16<sup>th</sup> September, 2010 - Thursday**

Sivasankar and I first went to the middle school at Anandan Madan Patcheri. It was an hour's bus journey from Thoothukudi bus stand. The HM and Asha teacher Gopinath took us around the school and introduced us to the teachers. We then had a long chat with the teachers and they updated us on different things about the school and the village. The HM was saying that there are a lot of first-generation learners in the school and that it is one of the toughest schools she has been in. Commuting to the school is quite a problem, and so none of the government teachers who come here stay for too long, so continuity in learning is a real issue for children. When queried about ABL, she mentioned that they don't follow it too diligently – she had no particular reason for it so assuming that it is just lack of interest in trying out a new methodology.

We spent a lot of time with Gopinath and saw how he handled his classes. Right from when he was appointed, we had been insisting that he follow ABL methodology no matter what the HMs said. He found it hard initially but feels that the children have adapted quite well recently. He has been following the steps laid out in the teachers' guide, and that helped he said. We interacted with the children for a while, talked to them about their interests, how to like ABL, etc.

ABL achievement charts are charts that depict the level of learning that each student in each subject is in. The achievement charts students in Gopinath's class were hung on the walls. We randomly picked a few students and between Sivasankar, Gopinath and myself, tested the students on the learning levels as stated in the chart. In some cases, the levels were accurate but in some cases, it looked like the marking on the chart was higher than what we gathered from interacting with them. When we asked Gopinath about this, he stated a few reasons that seemed genuine. [I won't state them here for different reasons but please contact me if you want to know more].

Also, there was a new power plant set up near the village recently and a lot of land has been acquired for this purpose. The company has promised to provide materials to the school.

We left around lunch time and headed to Vilvamarathupatti. It took us close to two and a half hours (after three bus changes) to travel the 40km. Mr. Muthukrishnan is a retired HM and the husband of the HM of Vilvamarathupatti school – he is a well-wisher of Asha and has been very helpful right from the start. We met him at Vilathikulam and we all headed out to Vilvamarathupatti. He said that the panchayat leader is unhelpful for all things pertaining to the school and so they have been having trouble bringing the government funds to the school, which typically have to be signed off by both the leader and the HM. Hence a lot of regular maintenance work and routine annual purchases have not been done. For example, the HM did not have funds to buy trays to keep ABL cards and so they were not arranged & kept in the order they should be.

Questions?  
Contact Bhaskar ([bhasve@gmail.com](mailto:bhasve@gmail.com))

We immediately decided that Asha Chennai would take care some of the basic essential things including trays for ABL cards, mats for children to sit on and painting children's scribble area. We then interacted with children in two classes, including the one that Asha Chennai teacher Mr.Durai was handling. They were a very enthusiastic bunch and asked us a lot of questions, about where we came from, what we were doing there and so on. Soon, it was school closing time, the bell rang and the children rushed out. We spent some more time talking to the teachers and walking around the school. The previous year, Sivasankar had come to visit the school for the first time along with Mr.Muthukrishnan and both of them had spent more than half a day fixing the roof of one of the buildings because it was in a bad shape. Since then, the school had received construction funds through SSA and had a new building. It started raining when we were inside the new building and to everyone's shock, the roof started leaking in a couple of places. Mr.Muthukrishnan said he would follow up with SSA and the contractor who did the work.

### **17<sup>th</sup> September, 2010 - Friday**

Our first visit on the following day was to the Asha Chennai Viswanathan Library at Nagalapuram. Mr.Vailmuthu is the part-time librarian there and he was waiting for us. He is a farmer by profession and was a classmate of Mr.John Baul, our teacher at Nagalapuram. The library runs out of a small rented place; there was a table, four stools, a bench and some mats inside. We had provided about 200+ books to begin with. Vailmuthu told us that there is a lot of interest, especially among children, towards the library. He keeps it open for an hour or two in the morning if possible (depending on the agricultural season) and 2-3 hours in the evening daily. Children check out book for a week or two; when they return the books, Vailmuthu asks them about what they had read as a way to make sure the children stayed interested. He said that works out quite well.

We got feedback about the books we had given; which ones were more popular, which ones were useful for reference, etc. We looked at the library registers and noticed a lot of transactions. We also got a lot of input from Vailmuthu about the kind of books the children and adolescents in the village would be particularly interested in. Overall, we are very happy to see the library functioning well.

Once we got done at the library, we headed to the middle school nearby. The teachers and children were expecting us and so we wished them as we entered. The prayer was conducted and the children went to their classrooms. We met with the HM and had a long chat. She updated us on several things about the school and thanked us for appointing a teacher there. She mentioned that having an additional teacher for primary classes took a lot of stress out of the other two primary teachers and gave them more time for facilitating ABL. She had high praise for John Baul and said he was completely independent and was a favourite with the kids.

We then went around to all the classrooms and interacted with the children. We checked some of the sports and educational materials we had provided the previous academic year. They were all in order and put to good use. Infact, there was a request for more sports materials which we said we'd be happy to oblige. After that, we spent close to an hour in John's classroom. We sat with the kids and had them walk us through how they go about learning using ABL. We randomly tested some children against the achievement chart levels and noticed that the latter was an accurate reflection. We encouraged John to continue letting children learn at their own pace and making sure to provide enough attention to all children.

We then looked at some really nice stick puppets that John and the children had made for an upcoming demonstration to government officials visiting the school. The plan was to narrate a story using these puppets. They were also planning to use a 'villu' (bow) to sing some 'villu paatu'. John had hand-made one such bow with some decorations and whistles, and that was hanging on the classroom wall.

We headed out of the school around lunchtime.

Asha Chennai

Questions?

Contact Bhaskar ([bhasve@gmail.com](mailto:bhasve@gmail.com))

After lunch, the three Asha Chennai teachers, Sivasankar and I gathered in a park and had a meeting. We discussed our observations from the visits to the schools and the library, and gave them feedback. It seemed like each of them could learn a bit from each other and so we had them share various things about their schools, teaching, methodologies, challenges, dealing with government teachers, etc. We then planned out the academic year. There was a general agreement that children liked to learn using ABL and Asha Chennai teachers would continue to “go by the book” on this, even if results are not immediate. We also decided to provide educational materials on time and maybe in two phases because students tend to run out of notebooks and pencils after half-yearly vacations. I mentioned that there is a budget allocation to conduct annual day functions this year and that they should start planning it out.

Overall, it was a good trip and it seemed like the teachers had settled in well after a year with Asha Chennai.