
**Site Visit Report: Jeevan Gnanodaya (JG)
Chengalpattu District, Tamil Nadu**

Project URL: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=84>

Photos from the site visit: <http://picasaweb.google.com/shankar84/JeevanGnanodaya>

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1. Getting There

It was one of those days in Chennai when the city (especially the suburbs) gets crippled with knee-deep water and muddy roads in the midst of pouring rains, courtesy of a cyclonic depression off the coast, quite typical of this time of the year. I reached Chengalpattu around 11:00 AM. I had taken my dad's car, and the drive (which was pretty scenic) took close to 1¾ hours. It is possible that one can reach Chengalpattu much faster on a day it is not raining or if you manage to start early and stay away from the morning rush. This was not a surprise visit, Mr. Devarajan knew about it two days in advance.

My first stop was at a home which in every right is the center of all action in this project. I was greeted at the entrance by Mr. Devarajan and his son, Jeevan. This is where both of them live – though they don't really have a great deal of personal space for themselves, even literally. Also waiting for my arrival was a freelance journalist from Chennai who had known this project for many years – Mr. Devarajan introduced her as one of the very few who had seen the project “grow” from a beginning with just five students 19 years ago. She was there on that day to teach English at JG's primary school so the kids get some exposure to English. She volunteers for about two days a week (of late) to do this. I also briefly met Mrs. Renuka, who is the headmistress at the school (for the deaf). Mr. Devarajan informed me that the state government had ordered all schools to be closed for the day (due to heavy rains) and that I will not get to see the day scholars as some of them come from far off. I would however get to see classes in action in all centers – the deaf school, ITI and the primary school. The classes were to be attended by students residing in the hostel and by whoever could make it to school on that day².

2. Jeevan Gnanodaya Industrial Training Institute

From here, we headed to visit JG's Industrial Training Institute (ITI). This institute has two teachers; one of them (Mr. Murthy) was on leave. I got to meet Mr. Vijayan, who is an engineering graduate and also holds an MBA degree. The ITI has 36 students, 18 each in the first and second year. Though a regular academic year would begin only around June, students at the ITI are brought in as early as April each year in order to help bridge any academic gaps that may be present for students joining the ITI from outside. Students from JG are expected to have a smooth transition into the ITI after their 10th. This was pretty evident to me. Of all the students present on that day, four were from JG – in the sense that they had completed their schooling from Class 1 at JG – and all of them could speak³ or utter words while the rest could only show gestures in reply to my questions. On that day, there were about 22 boys and 4 girls. One of the boys, I was

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² I must mention that none of the classes I saw were “normally scheduled”, but staged for the benefit of the site visit. The students had got done with their half-yearly examinations only on that day and the holidays were beginning the next day. I however tried to reduce the “staged effect” by making my interactions with students pretty informal and by asking questions outside of whatever had been planned for the day by JG's teachers.

³ Though they spoke, I wasn't able to decipher all of it. I was told that there is usually a learning curve involved, typically a few days, before one could understand them fully.

told, was partly blind in addition to hearing impairment but still manages to fare at par with others. I spoke to a few of them, with assistance from Mr. Vijayan and Mr. Devarajan. I got to see the various stuff taught to the students in the practical classes – marking, cutting, drilling, turning, filing etc. I was also showed the final versions of what students from the previous batch had done. The work (mainly various complicated shapes in metal) seemed pretty impressive. The students were visibly excited about my visit and one of them asked about myself, where I was from, what I do etc. The ITI follows the regular ITI syllabus prescribed by the central government; I got to see the text books they use. It is worth mentioning here that since Central board question papers are only in English and Hindi, ITI students (especially those joining JG just for this) face an additional hurdle of mastering the bare minimum knowledge of English to pass the examinations. The results of the examination JG's students had taken in March/April 2007 (check this) had just come in – it showed a 100% pass rate (a total of 7 students took the exam).

I was also shown how a typical instruction class (lecture) would look like. The students were taught about projections of objects – top view, side view, front view etc. and students were asked to draw these projections of a given object. I went up and asked them questions of my own, mainly in the areas of geometry and projections. The students were enthusiastic and gave suitable replies to whatever I asked.

3. Jeevan Gnanodaya Nursery and Primary School

We then stopped at Jeevan Gnanodaya's school for primary children. This is not something any Asha chapter funds, but we decided to stop there nevertheless since it was on our way back. Students who come here do *not* have hearing loss, they're 'normal'. The school has 7 teachers, 1 headmistress, 2 ayahs, 1 watchman and a driver. The school is managed entirely with the money collected from students (which is a nominal Rs.30 per month per child), and from the money in JG's trust account. I visited grades 1 through 5 and most of the kids seemed really excited about my visit. This was a rather hurriedly visited place for two reasons – I was more interested in visiting the school for the deaf and didn't want to run out of time, and also, it was past the students' usual lunch time by the time I reached the place, and I didn't want to have them skip lunch and wait for me to have casual interactions with them. I did however manage to visit classes from kindergarten through 5th grade, spending about five minutes in each class, asking the kids questions and taking photographs. The kids seemed energetic, and capable of answering my questions.

Aside: I learnt that this school had been closed down for around a year in 2004 by the Tamil Nadu government since it failed to meet some safety regulations that the government had made compulsory. This was an aftermath of the Kumbakonam school fire accident, which many of us may be aware of, that claimed the lives of 92 children. The school had closed down then, and made use of the time to construct proper roofing, and get the state government's recognition. This is something which Asha should perhaps keep in mind for all of our schools – it turns out that though the laws are in place, they're not necessarily enforced all the time. Just two days later, in another site visit, I learnt about a balwadi school that had been functioning under a thatched roof till as late as September 2007. It does not exist today, and was lost in another fire accident. Thankfully, the saving grace is that no lives were lost. As a personal opinion, Asha (or anyone else) must not entertain proposals that blatantly violate safety norms, just because they're low-cost or 'urgent'. We should instead take efforts to educate project partners about anything, including issues such as children's safety, they might have ignored while instituting the project.

We headed to lunch from here. The students were served vegetarian food, and included biriyani, fruits and sweets. The sweet was there probably because it was the school's last working day before Christmas vacations began. I was told, by some of the students, that Mr. Devarajan himself is a good cook. The school has two cooks to coordinate the kitchen every day; Mr. Devarajan assists them as well. Apart from lunch, which is served for everyone, hostel students also get breakfast at 7:30 AM, tea and snacks at 5:00 PM and dinner at night.

4. Jeevan Gnanodaya School for the Deaf

Post-lunch, we set out to see the classes in Jeevan Gnanodaya's school for the deaf. This has around 130 students, of which 36 are girls. Around 90 stay in the hostel, the remaining are day scholars. Day scholars come from distances as far as 50 kms, and JG's van (while it was functioning⁴) used to pick up students from various pickup points – Tambaram, Mahabalipuram, Kalpakkam etc. All students receive 100% free education. The school has 14 teachers, including one headmistress (Mrs. Renuka), two cooks and one watchman. One of the teachers also assumes warden duties in the hostel.

The school has classes from kindergarten to Class X, and follows the Tamil Nadu state board syllabus. All of the instruction is in Tamil. The teaching technique used is a mixture of gestures, signs (locally developed, nothing standard like the American Sign Language) and lip-reading. The emphasis is to get children to speak, as signs and gestures are not necessarily understood by everyone. This is, I was told, missing in other government schools where students do not go beyond showing gestures. Also, the students admitted to this school are mostly *completely or almost completely* deaf, and hence faces a bigger challenge in getting students to speak. Keeping that in mind, it becomes often difficult to compare the results seen in some of the city schools to what one can see at Jeevan Gnanodaya. Many of the city schools (privately owned) admit students who are only 10% or 20% deaf and are therefore capable of achieving much better results in getting students to speak. Not to mention, city schools also enjoy the comforts of expensive equipments and therapy techniques, which students can seem to afford, unlike in this case. The school does not recruit any doctor or other medical help to improve the speech of students; only the regular doctor visits happen as and when the need arises.

The teachers are paid a starting salary of Rs.2500 per month and increases with time. The headmistress' salary is Rs.7500 per month. Apart from this, the teachers also receive other benefits like insurance and PF. I asked a 10th grade teacher, a young (unmarried) woman who is trying to complete her post graduate studies via correspondence, why she chose to work for the school. She said it was purely because of her own interest. Not that everyone's reason should be the same, but not many of JG's teachers have migrated elsewhere in the past. The last ones to leave (three left around a year back) left this job because they got government postings. Two teachers have left in the past to pursue higher studies (B.Ed.).

A typical graduate (10th pass out) from this school will be able to speak in Tamil, although it might take a few days for people to understand their pronunciation. However, experience is that they don't receive good jobs with just a 10th grade certificate. Students in the past have only managed to find menial jobs (watchman, sweeper etc.) or just don't do anything. One student has gone on to become a drawing teacher in some school, but the success story pretty much ends there. This gap between education and reality for these children is what urged Mr. Devarajan to start the ITI. Skills learnt at the ITI are able to help students find respectable jobs at factories⁵. It is part of a larger plan of Mr. Devarajan to start a spinning factory himself and employ JG graduates there itself. This, whenever it happens, is good because the students feel much at home with Mr. Devarajan and also stand chances of earning more with him.

5. Jeevan Gnanodaya's Van

Mr. Devarajan used to own a van that was pretty important to the functioning of the project. As mentioned earlier, the ITI, the hostel and JG's primary school for 'normal' children are located at three different places, and the van undertakes the task of shuttling students across between centers many times during a day. The van's functions mainly include:

1. Getting day scholars to (the deaf) school: Saves walking time (equivalent to an hour's driving time) for the students. One trip in the morning and one in the evening for drop back.
2. Shuttling ITI students to ITI and back. (also during lunch time)
3. Shuttling kids from the primary school to the lunch place during lunch time.
4. Other miscellaneous errands.

⁴ For more about the van, see Section 5.

⁵ This doesn't mean to say that the education received up till 10th grade goes waste. That is necessary so that students can understand whatever is being taught at the ITI.

The van however no longer exists. It grew very old and unusable that they got rid of it (sold it to someone). I was told that getting a new van is their highest priority at the moment.

Post-site visit update (Jan. 13 2008): They had been using a minivan as a makeshift arrangement until the new van arrives. Mr. Devarajan told me that even that has broken down in the rains and so, day scholars are now either walking to the school, or staying at times in the hostel, or in days of difficulties (rain etc.) do not go to school at all.

6. Wrapping up

Following my visit to the deaf school, there was a (very impressive) cultural program by the students, mainly consisting of dances and music. It might make sense to go through some of the site visit photographs rather than trying to capture it in words. Hearing aids (behind the ear type) were given away to the ITI students and pocket-type hearing aids were given away to smaller children.

The drive back to Chennai was quite an adventure. Some (presumably small) dam near Chengalpattu had broken (I was told so) in the day-long rains and water was almost everywhere, even in the inside of my car, till the outskirts of Chengalpattu. As if that was not enough, an intense traffic jam faithfully held me captive in the car for an extra hour and a half. The only thing that kept me going through the painfully slow drive was the pointless drivel on Radio Mirchi and Suryan FM. No prizes for guessing what I was thankful for during every minute of that piece of entertainment!

7. The road ahead

Looking back, the project has come a very long way. Today, apart from Asha's funding, the main source of funds for the day-to-day functioning of the project comes from the Jeevan Gnanodaya trust, which is capable of generating 25 lakh rupees every year, purely from donations. The JG donor base (mainly Chennai and around) is around 70 people strong, who have grown over the years to become committed and reliable donors for the project. All donors are invited for the school's Annual Day, celebrated on 31st March every year. The trust receives (undoubtedly generous) donations from these people exactly once every year – Mr. Devarajan does not ask for more. Apart from helping with the part of the schools' recurring expenses, the JG trust takes credit for the following:

1. Contribution to ITI construction costs: 35 lakhs (in addition to 7 lakhs from Asha)
2. Nursery and Primary School:
 - a. Land purchase: 18 lakhs
 - b. Building construction: 13 lakhs
 - c. Recognition: 3 lakhs
3. Proposed marriage hall project (to drive JG into self-sustenance):
 - a. Land purchase: 1.75 crores (including a bank loan for about 20 lakhs or so)
 - b. Construction expenses (in progress): 1 crore

This trust is however not something they can rely on forever. Mr. Devarajan admits that the donations pour in purely for his name and the goodwill he has developed with the donors over the years. There is absolutely no guarantee (in fact, it seems unrealistic) that the goodwill and trust will continue when someone else takes over the management. So, JG's road ahead is clearly marked out – become self-sustained and in addition to that, Mr. Devarajan wishes to make his spinning yarn dream a reality. This will take care of employment opportunities for the graduates from the ITI. Also, as a part of the self-sustenance plan, Mr. Devarajan wants to grow vegetables needed for the school himself, which could be a cost-cutting measure in the long run. Mr. Devarajan wishfully remarks:

“We have come a really long way, and it has taken 18 years to come here. If the marriage hall and factory fall in place, we will soon become self sustained in a year's time and my students can find work easily after the ITI, and there could not be anything more satisfying than that. We will also not ask for Asha or any other support after that. If this is not done, the work done in the last 18 years goes to waste.”

Obviously, money is the villain. As of today, money is needed to do the following:

(One-time expenses; enumerated roughly in the order of Mr. Devarajan's priorities)

1. Van (See Section 5)
2. Land purchase for spinning yarn and its construction costs.
3. Better furniture for some of the classes in the deaf school.
4. Kitchen roof repair – it's currently in a bad shape and has developed leakage.
5. Buying four computers for the deaf school: Students will benefit if taught basic computer education (MS office, internet, email etc.), DTP, (computer-aided) engineering drawing etc.
6. Buying a piece of land outside town premises for vegetable cultivation.

It might make sense for all chapters to discuss the above list and possibly float a WAH 2008 (self-sustenance) proposal for part of the spinning yarn expenses.

These apart, they would also benefit from any inputs on improving the quality of education to students, and are willing to welcome suggestions and thoughts. Experts who have prior experience dealing with hearing impaired children can be of help.