

The Timbaktu Collective



A registered Voluntary Organisation working in Rural India

life we celebrate you

'And those who were dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music'. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Introduction

The Timbaktu Collective is a voluntary organization initiated in 1990 to work for sustainable development in the drought prone Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, India. At this time a group of like minded people working in development got together and bought 32 acres of totally barren waste land which was named Timbaktu. The following five years were spent nurturing the land. Within eight years the trees, the birds and animals returned, the water table rose and the land began to produce. People from the surrounding villages came and cut the grass for thatch, for brooms and to feed their animals. Sticks were collected for wood and berries to eat.

The phenomenal change in the landscape encouraged the Timbaktu team to made contact with villagers in the surrounding area focusing on the landless, as well as small and marginal farmers. They were especially interested in the lives of women, children, youth and Dalits – the people most affected by situations like chronic drought, unproductive land, unemployment and poor infrastructural facilities.

Eighteen years later the Collective works in 140 villages of Chennekothapalli, Roddam and Ramagiri mandals serving more than 10,000 families. It runs two schools one in Timbaktu and one in the village of Chennekothapalli and it services three others schools in the area. It recently set up a Children's Resource Center and an Arts and Crafts center for children and youth from the community. Timbaktu Collective is presently moving towards the promotion of cooperatives with a livelihood focus. This was seen as a logical next step to promoting a social and economic base in the villages.

The collective has formed numerous Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to work in the areas of:

- Regeneration of forests in common lands (revenue waste lands and Reserve Forests)
- Revitalisation of agricultural lands belonging to small and marginal farmers
- Rejuvenation of traditional water-harvesting structures (tanks, kuntas, wells and other water bodies)
- Developing a banking system owned by rural women from marginalized families
- Relevant education for children who are slow learners, school drop outs, or belonging to single parents or those having no parents.
- Responsible citizenship among youth and Dalit rights
- Awareness building on local and self governance (panchayats)
- Awareness building and empowerment of disabled people
- Networking with other voluntary, civil society, community based and mass organizations at district, state and national levels.

Vision - Rural communities take control of their own lives, govern themselves and live in social and gender harmony while maintaining a sustainable lifestyle.

Mission – Enable rural marginalised peoples (landless labour, small & marginal farmers) especially Women, Children, Dalits & Disabled people to augment their livelihood resources, get organised and work towards social & gender justice and equity in a meaningful and joyous manner.



Programs

Chiguru for children is an alternative education program run by the Collective. It focuses on children belonging to marginalized families, drop-out children, those who have taken up roles of income earners for their families etc. The Collective presently runs a day school and a boarding school, a creative resource center.

Mogga an extension of the Chiguru program, working on child rights issues. A new initiative presently working in 31 villages with about 700 children.

Yuvatha a youth network program with a strength of 568 members aims at the development of rural youth and in organising them to take an active part in village development.

Militha meaning inclusion is the name of the Collective's work with people with disabilities. The primary activity is the formation of Cross Disability Self Advocacy groups of people with different disabilities. Advocating and lobbying for inclusion of people with disabilities in the mainstream development programs of the government as well as representation in the local bodies forms part of the program.

Haritha a watershed development project has been one of the core activity areas of the collective since 1992. Much work has gone into building Community based organizations and their capacities in order to take up the concerned responsibilities of this project.

The **Kalpavalli** program evolved as an organic extension of the Timbaktu experiment in eco-restoration. It has twin aims of helping the villagers protect and develop the natural resources of the village and of enabling the poor to improve their precarious livelihoods.

Over the years the Collective has been moving towards promotion of cooperatives with livelihood focus. This was seen as a logical next step to promoting a social and economic base in the villages.

Mutually Aided Women's Thrift Cooperative - In 1997 it began with the promotion of a small mutually aided women's thrift cooperative, registered under the MACS act of AP. Today there are 3 such thrift cooperatives with around 10,000 women members and capital base of Rs. 4 crores. In Chenekothapalli village the MAC Societies run a shop selling organic millets and ground nut oil and a small tea shop that serves food made out of the organic products.

Timbaktu Organic - In April 2008, after having worked directly with local smallholder farmers for 15 years, the Collective supported by the Women's Co-operatives, helped set up and register a farming and marketing cooperative (FaM Coop Ltd) that promotes farming, processing and marketing of organic food products under the brand name "Timbaktu Organic" and is owned and managed by the producers themselves.

Bhavani - a women's weaving center has been established in cooperation with Dastakar Andhra. Women are trained in both weaving and producing of natural dyes as well as the dyeing of cloth.

Since the beginning of 2008, the Collective and the Women's Cooperatives have been looking into the viability of setting up a producer owned **Dairy cooperative**.

For further information about the Collective please visit our website www.timbaktu.org.



The Chiguru program

The essence of Chiguru's alternative education can be summed up as an education which equips children to live a fuller life. It aims at an integrated approach to education. It gives equal importance to academics, arts and crafts. Children's resources are broad in nature and go beyond materials and the teacher, the classroom and books. Time and a broader vision of education is the crux. Chiguru achieves this by using child centered education, alternative methods of teaching (games, theatre, drawing, art, craft, use of the environment); acquiring life skills (growing vegetables, rearing animals, planting trees, cooking, looking after ones living space); leadership skills, decision making, public speaking, being responsible for school; and sensitive to their environment and their culture. All this takes place within an environment of cooperation rather than competition.

Design

The Alternative Education program of the Collective is quite unique by design. Its basic approach is guided by the broad values that govern children's rights.

- A fearless and non-competitive environment
- A non discriminatory approach to all aspects of learning
- A environment of inclusion be it within the learning space or outside i.e. from the local people and cultures
- The need for the overall development of the child.

A special curriculum has been researched and designed that involves the incorporation of various elements within the immediate environment. The teaching materials, worksheets, lab work and project works specially designed are of high academic quality. Children are involved in a variety of activities and projects to help them develop a concrete understanding of the concepts covered in the classes. Arts and crafts, music, dance, drama, games, outdoor activities, celebration of festivals, access to the library and exposure to the world via the medium of video films, external visitors and field trips all form part of the learning process. It integrates nutrition, health and hygiene into a homogenous program. The atmosphere created within the centers instills a desire to learn.

There are no examinations except for those conducted by the government at the 5th, 7th and 10th standard levels. These examinations are meant to help them get admission into the mainstream schools and colleges, whenever the children choose to join them. The performance of the children in these examinations has been very good. Presently discussions are on in *Chiguru* on the pros and cons of getting the schools recognized by the State Government.

Timbaktu Collective presently runs two schools and a Children's Resource Center.

Prakruti Badi – Nature School in Chennekothapalli village is a day school. It runs classes from the 1st to 10th standard and presently has 110 girls and boys.

Timbaktu Badi – is a residential school that runs classes from 1st to 7th standard. It presently has 70 girls and boys.

Activities:

The highlights of the academic work of the children from both these schools include drawing maps of the district and state using grids, experiments in electrical and electronics and the initiation of "Kottapalli" a children's e-magazine (www.kottapalli.in).

Activities like general knowledge quiz programs, elocution and debates have been introduced to improve their academic skills. There are sessions on child rights, human rights, the



environment, organic farming etc. Computer multi-media materials are regular academic activities in junior classes with senior children attending regular computer classes linked to learning basic English.

Skill training involves classes in puppet making, drawing, paper-mache work, clay modeling, embroidery, wool work, tailoring, mat making with date palm fronds, bamboo craft, making greeting cards and science models.

Kolattam and Chekkabhajana classes are conducted. Children learn how to play the Dappu (a percussion instrument). A number of outdoor games are taught. Chiguru organises two sports festivals a year. Approximately 300 children participate in each festival.

Nutrition:

The schools have a well planned and organised nutrition program which is monitored by the children's food committees.

Children's Resource Centre

All over the world, public spaces for children are shrinking. Any kind of private, safe creative learning space for children is non-existent in Indian villages. To counter the learning trend and the lack of any creative learning space in the area Timbaktu Collective set up the Children's Resource Center in Chennekothapalli. On an average about 200 children make use of the resources of the center every day.

Resources & Activities:

The Creative Resource Centre houses a library with around 5000 books, a science laboratory, eight computers, 100 educational CDs, a hobby workshop with tools and materials for painting, fabric work, tailoring, bamboo craft, electronics, play resources etc. In addition the centre organizes children's festivals and a variety of programs/classes in arts, crafts and sports. The community children regularly use the playground.

The Centre also offers training to young adults who want to pursue an alternative career in arts & crafts after the 10th standard. Skills such as tailoring, bamboo craft, painting and screen printing are taught.

Additional activities:

Festivals, exhibitions, cultural and other events are celebrated at the Centre, with children from the three surrounding Mandals invited to participate.

Conclusion

The Chiguru program has been the core of the vision and mission of Timbaktu Collective. The children who join the schools are initially academically very weak with most of them branded as slow learners or dull children. The experience of Chiguru is that with good nutrition, fearless and non-competitive environments, children start performing well in academics and grow up to become achievers in their own right.