

Asha Site-Visit Report

Chilla, Thiruvananthapuram

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Background

Chilla is a small home for children of sex-workers in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The project was conceived and executed mainly by a dedicated couple, Anil and Roja. Till recently, they were living with the children, bringing them up along with their own child. The main goal of Chilla is to provide a true home for children of sex-workers who otherwise face stigma and the dangers of the street. They do this while allowing the children to continue being emotionally close to their mothers. About a dozen children live at this home, and a smaller number of children (many of whom used to live there) are supported by Chilla, while they live at other orphanages, with distant relatives, or in some cases, with their mothers. Mothers have access to their children, and they often do visit the children and even take them back with them during holidays.

Asha (Asha Urbana-Champaign and prior to that Asha Princeton) has been supporting Chilla for several years. But due to organizational issues, a few years back Chilla became independent of the original NGO that had ownership of the project, and since then has had difficulty obtaining foreign funds. Chilla has not received support from Asha since end of 2009, as they have been waiting for ANANNIA (the registered organization that was set up to run Chilla) to obtain FCRA prior permission. The last transfer from Asha in 2009 was via Sangama, an organization in Bangalore which had stepped in to temporarily take charge of the project; at the ground it was still run by Anil and Roja. While the site-visit was made, Anil and Roja were expecting the prior permission to arrive in a month or so. (Finally they obtained it by end of October.) Asha had approved funding a couple of times, but have been waiting for the FCRA clearance. Chilla's FCRA application towards the end of 2011 included a letter from Asha promising \$7820.

Meanwhile, they have been under considerable financial strain; Chilla has accrued a fair amount of debt (mostly in the form of interest-free loans from well-wishers) while they have been waiting for FCRA prior permission. Many of the loans are taken out against the promise that Asha (as well as ABC, a small Swedish organization) has promised funds as soon as the FCRA clearance comes through.

Last year Chilla moved to their current location in Karakulam, in the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram, where they managed to buy some property. The main motivation for the move was that new governmental regulations required NGOs housing children to have their own property, large enough to accommodate all the children they are housing. Also, they need not keep moving every few years (not all landlords are sympathetic to having an organization for children of sex-workers running from their property). The money required was raised partly from donations specifically raised for this cause and partly from the real-estate deal in which Chilla bought a larger piece of the land than they needed and resold part of it to individuals (mostly well-wishers, who were interested in forming an organic farming commune).

The Visit

My wife Preethi and I visited Chilla for an afternoon, at their current location.



At Chilla, with the children and Anil (center). On far right is Avani.

Photo credit: Preethi Jyothi.

Anil picked us up from the city in his car. When we reached the home, it was still too early for the children to have returned from school. While waiting for the children, we looked over the building. It is an old house, that has been somewhat renovated. It is habitable, but is fairly spartan and parts of it are in need of renovation. A well-known architect in the city (G. Shankar, of the Habitat Technology Group) has been assisting with providing cost-effective repairs. The house has several small rooms where the boys stay. The house itself looks a little dingy, but is more than compensated for by the scenic "yard" -- more like the edge of a forest -- surrounding it. The girls are accommodated in a building next door, which is not owned by Chilla, but by a group of individuals including Anil and Roja who bought the property along with Chilla's land deal (this is the group who is hoping to start an organic farm commune eventually). Chilla rents this house for Rs. 6,500 a month. This house, which is in much better repair, also accommodates the person in charge of looking after the kids, and has the kitchen for the whole group.



The girls playing and posing for the camera inside the house. The mural on top was done for free by an artist who is friends with Chilla.

An important change to the day-to-day running of Chilla is that now Anil and Roja do not live at the same place as the children. They are renting a place in the city, where they live with their little son. Anil or Roja does visit Chilla virtually every day. Avani, a young woman pursuing her masters degree in engineering had taken over the responsibility of living at Chilla and taking care of the children and their educational needs. As a *resident tutor* is paid Rs. 8,000 per month, and is assisted by an *ayah* and a cook, in addition to Anil and Roja who visit frequently. While this seems to be a satisfactory arrangement for now, with the children evidently enjoying Avani's company, the long term almost-parental bond the children used to form with Roja and Anil will probably be missed.

But being away from the city, some of the older children, who study in the schools in the city have a longer commute. Also, the move has put financial strain on Chilla, as they have acquired some debt that they need to pay off. (Not receiving funds from Asha for operational expenses has compounded the strain on Chilla's finances.)

Another person who is closely involved with Chilla now is Dr. Deepa Gopinath, a lecturer at the College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram (CET). (In fact, the resident tutor Avani is a student of Deepa's, and learnt about Chilla from her.) In an earlier visit, I had met Deepa's brother Prakash and his wife Ranjini, who, after quitting her job as a school teacher for health reasons, used to volunteer at Chilla as a tutor.

Currently there are 3 boys and 7 girls staying in Chilla. In addition, Chilla sponsors the expenses of 7 children who are living at other organizations or with their mothers or relatives. The two oldest children currently in Chilla -- Ayana and Kiran -- have finished twelfth standard. When we visited, Ayana was enrolled in a BA (English) programme, but was hoping to get into a BSc (Nursing) programme. (She did manage to get into the nursing course; see updates below.) We met only one of the boys during the visit.

As Preethi and I were leaving, two sisters who have been at Chilla for several years, arrived with their mother. They had met me several times before and had met Preethi last time we visited Chilla. It was heartening to see that they had great fondness for everything at Chilla, even after leaving the place. It is typical that the children who have left Chilla to stay with their mothers (usually because the mother has a stable life now, without having to depend on sex-work) stay in touch with Anil and Roja and visit them often. Often they are still financially supported by Chilla.

Further Updates

After our visit there have been several noteworthy developments. Following is a summary of these, based on Chilla's newsletter and from a conversation/e-mail exchanges I had with Anil and Deepa.

The resident tutor we met, Avani moved on to a new job, and her sister Aswathy has taken her place at Chilla now. Aswathy has a masters degree (MCom) and is planning to pursue an MPhil degree. She believes that she can continue staying at Chilla while working on her MPhil. Chilla pays her Rs. 8.000 per month.



In front of the house where the girls stay. On far right is Dr. Deepa Gopinath.

They do not have an *ayah* at the moment. They are planning to hire a replacement.

Two students from Thiruvananthapuram Medical College has taken the initiative to start an organic farm on the premises of Chilla. This is still in its initial stages.

Three social work students from Mid Sweden University are currently interning at Chilla for 15 weeks. They visit Chilla for a few hours, 3 days a week, and interact with the children, helping them with developing communication skills (in English).



Emma, Karolina and Silje with girls from Chilla.
Photo from Chilla's newsletter

Ayana managed to get into a BSc (Nursing) course, in Kottayam, a town few hours north of Thiruvananthapuram. She stays in a hostel there, and returns to Chilla on weekends. All her expenses are sponsored by Chilla. Kiran has enrolled in a poly-technic. One of the younger girls has won medals in sports at a regional event, and she is getting some training to develop her talents further.

Chilla has more room in the building housing the boys. They are planning to take in 2 or 3 boys at the beginning of the next academic year.

Some new furniture was made for the children (cots, study table) using timber from the premises.

Deepa is associated the National Service Scheme unit at CET. She helped organize a seven day camp during which the NSS volunteers started building a "multi-purpose study hall" for Chilla using reclaimed plastic bottles and local mud. This was after our visit, so I haven't seen the structure; some [news reports](#) and a [video](#) (in Malayalam) are available on-line. The structure has not been completed yet. The NSS volunteers are on the look out for funds for the roof work and windows/doors. Deepa expects the work to resume after the exams in December.



NSS volunteers constructing a reading hall at Chilla.
Photo from Chilla's newsletter

An important step for the organization has been the approval (prior permission for one-time transfer) from the government under the Foreign Currency Regulation Act (FCRA) to receive funds. This will allow Asha to transfer the funds that were approved in the past. Chilla is now planning to apply for a permanent FCRA approval.

Last year (prior to applying for FCRA permission) Chilla got themselves registered under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act 2006. Currently they are in the process of registering themselves with Kerala government's Board of Control of Orphanages and Other Charitable Homes. This is expected to provide access to funding from government projects in the future.

Final Thoughts

My overall impression of the project remains very positive. Chilla is a small project in terms of the number children it serves, and as such does not have the economies of scale typical of many other projects supported by Asha. However, it sets a rare and excellent model for the quality of life that can be created for the children coming from a most challenging situation. The atmosphere at Chilla is not of an organization, but that of a home. The children have forged emotional ties with Anil and Roja who fill in the void of a family for them. Their association with Chilla is a long-term relationship, lasting well-beyond when they leave Chilla. And the impact of that association literally transforms their lives for the better.

Chilla has always enjoyed the company and best wishes of a collection of progressive minded individuals and groups. This is natural and important given Chilla's goals, which is not just to care for the children of sex-workers, but to ensure that they get their rightful place in the society without any fear of stigma associated with their mothers' background.

I have mixed feelings about the change in the structure of Chilla, with Anil and Roja not staying with the children. Of course, this is a choice that the couple had to make, as a family with a young son. They are still very much committed to Chilla as an organization, as well as attached to the individual children at Chilla. However, in coming years, the new children arriving at Chilla will probably not develop the same level of emotional bonds with the couple.

On the other hand, it bodes well for the future of the organization that the resident-tutor model seems to be working very well. In the past (when the finances were less difficult) Chilla had considered the possibility of replicating their model in other parts of Kerala (specifically, Kozhikode) and in Bangalore; perhaps the least certain variable in that plan was the ability to find a willing person/couple who can dedicate their life to a cause and provide a long-term family for children of sex-workers. The new model, of modestly paid resident tutors (as long as they can find trustworthy and kind individuals) seems like a viable alternative. This could very well be the path that Chilla needs to take before it can reach out to the hundreds of children of sex-workers in the city (and elsewhere) and bring them the same hope that, over the last decade or so, Anil and Roja has brought to a handful of children.