

# Site visit report of Timbaktu collective on 7-8 August 2004

by Suja Warriar

There is no designated CEO, no official structure, no organizational chart, no business plan or company strategy, but sharing wealth & knowledge, and knowledge management at its best form. With a mission and vision and a definite goal, success is not measured by profits and growth here. Meet a collective that runs with an offbeat management style, that is changing the fortune of many and touching the lives of the unknown with utmost care.

Following an invitation from Bablu Ganguly, made during his last visit to Bangalore, some of us ASHA members reached Timbaktu Collective on 7th August, Saturday, where we were welcomed with warmth and respect. The purpose of the visit was to be part of the alternative life style and interact with the children of Collective, an ASHA supported project. We were all received with great hospitality. The team includes three children, one of them no more than a year old.

## Reaching Timbaktu collective

There are buses from Bangalore to Hyderabad every hour and it takes 4-5 hours to reach Chennethapally, the nearest town near Timbaktu, where the office of the Collective is situated. CK Pally is 50 kms from Anantapur, the biggest district of Andhra Pradesh.

## About Timbaktu Collective

The Timbaktu Collective is a registered voluntary organisation that was initiated in 1990, to work for sustainable development in the drought prone Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, India. The team of 60 members works in about 100 villages of Chennethapalli, Roddam and Ramagiri mandals of Anantapur district, serving about 30,000 marginalised people, focusing on landless, small, marginal farmers who are affected by poverty and negligence by the beaurocracy

The story began in 1990, when a small group of highly educated and dedicated development activists from various walks of life located themselves in a 32 acre plot of dry, degraded land. And they bought the land by using their personal funds amounting to Rs.1,10,000. They named it **Timbaktu (where the earth meets the sky)**. *Healing and regenerating the devastated land and creating an agro forest was their mission.*

Coming back to our visit, the Saturday lunch was served in a community kitchen (there are two kitchens, one for the school and another for visitors and other collective members). Black tea with lemon (from the kitchen garden) added more flavor to the hot and sumptuous meal served with great care and affection. During lunch we met Mr.Subba, Mr.Dinesh and Shylesh and many more of the team. Mr. Subba takes care of the educational aspect of the Collective. Mr.Dinesh plays a key role in modifying the barren land to a thick forest area and his knowledge about land and agriculture is beyond imagination. The Collective is an example of management of centralized thought and decentralization of responsibilities. Each member is assigned specific tasks which are carried out with devotion.



The School and Garbage Cans

## Education

Mr.Subba manages the school. The Collective runs four schools, one is located in Timbaktu and the other three schools are near CK Palli. One of the schools is an evening school. The school timings correspond to regular school times and Sunday is a holiday for all the schools. The schools accommodate children up to standard 10. The Timbaktu school is a residential school and accommodates children up to standard 7. The attendant children are from nearby villages. There are 47 children and 6 teachers. The Collective today faces a problem accommodating older children on the same premises. The children are admitted to the schools by their parents or close relatives, but it is often found that there are not many relatives who are interested in accepting them back after the children's education is complete.



Akshath having charmed a local, gets a ride to timbaktu

Mr.Subba gave us a tour of the classrooms in the afternoon where we had an opportunity to see the children being trained in various crafts and skills. Some of the children learn carpentry and have created extraordinary pieces of work.

The children's communication skills are very impressive and all of them understand English. They are trained to learn that being pretty, bright and successful is not the end, but that fulfillment comes from deeper resources. The Collective is making each child strong enough to face the world with confidence. The impression we got was that these children will overcome challenges that real life throws at them and will emerge winners.

On every Sunday evening, there is a cultural program organized by the children. Because the ASHA team was visiting on Saturday, the children arranged the same for the Saturday evening. The programme included songs, dance, a skit and a group dance, dandia, and many more performances. It was a memorable evening for ASHA members. In the backdrop of innocence, these children have tremendous knowledge, dreams, and hopes to move ahead. The Collective is a place where they feel emotionally and financially secure, it provides an atmosphere to develop the children's hidden talents, educating them to give them self respect, confidence and an awareness of social responsibility. They have freedom of thought, ideas and leadership qualities. After their education, each child will leave the Collective with a record of information about his/her skill set and a considerable amount of finances in their personal account to pursue their further studies. If needed, the Collective is also assisting the children in continuing higher studies.

Great work by Mr.Subba and each one associated with School.



Forest Walk

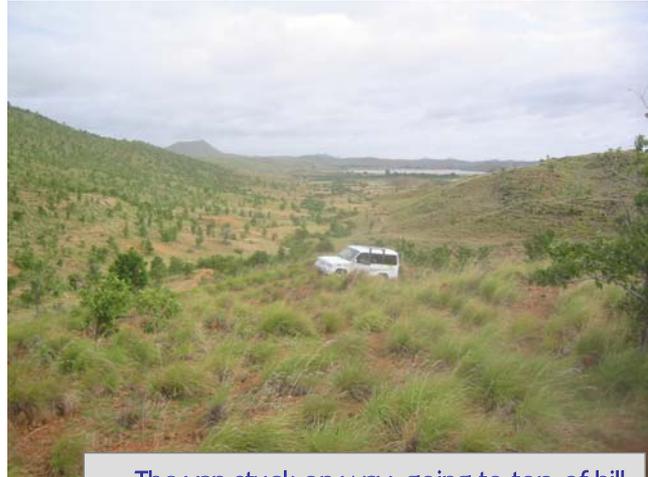
## Forest, land, water:

Dinesh plays a key role in Ecoforestation activities in Timbaktu. Land, forest and water are the three things close to his heart. An electrical engineer by profession, he has in depth knowledge of ecology and soil, water and reforestation. While on a forest walk in the evening, he discussed many activities that the Collective is involved in. The Ananthpur district of Andhra Pradesh was considered to be the finest summer deciduous forest

belonging to the most powerful and rich kingdoms of South India, the Vijayanagara Kingdom in the 19th century. His tremendous knowledge about the land helps him work with the barren land and with networking with the villagers. Dinesh explained rain water harvesting methods, various crops and plants that the Collective has tried growing during the last 14 years to revive the glory of the land. Irrigation systems, land fertility, and maintenance are the key areas that they are concentrating on. Since the soil is alkaline with low organic content, degraded, calcified and compacted reforestation, and revival of the land is one of the major challenges ahead.

## 8th August-2004

Chirping birds woke the team in the early morning to go dibbling with Dhanajoy and Dinesh. As a part of reforestation work of Kalpavally forest, 10,000 acres of barren reserved forest is being regenerated. Trying organic means to make the barren land fertile is a challenge for the Collective and the ecoforestation began as an experiment. Today, it is an inspiration, a starting point and a show piece to the rest of the world. Our team reached the hills by 8.30 AM, after traveling halfway on Timbaktu vehicles and the rest of the way trekking. The hills are covered with sharp rocks and dry sand. We were in a picnic mood and a sumptuous breakfast was served on the hill side, where we were surrounded by bushy, thorny plants. Almost thousands of seeds that can survive the Kalpavally dry weather are planted inside pits dug by the team. On the way back we saw large flocks of sheep climbing down the hills, they set the route, searching for water and food. The hills seem to be nourished by peoples' desires, happiness, unhappiness, dreams, and hope.



The van stuck on way, going to top of hill for seed dibbling, kalpavally forest

## Vision & values

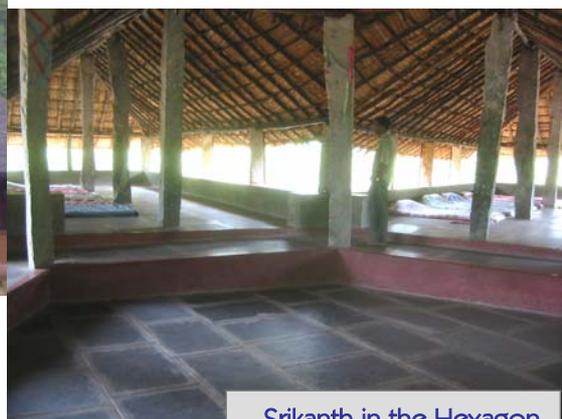
The vision of the Collective is to stop the degradation of the land in Anantpur district and to find ways to reverse it. It provides an alternative lifestyle that is sustainable and provides more liberty and happiness, as opposed to exploitation. The vision is:

- Celebration of Life
- Faith in people and their wisdom
- Cooperation
- Excellence



Hexagon from Outside

In Hexagon, the lovely hut with a thatched roof, the ASHA



Srikanth in the Hexagon

members spoke with Mary and Bablu Ganguly, the key members of the Collective, about the issues which need immediate support from volunteers of ASHA and other NGO's.

1 [A Web page for accommodating all the details of Thrift co-operative](#)

[Thrift co-operative](#): This is an initiative of the Collective and Mary plays a key role. Almost Rs. 85 Lakh is credited to this account by women in the near by villages and almost 60,000 women are involved in this project. They have deposited this money in the form of small amounts like Rs.10 and multiples and they get an interest of 9% for their deposit. They can obtain loans from this account for a rate of 18% and this money can be utilized to any purpose including house maintenance.

2 [Translate thousands of Telugu documents related to Thrift co-operative to English](#) and update the web page. This is to let the know about the great effort and success of the unknown women in the valleys of Rayalseema. Mary is sure that the Collective has given great strength to these women to face the challenges of life and none of these women's lives resonate with the ambiguity known only to women who have their backs to the wall and a hostile world before them. The women here know that life is not full of with pleasures unbounded, not eternally smooth. They have gained strength from the Collective not to build a life on an unreal foundation, which would anyway crumble. These women are backed by the Collective to distinguish the real from the mythical.

3 [The Collective is interested in getting involved with many NGO's](#) and the team very much welcomes volunteer groups to present seminars and conferences and other team building activities in Timbaktu.

**Funding:** The work of the Collective is funded by individuals, both within and outside the country, along with funding agencies and the government. Since the Collective is wholly dependent on these sources to keep the work going, a lot of its efforts go into raising these funds on a periodic basis. In order to ensure the support for this work, the Collective has set up a Corpus fund. The target as of now is Rs.1 crore. Interest from this fund will be used as an ensured funding source. ASHA-USA supports the Collective in many ways. Most of the lovely structures in Timbaktu are supported by ASHA-USA

**Conclusion:** Any work that is done with devotion and sincerity will pass the test of time and future generations will follow the footprints with respect. Timbaktu is an activist's retreat, a nucleus of ideas, many action groups working under one roof to reach one goal. They share love, friendship, pain and sorrow, failure and victory. They provide hope for the hopeless, telling the underprivileged strata of society not to be intimidated by failures, to live with zest and hope, live with self respect.

Let us wish that the rain God will shower many blessings on such a wonderful piece of land, revitalize the cosmologies, caring for the land and the people who really take care of mother earth.

*If a man is called a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well. Like the soul needs hope, faith, a reason to live, God placed some dreams in the minds of these wonderful people and he went on doing other things and they have come out with amazing results from the responsibility entrusted upon them.*

Do you feel like meeting these wonderful people? They are just an e-mail away.... log onto [Ashanet.org](http://Ashanet.org) or [timbkatu.org](http://timbkatu.org)