

HUT Site Visit

Summer 2006

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Please note that the project for which the HUT NGO is currently requesting funding is a brand new one and doesn't exist yet. However, in Summer 2006, I visited closely related HUT projects.

HUT and a few other other NGOs operating in Tiruchirapalli and neighboring districts were mentioned to me by acquaintances when I visited my home town in the Summer of 2006. They worked on a diverse variety of missions from runaway children to women's empowerment to sustainability education to promotion of civic engagement. The only thing they had in common was that they were (a) secular NGOs, not funded by any religious organizations, atleast not routinely (b) had managed to retain a social worker/volunteer base for more than 5 years.

I visited a random selection of these NGOs - I did not choose HUT for any specific reason other than (a) and (b) above.

In particular, I visited 2 facilities run by HUT: a matriculation school (1-10 grade) school in Mannachanallur (Tiruchi district) and the AIDS home about 50 miles away in Perambalur (Perambalur district). The former is an inexpensive school which attempts to provide relatively high quality education to kids from very poor and rural backgrounds. The latter is essentially a free sanatorium that provides nutritious food, a clean and peaceful, stigma-free environment and treatment for opportunistic infections for very poor or destitute AIDS patients for 15 day periods.

HUT has operated in the area for about 10 years at least and has been involved in a variety of projects some of which have been successful and others have not. But the HUT NGO itself has continued on energetically. The NGO is run by a doctor family (husband and wife, the Venkatesh's) who have devoted their lives to social work. The tradition seems to be atleast 2 generations old and was begun by Dr. Venkatesh's parents. They are older, but still active and their 2 other daughters are also social workers (teachers). They are very energetic and pragmatic. Also from what I saw, they appear to have a high level of integrity in holding themselves accountable and listening carefully to their donors, beneficiaries, partners and co-workers.

For their AIDS related work, they have been funded by the TamilNadu AIDS control society and another Canadian NGO. They have faced and are holding sway against a host of difficulties in their AIDS related work, from the low availability to govt subsidized ARDS, social stigma, retention of employees, being once nearly thrown out of their facility because the neighbors did not like living close to an AIDS home etc. An example showing the level of the stigma: when I visited the AIDS home with my 6 and 3 year old, the patients were so surprised and overjoyed because no one lets any kids get near them (including their own families!)

Other projects and close partner-projects that seemed very interesting and show the extent of HUT's networking, involvement and knowledge of the community and willingness to try original, perhaps risky approaches are:

- (i) A type of health insurance cooperative for the rural poor around Mannachannallur - essentially for the communities that the matriculation school serves.
- (ii) The "positive peoples network" a close partner NGO consisting

of HIV positive people: a large support group who work towards prevention of AIDS, AIDS related education in sensitive populations including sex workers and truck drivers as well as the general population, dispelling unscientific fears and stigma.

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