

## Phone conversation with Siddamma

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Updates on different aspects of the work:

### **Resource Center**

We have hired four staff members from the local youth. We are also looking for two more staff who work on weaving and pottery (the two other activities that are common in local villages).

*Q: What are their names?*

A: Madhavan, Vellan, Lokanathan, Iyeppan.

*Q: Is Duria (released bonded laborer I met at the center) family not one of the members?*

A: No, Duria and his wife and two children have gone back to Pallavakam. They felt that they would like to be with the other released bonded laborers who have been rehabilitated there.

*Q: What is the plan of action for the new members?*

A: We will be going to Nagapattanam on June 3,4 to attend an organic farming meeting. Namalwar and other groups working on this solution are organizing the meeting. The team will stay in Nagapattanam for a weeks training following the meeting.

After the training, Namalwar will accompany the group back and help us plan our training and building of the center for a week or two. We have tentatively decided to focus on food items in terms of oil (Groundnut and Gingly), millets (Ragi, Choolam) and dal. This was based on a sample survey that was done by the team that a good part of food is based on millets rather than rice. Namalwar also wanted to talk to the local farmers himself.

We also plan to take 5 local farmers for the meeting.

*Q: How are you going to find these farmers?*

A: We will let everyone know that this opportunity is available and we will take them if they come forward for this.

This month we are opening the account in the local branch for the resource center to track the accounts. One of the staff members has started maintaining the accounting book. We will also sell the products manufactured in the local market.

Part of the effort in the survey will be to look for non-genetic seeds. It appears that we may need to purchase some of these seeds at an estimated Rs. 18,000.

Due to the election result and the policy decisions following we have been busy and the announcement has not been done yet.

The government is providing Rs.60,000 off on tractors and coming up with schemes that can help you pay it off over time. Bharathi Trust has received a tractor to help with the development work.

We are using it for infrastructure development for the community. Remove stone from the land and build access road. Also work on the rain harvesting to carry stone and work on these structures. 4 acres of land has been recovered from very healthy soil. Some of the non-agricultural land has now become useable. Use for the local stone for making walls and we are looking into it.

Q: Isn't the policy of subsidy meant to try to push tractors on the farmers?

A: This is true. It is an extreme subsidy, but most people cannot afford it even with the subsidy. The running cost would also be very high if you use it for everything.

We plan to use it for things other than agriculture like bridge construction and transportation.

Q: How many acres of land is the resource center on?

A: We have 10 acres of good land and 3 acres of surplus wasteland. Within the 10 acres of land 6 acres were already used for agriculture. We recovered the 4 acres using the tractor over the last month. There is also 6 acres of wasteland where we will be planting trees. We will register in the government that and we will get tree patta.

We plan to put up the cowshed and another shed. We had collected many stones from the land. Black stone on the other side of the hill areas that is meant for construction and you can get permission from government.

Jignesh will give idea if we can use it for making walls and it will be cheaper to make the shed and cowshed. We need a storage system now if we go into production. He also suggested that we can use (limestone) calcium and sand instead of using the cement.

The 3 appointed local youths have found from their survey that a lot of calcium is available locally and this may help us come up with cheaper housing. We will need to work on the ratio of the mix with the calcium and sand.

Q: Is there any law against being able to trade or sell seeds?

A: There is no such law right now, but there is a big ongoing lobby for this. If it comes very close to becoming a law we will work more strongly on educating the people about the law.

Benique, is a volunteer from Belgium, who has been looking into energy and power. He traveled by bus to Dhaka and then by train. He has also built a solar cooker. He visited two villages where there is no electricity and working on setting up lighting using solar energy. He is also looking into harnessing wind energy on the hills. He also helped with leveling the land in our effort to bring larger land to be under agriculture.

Q: Isn't there electricity in all villages in TN?

A: Not really. Perhaps on paper, anyway a village would be considered to have electricity if there were streetlights (even if they don't work) and not when each house has electricity. There are still some villages with neither.

On June 29, ten volunteers from Belgium will be arriving to the resource center. Forest department has also come forward give more saplings based on the success in the last year. This time we will specifically work on plants that help with compost manure (poonga acts as an organic tonic) creation.

Parani from Seattle chapter had recently visited and we should try to get some feedback from him regarding activities of Bharathi Trust: Project Freedom and Resource center.

### **Released-Bonded Laborers**

New collector has joined, Tiruvallur district. Livia had finished the video she made on the Irulas in general we will need to go over what has been done so far with him.

Also there is a new government mandate that the poor and landless will get 2 acres of land. This land is going to be dry land. 15 lakhs land to be provided to the poor people. We have been waiting for a long time for this and we will really look into the implementation of such a scheme.

This scheme will benefit the new villages created to accommodate the release bonded laborers. But, we will push the government to implement 2 acres of land for all Irulas who are landless. We are at least hoping that 50% of the landless Irulas will be provided land. We have worked very hard for many years to ensure that 90% of the Irula families have their BPL ration card and for once they should be legally eligible for this.

Q: Now that elections are over are we going to have the Irula convention?

A: Yes, we have finally got the approval from the government to hold the convention. June 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> week there will be the Irula Convention and it will be a good push to get these rights.

However, since the land is going to be dry. We may need to look into common cultivation or irrigation system since individually they may not be able to afford it.

Also only when they have access to water on the field will it truly be of any use. The resource center now becomes of even more importance now to generate proven technology that is not capitol intensive. Do you have any ideas on how to fundraise for something like this?

Another part in the policy is that for those who were given land but do not hold pattas to land that allow housing may receive permission for also building houses on their land. Farmers have given a write off in cooperative society bank alone. There is some relaxation from the government.

Q: What about the other teacher who was visiting their family elsewhere?

A: Bhuneshwari is back to the school after the visit.

Q: Any progress on the rice mill that the government was thinking about?

A: The earlier collector said that after speaking to his officers they think they have already given Rs.20,000 to the families for rehabilitation (40 lakhs is the cumulative total in the bank account) Government is suggesting that we put in the investment and start a rice mill on our own and that they will help after that. They said they will give the land for the rice mill (~ 1 acre). They now claim that they will supply the paddy and give orders from the government consistently. There is now a new collector who we need to speak to now.

Q: What about the agreement about money for housing?

A: The GO (Government Order) has already been passed for this, Rs. 32,000 for each house for 72 houses. Roof has to be cement and have a toilet. We are still trying to get the actual requirements. Committed for another 150 houses after this is completed.

The second smaller bonded laborer village that you visited, 70 houses with brick wall and roof with thatch have been constructed. The new village has 55 children who also need to be educated/integrated into mainstream.

### **Other Developments**

We have completed building 400 houses for those who were affected by the floods in TN. The floods were from the Pichatam river and we worked with the Irulas in that area.

For the villages in North Pichavaram the collector office has asked for feedback and we need to move with the proposal since they need to give an update on what has happened.

The small Irula hamlet that had been in Tiruvanmayur have moved near Besant Nagar there are 63 children. We met Sumitra, from The School and she suggested that she can find some volunteers. Motivational center to start a shed, per day one time meal.

One time meal : Rs.7x60x30x6 = 151,200

School structure : Rs.50,000