

## Site Visit of VTTRC, July 16, 2015

By Melli Annamalai, Asha-Boston/MIT

Oracle recently awarded a grant to SVYM for Science education. A part of this funding is for the resource center started by VTTRC, with a specific focus on tribal ashram schools in the area (government run schools for tribal children). I visited this resource center, and as part of that visit also spent some time talking to VTTRC students and staff.

VTTRC staff are excited about the resource center, they feel it supplements their programs well. The resource center's main goal is helping teachers who are working in the tribal ashram schools (many – 20 teachers - are graduates from VTTRC, 17 are VTCL alumni). They are providing a series of workshops for the teachers, and they showed me many notes of appreciation from the teachers. There are 1020 students in the tribal ashram schools, so the resource center reaches this many children.

VTTRC is doing well, in particular they are very happy with the “budding teachers” program. As part of the curriculum of VTTRC they introduced this program. This enables students to sit in and co-teach with teachers at VTCL and other schools. This provides the student-teachers a lot of practical experience with teaching, and students graduate with more confidence about their teaching abilities. This has been a significant improvement. Some VTTRC graduates are now working in private schools in Mysore city (earning Rs. 6000-8000 a month), and this is a source of pride for them. They see this as an achievement.

They are also focusing in improved learning of English at VTTRC. Titan is supporting a resource person to come from Bangalore to teach English. She stays a few days each visit, which is every two weeks or so. I had an opportunity to participate briefly in the class. I addressed the students and urged them to read more in English, as that was a great way to learn a language. VTTRC is right next door to VTCL, and VTCL has an excellent library with many English books. They showed some reluctance to use the library and get access to English books. **I think use of the library must be strongly encouraged, particularly to help with English.** Watching TV programs in English, conversing in English, etc. will also help. It is difficult to learn a language by only listening to a teacher.

I had an interesting encounter right after this class. 4 girls accosted me (yes, ‘accosted’ me, and I say that positively – I really appreciated their determination) and started discussing the importance of English. They wanted to know why English was so important today. I explained the historical reasons of why English has become an important language in India today in business and elsewhere. They expressed their serious dissatisfaction that everyone was constantly urging them to learn English, and no one seemed to care about Kannada. I explained that Kannada was also very important, but English has also become essential. They were unconvinced, they felt Kannada was being pushed away. They then asked me whether I had done anything to spread Kannada in America. If English was spreading in India, why not spread Kannada in America? I tried to explain the challenges in doing that. Why not at least teach one person in America Kannada they asked. I was impressed with their courage and articulation of their ideas. I am unsure why they were silent in the (English) class, without saying much.

They seemed docile then, but changed when they were speaking to me. **If they can bring this level of questioning and radical thinking to class, that will be a significant achievement.** So much teaching in India is fact based and focused on rote memorization, resulting in docile students who rarely learn how to ask questions.



*The girls who 'accosted' me.*



*Some resources used at VTTRC*

I was happy to note that 20 VTTRC graduates are now teachers in the local tribal ashram schools. This is exactly what is needed – an institution to train local youth to teach at local schools. The local youth understand the local context best. The graduates are hired as “contract” teachers (paid for 9 months a year, and the salary is low), and the hope is at least some will become permanent hires.