

Phone call with Siddamma

- Sanjeev Ranganathan

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Siddamma has been suffering from Spondylitis. She would like to spend a couple of days at an Ayurvedic center, but hasn't been able to due to the ongoing Tsunami work in Cuddalore.

An international agency had come forward to partner with them in Cuddalore. But, they were being treated more like contractors rather than partners. They were asked to replace the local people they had with highly educated people who are fluent in english, budgets were made by committees without speaking to any of the affected people, etc. Given the way things were going, Siddamma had written to the head office indicating that it is not possible for them to work without people's participation or without taking into consideration their requirements. At this time half the requirements have already been met through different sources including the people themselves. The Sarpam's had called a meeting with all the villagers and held a discussion. In the town hall meeting it was decided that if the org is not going to work on what the people require they will work together on what is left. There may be government schemes available as well.

However, following their stand the head office has sent many people to Cuddalore to understand the requirements of the people and she is helping them work with the people. This is the reason she hasn't been able to take the time out she requires.

We then spoke of the discussion we had about the resource center and the discussion I had with Muriel.

Q: Muriel mentioned that they were planting trees. Where did you get the saplings?

A: The saplings were donated by the forest department. The forest officer has been very keen in participating in any steps to replenish the large deforestation around this area.

Q: What is the progress on learning about other efforts and resource centers?

A: We are being visited by people who own their own land and have shifted to things like organic farming or by researchers who work in this area. It is really quite encouraging that they are coming over to visit us and inviting us to go and visit them. We visited some villages in Nagapattanam with Namallwar. Next week an engineer in agritulture and power will be visiting to observe and contribute to what he can.

Q: What is the advantage to the local people in the area?

A: Recently we were sowing paddy. The villagers were also participating and were amazed at the little investment was required in the process compared to what is done now.

Q: How do the villages know what is the investment?

A: We are doing the experiments openly so people know what is needed to put in and also what to expect. That way people will have reasonable/practical expectations and can balance their own investments with their returns. People are very keen on learning and have come forward to take part in the experiments.

Q: Where does the school fit into this picture?

A: We want the school to be a model school. We need to figure out what it is that we need to teach our children. We would like the children who may come from different backgrounds an opportunity to learn what they want. They should learn by doing and not just by some bookish knowledge. We want the children not only to have a distant dream of being a doctor or an engineer, but also be able to apply themselves learn what they need and contribute to the society.

It is also important that children should respect work that is done by hand. All their parents worked with their hand and it is important for them to respect this.

The second hope is for such a joyful learning school to be able to influence the government teachers and show them by example that it is possible to get the best out of children without beating them. When we talk to the teachers it looks like we are giving them a sermon and we need to show them by example.

There will be no standards and grades, there will perhaps be different skills that a child would need to learn to be competent in his area of work. e.g. if a child wants to learn about wind energy then there will be a set of skills that are useful for him to learn to live and survive in this area.

Q: What would be the upcoming requirements for the school?

A: We are in the first phase of the project. In the second phase when we start the school we will need a structure/shelter for the children. There will be need to support the teachers for their expenses and so on.

Q: What is the ongoing work at the center?

A: We are working on a detailed survey in all the villages, this includes the different skills/techniques they know and also survey of immediate needs of the land and resources about the educational and social background. There are some 28 questions in a survey for each household.

These surveys are important for even basic things like what is consumed the most so what should we concentrate on producing first and so on.s