

## **Site visit to Project Freedom**

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### **Introduction and Background**

Siddamma, my mother and I started from my place in the morning. While travelling, Siddamma gave a brief introduction of herself and Bharathi trust's work to my mother. The drive was quite long and we also went over some details of the red hills region. There are about 2000 or more rice mills situated in this area. This area falls close to the Andhra border and Nellore, the rice bowl of India is not too far away. Agricultural produce comes in huge number of Lorries from the Nellore area to be processed in the rice mills. Siddamma went over some brief history on how the Irulas came to the thiruvallur region with the advent of the Forest protection act and how many of them were employed in the rice mills. When we passed through some of the rice mills, we noticed the rather tall boundary walls and protected gates. There were chimneys all around. We later crossed the pallvakam area to come to S.K.Nagar. We saw the government school on our way which was on the main road running next to S.K.Nagar. We met a few women from the community on the way and they mentioned that they are on their way to get rations from PDS and would meet with us soon.

### **Housing, Primary school, balwadi and land for brick kiln**

We looked at the land allotted for the brick kilns. It was right across the main road and next to a huge pond. Siddamma mentioned that taking the soil from the banks would also help in retrenching of the pond. There was enough space for the entire brick kiln to be set up and it was located next to the community as well. We then walked through some of the 70 houses set up so far in the community. These were about 200 sq ft each with a single room and kitchen. They did have stairs leading to a terrace space. We took a look at the Child care center building which is now functioning as the primary school. We didn't go inside as there was no class in session and it was locked. Right next to the building a balwadi was being constructed for really young kids. There were many huts in the region. There are about 200 families in S.K.Nagar, but government has so far provided housing for only 70. There was also an overhead water tank constructed by the government for the community.

### **Discussion with community (This has been captured in video)**

#### **Brief history**

We all went to a community gathering space and sat together to discuss various aspects. Krishnan, the State president of the Sarpams also joined us from the Bharathi trust office. Siddamma introduced us to the community and initiated the discussion by requesting one of the folks to narrate their experiences so far. One of the women started narrating her personal experience and the death threats her husband faced because of their efforts in rescuing themselves and the community. Slowly, more folks started talking about the harsh living conditions. Everyone were literally bound by the walls of the mills with no wages (all of it taken as repayment of loans), children being made to work in hazardous conditions, sexual abuse, rapes and even murders. Women

had no privacy and the same water outlet used for the rice mill purposes was the bathroom for everyone. No doctors visited them and even child births happened with assistance of other women in the community. Women were made to work immediately after pregnancy and illness was not an excuse. No special consideration was given for festivals or other occasions. Generations of the community were forced to work within mills due to past loans. Revision of wages was in the owner's prerogative only. The families or individuals were also traded between rice mills for money. Anyone who raised their voice was immediately dealt with violence. The people were not allowed to have meetings or talk in groups. They also mentioned how they escaped from the rice mills and how they operated covertly in passing information to rest of the community. They spoke about how Krishnan and Siddamma had helped them escape from the rice mills and provided immediate shelter and food. Siddamma spoke about how the released families even struggled to learn 'cooking'. The only diet they were used to was the gruel made out of stale or broken rice that the mills rejected. Then slowly efforts were made to organize these communities. According to the government records, generations of the communities never existed. There are no ration cards, voter identities etc. The released families through the Sarpams got ration cards, community certificates and voter identities for the first time. Through the Human rights hearings and the struggles of Sarpam, the communities were recognized as bonded laborers and appropriate rehabilitation was declared by the government. (Note: Recounting these experiences in it self was traumatic for some of them and I felt, maybe we should be careful in having such a discussion with the community the next time. i.e. we don't have to go into the details again and again.)

### **Current situation**

Many rice mills have become wary of the situation and have changed their ways. But, there do exist some mills which still could possibly use oppressive measures on its labor. With regards to the released families, government provided land, water, housing and electricity. Housing and electricity have not been completely implemented yet. We spoke at length about their current occupations – all of them were employed as daily wage laborers mainly in agriculture related areas. Depending on the season, the availability and variety of jobs would vary. Right now, they were harvesting groundnut yields. Some of the male members also migrate to mangroves during the mangoes season and stay there for 3-4 months for work. 10 women from the community go to a nearby plastic bag company as daily wage laborers and it pays slightly higher. There are no consistent job opportunities for the families here. They mentioned that all jobs that they took up involved skills they were not accustomed to and they learned slowly on the job. With regards to education of the children, the students currently go to the government school down the main road. A MLA has promised to make the child care center as the government primary school for the community. At this point, the community mentioned that it has been a huge struggle to get the government to act on the court orders. They have still not given electricity and completed housing for all. The land pattas have also not been given to many families. Later, Krishnan mentioned that the housing cost was also partly supported by Bharathi trust through another NGO's funding. They also mentioned how the BDO office has not been receptive to their complaints on irregularities of education schemes – scholarship money was not being awarded, building fees of Rs. 125 was being collected from the parents and so on. Some of the members also showed us a letter that had allotted free color TVs for the

families. The families mentioned that they don't have electricity in the first place and a TV is not what they want at this point. They listed all their grievances with government action. There was a spontaneous discussion on how to get the government to act. The community decided to organize a protest right at the collector's office by staging a 'live-in' there. Siddamma, Krishnan and the community members discussed when to do this and how best to do it.

### **Plans for the future**

Siddamma led the discussion on how stable employment is a major concern for the community at this point and she kind of did a recap of the discussions she had with the community in the past. She explained the two possibilities that had been arrived at earlier – the brick kiln and the paper recycling plant. She further explained how they have adequate resources for the paper recycling plant and networks with government offices for procuring and sale of paper based products. She also mentioned the possibility of harnessing recycling needs of the IT companies. She explained how this enterprise would be people owned and they should figure out a way of determining who would work in the effort. She also mentioned that the company won't have a single owner and the proceeds would support the community. Then she went over the brick kiln efforts in the region, discussed how much they pay brick kiln laborers and at what rate bricks get sold. She explained how much profit can be made given the current market rate for bricks and said it can be a sustainable income.

After the recap, Siddamma initiated the discussion on what they think is feasible, how confident are they in taking up such new ventures after being released from within rice mills and not exposed to a lot of skills. So, we started with the recycling plant and discussed as to why a minimum of 40 women is required – its mainly because the plant would operate in a shift system with 10 women working in each shift. The next question was about why it can't be on a larger scale – the idea was to establish a good working model with a small venture and then grow on it. They didn't want to get into a big venture employing a lot more women immediately. They want to establish the first venture and create a sustainable client base before expanding. The 40 women would also take up ownership, management, accounting etc. of the company. The training for all these aspects and the technical aspects would be provided with Geetha's help (resource person and Siddamma's friend who has been successful in a similar effort before). Siddamma asked the women in the community if they were willing to recover 50% of the investment made in the effort through the profits over a period of time and then use it as further investment to create more opportunities – the women agreed to the idea and said they would be more than willing to do that. They also decided that they would discuss in all their SHGs (10 women SHGs exist). The aspects would include this idea of repaying as loan 50% of the investment and selecting who would be the 40 women to be part of the initial venture.

Next, we discussed the possibility of a brick kiln chamber. Siddamma mentioned that the local panchayat leader had offered the nearby pond land to the people to set up the venture. He was hopeful that the soil could be used for the brick kiln, while deepening the pond itself. She then explained how administration of the brick kiln will also require considerable amount of effort from the families. She felt it might be easier for the community to start on something small and concrete before expanding to more

people. The community members agreed and felt that the paper recycling plant sounded a better option than the brick kiln, mainly because brick kiln is not year round and the peak season is in summer. It's kind of late now to start. They also felt more confident about the paper recycling plant. The brick kiln proposal can be revisited next year depending on how this effort progresses. The land for both these efforts has been promised by the panchayat leader. The land for the paper recycling plant is about 2-3 acres and adjacent to the huts we were sitting in. The community mentioned that there was government/panchayat land all around and it won't be a problem accessing it. Then we discussed how all the processed paper goods have to be transported to various locations in Chennai and its kind of far off, so would a vehicle be necessary – they agreed that it is necessary and decided a three wheeler 'tempo' would be ideal and it might be tough to start without a vehicle. We then discussed training resources. In addition to help from Geetha, Bharathi trust is also taking responsibility in identifying help from the government's SSITI (Small Scale Industries Training Institute). In terms of training and resources for the brick kiln, Krishnan mentioned that there is a contact person in Cuddalore who has agreed to come down and set up the whole thing for the community when needed. In terms of hands on training, there are a few released bonded laborers from brick kilns who in conjunction with this community can ramp up the training and operation of the kiln. This prompted me to ask if the rice mill bonded laborers are averse to the job and rice mills now, how the brick kiln laborers will be able to do it after such a traumatic experience in their lives with brick kilns. The members of the community responded by saying that the hesitancy is about going back to the same mode of an unknown employer rather than the nature of work. So, if it was a community owned initiative, the nature of work will not be a concern as long as the requisite training is available. Some of the brick kiln laborers would also move into this settlement and they can train the other folks to make the bricks. They explained how they picked up training with agricultural tasks.

### **Return back home**

After having a delicious vegetarian lunch at the village, we were on our way back to the Thiruvallur railway station. Siddamma mentioned how even the brick kiln initiative can be started in a smaller venture rather than a whole chamber being built. The baking technique involved in piling bricks and heating from underneath might not be efficient, but is very low cost in investment. From the Thiruvallur station, my mother and I caught the train back to Chennai.