

Site Visit Report - Asha/Anawim(NGO) work in Tiruchendur District, Tamil Nadu

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Visit Dates: 14 – 18 December 2002

Number of Days spent at the site: 4

Number of Asha Centers Visited : 7

Other Activities: Visited about 20 villages (including some Local Municipal Schools and CRY centers), attended a half-day Women's group (representatives from 40 villages) meeting at the Anawim (NGO) offices, attended an Anawim bi-annual Trustee Meeting.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Prof. Rajagopal, (IOI and IIT Chennai), in his recent visit to the US, invited Asha volunteers to visit, learn and report on the education and other activities in the Tiruchendur area. IOI works with the Anawim Trust (an NGO whose scope of activities are described in the report).

Asha in cooperation with IOI has a major investment in this area including support for 7 planned Asha Centers(Silicon Valley, Berkeley, Seattle, MIT, Stanford, WAH and St. Louis) working with the Anawim Trust. The model that they have finally landed on is as follows:

- a) Construct an Asha funded supplemental education center in targeted Dalit villages. This center is to initially conceived and managed by Anawim. The goal of the center is to attract the children of the village in the evening (after school) and to provide them help with homework and a broader set of activities from sports to environment awareness etc.
- b) Form a women's group in the village consisting of a maximum of 20 members. Additional groups may be formed over time if there is an interest. Extend a loan of Rs. 1 lakh (roughly \$2000) to the group for starting a micro-credit operation. Accumulate the interest generated over time for 3 years. In this time frame, the money accumulated should be capable of partially supporting the Asha centers. As the money rotates (to possibly other villages), additional interest generated helps the continuing operations of the center.

The entire Asha effort in this area is through the Anawim Trust. My general impression is that the Anawim Trust is a very good NGO to keep engaged with. The Trustees and Staff seem very committed, transparent and open-minded. They work on all aspects of education and try to get each component separately funded. However, there are some issues that will be discussed in the detailed report that we need to keep in mind.. Since there is a serious attempt at self-sustainability, this model may be very interesting for Asha as we move forward.

Appendix A is a comprehensive financial summary provided by IOI on all Asha related activities. Appendix B is a Proposal for New Asha Centers. Appendix C is a short backgrounder on the Tiruchendur area for those interested in the demographics.

DETAILED REPORT:

The Anawim Trust:

An NGO group started in 1993 to improve local conditions in the Tuticorin District of Tamil Nadu. Registered in Tuticorin in 1997, FCRA clearance in 2000. The Trustees of the organization are:

Mr. John Sekhar - Commissioner of Customs, Chennai
Mr. K. Sundaraj - Retd. Police Sub Inspector, Tuticorin
Mr. G. Rajasekar - Asst. Manager, Air India, Trivandrum
Mr. A. Selwyn - Surveyor, Govt. of Tamil Nadu, Nagercoil
Mrs. Shanthi Devapriam - Director and Secretary, Anawim Trust.

Shanthi manages the operation of Anawim and the women and children programs. Selwyn manages the educational components of the programs on a part time basis. Sundaraj oversees the accounts and manages the FCRA account. Further, Anawim has 6 additional office staff and 28 directly supported teachers (one for each center).

Annual reports 1997-2001 can be made available on request. They run operations to the tune of roughly Rs. 21 lakhs/annum (\$55,000) (audit statement 2001-2002).

Main funding sources for 2001-2002:

• United Churches of Netherlands :	Rs. 5.6 lakhs
• Microcredit Funding	Rs. 4.5 lakhs
• Other Donations	Rs. 2.2 lakhs
• Asha **	Rs. 75,000
• CRY	Rs. 1.25 lakhs
• AEON Foundation (Japanese)	Rs. 75,000
• GTZ Spirulina Program	Rs. 25,000
• SEA Program	Rs. 25,000

** The Asha funding to date has been managed through IOI. Only a portion of the funds are reflected in the Anawim Financial books. The major missing Asha components include:

- Teacher's salaries for all the centers
- Construction costs for the centers
- Books purchased and distributed by IOI (to avail additional concessions)

A separate Financial report is filed by IOI in Appendix A. Proposal for New Asha Centers in Outlined in Appendix B.

Currently, Anawim manages the operations at 28 centers. These include 16 CRY centers, 6 Anawim centers and 6 Asha Centers (plans for a 7th Center to be supported by St. Louis are in progress). The CRY and Anawim programs are done on a smaller scale (no infrastructure for Centers).

Visit to the Sites:

a) Asha Centers:

My trips to each center lasted from 45 minutes to about 2 hours depending on the center. Since I was already acquainted with the teacher and had also met the women's group leaders (President, Secy and Treasurer) at the Anawim center, I concentrated mostly on the children and their activities. At each center, they did a short welcome song/play followed by a general interaction. I was also asked to speak at each center. Once I got the hang of doing this (I hit upon education, sports and tree planting as being the three pillars for development), I found this to be a very useful interaction tool since I just started asking individuals to speak up on various subjects. My takeaways are reported at the end of the center visits.

i. Ganesapuram: *Supported by Asha Silicon Valley:*

This center is currently functioning in a temporary premise. We visited this center twice (once early in the afternoon - 5 pm and then much later in the evening the next day). The village was relatively clean with about 100 families. The children showed up earlier than when the center was actually supposed to open. The new center being constructed right next to the old center and has a reasonable amount of space for playing outside etc. The center is expected to be completed early in 2003. The village children had also been involved with 2 rounds of tree planting. The second round seemed to have died due to lack of water. The first group looked pretty healthy.

I met the teacher at the center both at the Women's group meeting and then at the school. She used to teach at another school. She stated that the reading levels of the children was extremely poor (a 10th grade student performs at the 5th grade level). However, I got the impression that she was extremely competent (without being overbearing) and committed. She also works with the women's group in the village and helps with the functional aspects of the microcredit scheme (which is also ongoing in this village). **The real challenge is to retain such committed facilitators in the village to continue to help both the children and the general health of the village.**

The children ranged from all 1st to the 12th grade. There were supposed to be 62 children that attend the center. About 40 showed up. When I went

back to the center the second time, the overwhelming question (especially from the children in the 12th grade - I think there were 3-4 girls - most of them in accounting - was means of employment. I did not have any convincing answers. Anawim seems to just start coming to grips with this issue.

ii. *Kulashekarapattinam: Supported by Asha Berkeley*

This seemed to be a very mature center (the womens group also seemed more mature in its approach towards the NGO and its expectations). There was a better sense of self reliance. The village is one of the bigger villages that I visited and is the home of some of the Anawim Trust employees/trustees.

Interestingly, the current Asha center building was started in 1947 by some ex-servicemen. There were over 50 children from the village who were at the center. There is enough space outside the center for play activities. With the support of Anawim, the children have also constructed a fence made with thatch material to give them some privacy and to prevent stray animals (goats etc.) from walking in while they are in session.

The teacher/Coordinator belongs to the village (another important aspect), is retired, and has returned to give back to the community. The community is almost entirely Christian and so is the teacher. So, here is an issue that we need to table openly. I was told that they do have Bible study classes in the evening at the center to start the evening(they did not do so the day I visited since they had exams the following day and wanted to present some skits etc). The children also sing secular national songs etc before they begin their evening activities. I do not personally believe that this should be seen in any negative light. However, we need to be cognizant of this.

The children put up a couple of skits with morals on environment, family and development. It was very creative and they are very well trained. They have also been involved in tree planting and other activities. I saw evidence of this around the center and also on a few other streets in the village. They also have a self- managed savings/loan and contribution scheme (to teach them aspects of money management). The contributions run to the order of Rs. 1/week. They ran their weekly meeting to discuss some of their previous resolutions. They document all this in a notebook (including the savings/loan and contributions) and leafing through the book I did get the impression that they did this regularly and sincerely and were not just putting up a show for visitors. I came away with the strong

impression that the teacher is invaluable in this center and her commitment and creativity showed through.

Once again, there were a few students in the 11th and 12th standard (mostly girls). Most of them did indicate that they wanted to go to college. The question of jobs and employment came up again.

iii. Nathakulam: *Supported by Asha Stanford*

The current center is a temporary structure along a lake (and hence the name for the village). The village seemed to have a very long road and the center was at one end of it. The Center's teacher and Women's group stated that there were some problems with children feeling safe etc. returning from the center late in the evening but that they now escort all of the smaller children back home from the centers. There were about 50 children when we visited (late in the evening).

The Teacher/Coordinator was an extremely creative person. I had met her earlier in the Women's group meeting. She cared for the village children and also the Womens groups and seemed to have the knack to get things done for them even at the local Panchayat/Collectors office. Next door to the temporary center was the house of a retired gentleman who also keeps an eye on the center and was introduced to me as a person who cares greatly for the center and its future.

Since it was a little late in the evening, the children seemed a little preoccupied with their exams (next day). They put up a good skit sang some nice songs. There were several girls and a few boys in the 11th-12th grade (some of them in the Computer Science and Biology stream and a few in Accounting). I came away with the impression that there were several very intelligent children with a lot of potential. Also, the Center's Coordinator is absolutely a critical component here.

Anawim has been working on getting space approved for a permanent Center. I was informed that 2 Self Help Groups were functional. I feel that with the involvement of the interested people in the village, the Center should be constructed as soon as possible. This will really help the motivation of the children and the Teacher and the Self Help groups.

iv. Valasubramaniapuram: *Supported by Asha - WAH*

The first things that struck me about this Center was that its Coordinator was leaving and that WAH projects are treated just like any other Chapter funded project. The recurring theme is that the Coordinator is a critical component and we have no real means of retaining them unless they are either from the same village or retired people resettled in the village. I did

meet with the outgoing Coordinator who did seem to be a fine gentleman. He has got a job as a teacher in a regular school.

Currently, Robin, one of the Anawim employees helps out with keeping the Center functional. It was unclear to me how often they could keep the Center open without a regular coordinator. I was also told that they have interviewed candidates and that they will make an appointment soon.

The children seemed to be quite enthusiastic and have clearly benefited from the efforts of the outgoing Coordinator. They performed a couple of short skits relating to the environment and also sang some songs. There were a couple of children in the 11th and 12th grades. The children had also been involved with several tree planting efforts. The Center seemed to be well maintained and stacked with all some play material and other goodies for the children. They did ask for additional play material while we were there.

I was also informed that there was one active self-help women's group. However, they are not currently able to absorb all of the microcredit money and so the money is being offered to other villages with the interest benefits accruing to this Center.

In conclusion, **there is a real danger that these Centers can fall apart if there is no Coordinator or a plan to manage one in the interim period when a Coordinator leaves. Also, I have some reservations with both the complete self-sustainability model and the self-management of the centers by the Self-Help groups.** I think continued NGO involvement seems to be necessary (even if it is at a minimal level).

v. **Kurangantattu - *Supported by Asha Seattle***

This is a village with about 90 houses. The center has been active for 2 years and has 67 children who attend the center. The center is has play items and quite a few books. The village has no school. Both the Balvadi and the regular schools are at least 6 km away. There were training classes held for girls to ride bicycles so that they could attend school. There were 4 children in high school. The children have also undergone training in book binding at the Anawim Center. The children were able to communicate confidently and looked like they were very happy being at the Center.

The women's group is also active. The micro-credit scheme is operational and Rs 1,00,000 has been disbursed. Since we were short of time and due

to the exams the next day, we spent less time here than at the other centers.

I walked away with the impression that this was a good functional center and once again this can be attributed to the Coordinator. The Coordinator now visits the local school that the children attend. This was actually initiated by the local school teacher who was quite impressed with the progress that the children attending the Asha Center were making.

vi. Melatonipalem - *Supported by Asha MIT*

This is a very small village with only about 45 families. There is a Women's Self Help Group that is functional. The Center is in a state of flux since the Coordinator has left. There have been other issues with this center including even getting a power connection. Currently, they are borrowing power from the temple next door. This brings up another tricky problem with the general legal organization of all centers which we will discuss in the conclusions section.

Several children showed up at the center. However, I was not sure if they did that on a regular basis given the lack of a teacher and power issues. I was informed by the Anawim person that the children did meet next door at a Women's Group Representative's house. **The state of affairs here did convince me about the importance of a committed Coordinator at each of these Centers.**

vii. Thaneerpandal - *support requested from Asha St. Louis.*

This is also a very small village with about 40 families. There is currently a temporary rented facility where the children get together. This is a very small facility and when I visited, it was totally packed. However, I was told that this village is extremely committed to getting space and with Asha's support, they would like to get an Asha Center. There was a Coordinator who is relatively new. I got the impression that the children were attending the Center regularly. They had been involved with a strong tree planting effort. I was showed several trees planted in the village and also on the main road entrance.

Also, the Women's self-help group showed up and requested the funds for a center. I got the impression that the infrastructure in this village was worse than some of the other villages that I had visited. I also had the impression that the self-help group was not as mature as some of the others in terms of what their own responsibilities were. I was told that this was very common when these groups get started. They build their confidence only over a period of time.

While I feel strongly that a Center in this village would be very beneficial, we need to make sure that there are enough families to justify it and to ensure its eventual self-sustainability.

viii. Mangalvadi - support requested from NYC/NJ

This is currently an independent center located in the village. The micro-credit schemes are functional here and the village leadership seems to be very strong. Space for the Asha Center has been identified and has been secured. I was told that the design work for the center is underway. The children at this Center interacted very well. They had a garden that was doing very well. They had attended some of the Anawim seminars on herbal gardening etc. and seemed to be following through with a lot of enthusiasm. There were a few girl students in the 11th and 12th grade.

General Remarks on Asha Centers Visits:

- The general impression on the work of Anawim at the Asha Centers is favorable.
- Putting down infrastructure in the form of a Center has several benefits:
 - (i) It provides a safe place for children to come to, spend time and engage in active, useful learning
 - (ii) It provides the people in the village some hope for their children. It is a powerful symbol whose effects are evident
 - (iii) It provides women in the self-help groups a sense of responsibility and social commitment since it is stressed that they are eventually responsible for the Center
- An extremely important element in the Centers is the ability to recruit and retain good Coordinators. For a salary of Rs. 2000/month, it seems to be a reasonable proposition in these villages. We must accept the fact there will be turnovers. Substitute teachers to overcome this issue may be a solution if we start supporting more Centers.
- There is also the issue of the registration of these Centers and who they belong to. It turns out that today they belong to the village. In the absence of a formal entity in the village, there are practical problems such as securing electricity connection etc. Anawim plans to have this written over to their trust as a way to solve this. I am not comfortable with this but cannot yet think of a good alternative either.

b) CRY Centers

We visited 2 CRY centers. These are of a much smaller scale since they are operated out of smaller structures. They seemed to be well attended. I sensed that Anawim wants to have more Asha-type Centers since there are additional components including the buildings and some emphasis on self-sustainability.

c) Other Activities:

Other visits: Anawim Office, Anawim Farm House, Spirulina Making Facility, Rain Harvesting Tanks, Toilets Constructed by Anawim in Villages, Women's Cooperative for Palm Leaf Products. I also attended a Anawim Trustee bi-annual meeting as an invited guest. All trustees were present. All projects were reviewed and a few new ideas and suggestions were discussed.

I also attended a Women's group training meeting which is attended by all office bearers of the Self Help groups (they have a President, Secretary and a Treasurer in each of the groups). This meeting is held every two months at the Anawim Center. In addition to discussing mutual issues, this provides a forum to provide additional training, to invite speakers on specific topics of interest and for them to interact and learn. I think it is a wonderful forum and my observation was that the women seemed very happy to be there. This provides a mutual support system and helps in building confidence among the women. Since the goal is for them to be responsible for the Asha Centers in the long run, I think it is important that they have tools of decision making and implementation skills.

APPENDIX A – FINANCIAL SUMMARY FROM IOI ON ASHA CENTERS

Submitted by: INTERNATIONAL OCEAN INSTITUTE

**FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (INDIA)
IIT MADRAS, CHENNAI – 600 036**

ASHA MIT PROJECT (2000 – 2002)

Village: MELATHONIPALAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2001

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	2,500	By Construction cost of Asha Centre	1,865
“ Second Installment of Funds received	2,500	“ Capital for Micro Credit	944
“ Amount transferred from Central Fund	527	“ Educational Aids, Books	348
“ Excess expenses	61	“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	121
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator’s salary	1,134
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	717
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	459
Total	5,588	Total	5,588

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

Note:

Though the project ended on 31.12.2001, the village women’s group is now running the centre. A sum of \$ 527 was given as microcredit to the women’s group from the Central Fund to enable them to sustain the centre.

ASHA SEATTLE PROJECT (2000 – 2003)
Village: KURANGANTHATTU

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	2,500	By Construction cost of Asha Centre	2,284
“ Second installment of Funds received	3,500	“ Capital for Micro Credit	2,106
“ Third Installment of Funds received	5,000	“ Educational Aids, Books	459
		“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	128
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator salary	1,310
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	1,035
		“ Providing Vocational Skills	959
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	880
		“ Advance to Anawim trust for current expenses	647
		Central Fund	
		“ Contribution to Central fund	500
		“ Balance	692
Total	11,000	Total	11,000

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

Note: This was started as a 2-Year project and later converted into a Microcredit-linked one.

ASHA WAH PROJECT (2001 -)
Village: VALASUBRAMANIAPURAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	5,500	By Construction cost of Asha Centre	2,755
“ Second installment of Funds received	5,500	“ Capital for Micro Credit	2,150
		“ Educational Aids, Books	500
		“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	110
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator salary	831
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	256
		“ Providing Vocational Skills	690
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	1,224
		“ Advance to Anawim trust for current expenses	712
		Central Fund	
		“ Contribution to Central fund	500
		“ Balance	1,272
Total	11,000	Total	11,000

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

ASHA BERKELEY PROJECT (2002 -)
Village: KULASEKHARAPATTINAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	3,000	By Construction cost of Asha Centre	2,394
“ Excess expenses	3,539	“ Capital for Micro Credit	1,754
		“ Educational Aids, Books	119
		“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	86
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator salary	413
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	263
		“ Providing Vocational Skills	39
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	72
		“ Advance to Anawim trust for current expenses	899
		Central Fund	
		“ Contribution to Central fund	500
Total	6,539	Total	6,539

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

Note: The second installment of US\$ 3,000 received in January 2003 has not been included here. Taking it into account, there is still an excess expenditure of US\$539.

ASHA SILICON VALLEY PROJECT (2002 -)
Village: GANESAPURAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	3,000	By Advance for Construction cost of Asha Centre	1,563
“ Excess expenses	1,774	“ Capital for Micro Credit	2,084
		“ Educational Aids, Books	247
		“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	84
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator salary	417
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	146
		“ Providing Vocational Skills	36
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	41
		“ Advance to Anawim trust for current expenses	156
Total	4,774	Total	4,774

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

ASHA STANFORD PROJECT (2002 -)
Village: NATHAKULAM

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
		Fixed Costs	
To First Installment of Funds received	4,000	By Advance for Construction cost of Asha Centre	513
“ Excess expenses	176	“ Capital for Micro Credit	2,053
		“ Educational Aids, Books	156
		“ Recreation & Sports Materials, Bicycles	41
		Recurring Costs	
		“ Full-time Coordinator salary	205
		“ Providing Nutritional Supplement	59
		“ Providing Vocational Skills	12
		“ Training, Field visits and Competitions, Travel, etc	57
		“ Advance to Anawim trust for current expenses	580
		Central Fund	
		“ Contribution to Central Fund	500
Total	4,176	Total	4,176

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

Note: The second installment of US\$ 3,000 received in January 2003 has not been included here.

ASHA PROJECTS CENTRAL FUND

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS AS ON 31.12.2002

Receipts	US\$	Payments	US\$
To Amount transferred from			
- Asha Seattle Project	500	By Amount transferred to Asha MIT Project for Micro Credit	527
- Asha WAH Project	500	“ Purchase of computer	1,046
- Asha Berkeley Project	500	“ Balance	427
- Asha Stanford Project	500		
Total	2000	Total	2,000

Accountant

Prof.R.Rajagopalan
Director, IOI India

Note on the Central Fund: A sum of US\$ 500 from each project is placed in the Central Fund to be used for

- Maintenance of and improvement in the infrastructure of the Asha Centre (including the building, solar lamps, etc.)
- **Purchase of common items like computers, software, etc.**
- **Organising common training programmes (for example, computer awareness, examination coaching, spoken English, etc.)**
- **Setting up a book bank for school text books**
- **Fund for helping deserving students to meet urgent needs like school uniforms, payment of examination fees, etc.**
- Combined activities like cultural festivals, tours, etc.
- Loans to women’s groups to run Centre when unexpected problems arise
- Coordination, monitoring and evaluation: one supervisor (salary and office expenses, local travel, etc.) when the number of villages exceeds five.
- Contingency expense in any Centre

APPENDIX B : PROPOSAL FOR FUTURE ASHA CENTERS

ANAWIM TRUST, TIRUCHENDUR

IN ASSOCIATION WITH IOI INDIA AT IIT MADRAS

PROPOSAL TO ASHA CHAPTERS FOR SETTING UP ASHA JUNIOR CENTRES IN DALIT VILLAGES OF TAMIL NADU

(LINKING CHILDREN'S CENTRE WITH MICROCREDIT FOR WOMEN)

REVISED BUDGET (JANUARY 2003)

S.No.	Item	Budget Amount (US\$)
	Fixed Costs	
1.	Cost of Asha Centre	2200
2.	Micro credit	2300
3	Educational aids, books	600
4	Recreation and sports material, bicycles	300
	Recurring Costs for 3 years	
1.	Full-time organiser's salary	1000
2.	Providing nutritional supplement	1100
3.	Providing vocational skills (including computer training)	700
4.	Training, field visits, competitions, herbal garden, etc.	850
5.	Miscellaneous items (replenishment of basic items, magazines, newspapers, etc.)	450
	Contribution to Central Fund	500
	Total	10000

Note on the Central Fund: A sum of US\$ 500 from each project is placed in the Central Fund to be used for

- Maintenance of and improvement in the infrastructure of the Asha Centre (including the building, solar lamps, etc.)
- **Purchase of common items like computers, software, etc.**
- **Organising common training programmes (for example, computer awareness, examination coaching, spoken English, etc.)**
- **Setting up a book bank for school text books**
- **Fund for helping deserving students to meet urgent needs like school uniforms, payment of examination fees, etc.**
- Combined activities like cultural festivals, tours, etc.
- Loans to women's groups to run Centre when unexpected problems arise
- Coordination, monitoring and evaluation: one supervisor (salary and office expenses, local travel, etc.) when the number of villages exceeds six.
- Contingency expense in any Centre

APPENDIX C : SOME FACTOIDS ON THE TIRUCHENDUR AREA

Tiruchendur District of Tamil Nadu is a coastal district in the southern part of the State. There are several ways to get there from Chennai and Tiruvanandapuram. The most convenient are overnight trains from Chennai to Tutocorin or Tirunelveli and then local buses (about an hour or so from each place).

There are a few interesting things about that area. I found this region to have a considerable Hindu, Muslim and Christian presence and influence. Of course Tiruchendur is a Hindu holy site with a very impressive Murugan temple. Kayalpattinam, about half hour from Tiruchendur is a predominantly Muslim town which is a trading community. Manappad is an old Portuguese settlement and has a strong Christian presence (with a great lighthouse and an old church built in 1540). There are several other churches whose spires dominate the landscape in Manappad.

I was also told that these communities lived in relative harmony over the centuries. There is agriculture, lime-making from sea shells(I visited some of the kilns), palm leaf products (the Manappad Women's Cooperative is functional from the 1950s).

Outside Manappad, I was showed a 900 year old tree (called a Papparapuli tree) which was supposedly gifted by a sea-trading African community. There were several other signs that this area has had an active sea-trading history with other countries for several centuries.

The Dalit community in the area is interspersed within these other major communities. Some of these communities have converted to Christianity since the establishment of the Portuguese settlement. However, majority of the Dalit villages are still very underdeveloped and poor compared to the other communities surrounding them. They are usually landless and work on the fields of the landowners (usually from higher caste villages) or do odd jobs in the bigger villages and towns. I was also told that the system of making Dalits remove their shirts and chappals when they enter a higher caste village is no longer practiced. Also the "two-tumbler" system or the system of giving water to Dalits using a separate set of water glasses is also no longer practiced. However, several villagers did tell me that they cannot still get water from wells belonging to the higher class communities.