

A report on Exposure visit to Timbaktu

Introduction

The Balamitra team of Samata, a nonprofit organization based at Visakhapatnam visited Timbaktu on the 5th of October and stayed there till the morning of 8th. Project Balamitra is for the education of the indigenous children. Balamitra schools are spread across the two districts of Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam providing education to nearly 800 children in 40 villages. Exposure visit is an important part of the project in which the team gets an opportunity to observe and learn from the other community's development activities. The purpose of this exposure visit is to learn from the experience of others by direct interaction. It is a practical learning since the learning takes place in a real life situation. Exposure visits help a lot in skill enhancement too.

About Timbaktu

'Timbaktu', which means a place far away, is situated near Dharmavaram in Andhra Pradesh. It is nearly 22 Kms from the station. As a non profit organization Timbaktu is working on various projects for the welfare of the weaker sections of the society in the district of Ananatpur.

Timbaktu Office



It was initiated in the year 1990 by a small group of development activists who dedicated themselves to the service of the poor. Today the collective has a team of 106 people. The scope of their projects is spread across three mandals of Anantapur district covering the villages of Chennekothapalli, Rodham and Ramagiri mandals and they are reaching out to more than 50,000 people.

Soon after reaching Dharmavaram, we were greeted by 'Siddhu from Timbaktu', who helped us to reach the place in not more than 45 minutes. At the first instance, all of us remained spellbound for a while and started enjoying the silence of the place. Then a smiley face, with a sturdy voice greeted us and we could spot Mr.Satish who was in touch with us from the very beginning and made possible our visit.

Day1

The main campus: Mayasabha the Dining hall welcomed us with a luscious series of food items that were all natural. We were introduced to Mr.Hanumanthu, Incharge – Timbaktu Badi, who was humble enough to take us to the assembly area where the children of all the classes from 1 to 7 gather at 9.15 in the morning for the assembly session. They perform various activities like singing, dancing, news reading etc during the assembly. Getting introduced to the children was really exciting to our team. The children were from poor background. They were very active and greeted us with songs and dances. The interaction with the children was something to be cherished through out. Getting introduced to the tradition of 'Akka' and 'Anna' was emotive for all of us. The experience of learning about some of the activities of Timbaktu, sitting at 'Hexagon' was also enjoyable. After making a round of the main campus which comes to 32 acres, we proceeded to the 'Timbaktu' office which is nearly 7 kms away from the main campus.

Timbaktu Collective's Office: Is situated in Chennekothapalli which is nearly 7 kms from the main campus. It's beautifully designed and maintained. Mr.Satish who is the coordinator of Children's Programme, 'Chiguru' briefed us about our program at Timbaktu and introduced us to Mr Adinarayana, who took us to the Adishakthi Mahila thrift society, a programme for the women by the women to improve their economic status. It is one of the MATCS (mutually aided thrift cooperative societies) initiated by Timbaktu Collective. 'Anantha Sakthi' and ' Mahila Sakthi' are the other two societies which belong to the mandals of Roddam and Ramagiri. The interaction with the president of the society was helpful enough in knowing and learning about their nature of work and activities. It was heartening to know that over 5,000 women are being benefited by 'Adisakthi' alone. And their aim to increase the figure to 7,000 was admirable. Bhavani 'the weaving centre' that provides training on handlooms and weaving to the adolescent girls was worth watching. All the colours used were organic and we could even look into the process of preparing some of these colours. Timbaktu organic a venture promoted by Timbaktu collective and aims at promoting organic farming.

Dharani, the centre for organic products is a processing and marketing supply cooperative of farmers of organic products like millets, redgram, peanuts etc. The





farmers are taught to use only natural fertilizers for growing the crops.

Dharani Organic Centre

Prakruthi Badi (Nature school) run under the alternative education programme of Timbaktu is a non formal learning centre for the children of 1st to 10th standard. The teachers developed their own methodology to teach the subjects like Math, English, Social,

science and Telugu. The afternoon sessions are fully meant to enable the children acquire skills in various craft and art forms. The training is given either by a Resource person, or a teacher who becomes a resource person for some of the skills. This gives an opportunity to the children to enhance their creativity. The children are provided lunch at the school and we too got an opportunity to relish the food along with the children. There is also a Children’s Resource Centre which is beautifully managed and maintained by the team. It has a library, study room, computer facilities, craft workshop, environmental science lab and play facilities. The resource centre is open to all the children of the villages. A Children’s magazine called ‘Kottapalli’ published by Kottapalli trust helps to develop creative writing in children.

Children’s Resource Centre



Children practicing at Prakruthi Badi



The ‘Kolattam’ (a traditional folk dance) played by the children of Timbaktu Badi was an unforgettable experience. They also presented some folk songs. It was a fun filled moment for every one of us. The Balamitra team also entertained the students with some tribal numbers. All the children were very friendly. We also had a very nice experience of eating dinner with them. It was really surprising to see those children maintaining good social skills and high energy levels. The amount of discipline seen among them was truly laudable.



Day 2: We got introduced to most of the activities under the project called 'Chiguru' on the 2nd day.

Back to Basics: is a programme that runs remedial classes for the children of government schools after assessing their knowledge through CCA (Children's Competitive Assessments). The classes are taken in the morning and evening, before and after the school hours. Early in the morning at around 7.00am we visited the village, 'Papireddypalli' to learn about this programme from Mr.Nageshwara Rao who was there with us through out the day. Lowly graded government schools are chosen for the programme and children are enrolled only after assessing their capabilities. More than 1400 children in 50 villages are benefiting through the program this year.

At around 11' o clock in the morning, we had a wonderful presentation in the Timbaktu office which was really useful to us in getting into and understanding the deeper aspects of the organization. There was also an interactive session with Mr. Satish after the presentation, which helped us to get some of our doubts clarified.

Bala Militha: In the afternoon we were taken to a village named Cherlopalli to meet a member of Balamilitha. Balamilitha is a programme for mentally retarded, physically challenged and hearing impaired children which covers 75 villages and takes care of more than 180 children. Sai, whom we met there in the government school of 'Cherlopalli' was a very interesting cute kid. Sai is having regular physiotherapy and is learning to walk with calipers.

Mogga: It is a programme for the children by the children where they come together



to form 'Bala Sanghas' (children's associations). They discuss various issues related to the children and also the issues related to the environment. It is a very good method of creating awareness among the children about the current topics. It also helps in improving the leadership qualities in a child and is also a real good idea of capacity building in an organization. The children come together and meet once in a week at least. Names are also given to their associations by them. We too had an opportunity to witness a meeting conducted by 'Sarojini Naidu' Sangam at Polepalli village. The meeting was conducted by the children and it was interesting to watch the small children discussing about environmental hazards and prevention of

plastics. There were also songs and folk dances after the meeting. Any child between the age group of 11 and 18 is eligible to be a member of 'Bala sangam'. Presently there are 45 children's associations in 3 mandals with 1447 children. In every sangam there are two leaders. One is a girl and the other is a boy. They also run a Children's newsletter called 'Chinnari nestham'. Visit to the resource centre of 'Hariyancheruvu' was also a memorable experience. The youth was learning folk dance called 'Chekka Bhajana' from a resource person. The classes continued for more than an hour. The team from Balamitra too joined the children to enjoy learning the skill.

Day 3:

Kalpavalli: Visiting Kalpavalli early in the morning was quite exciting for every one of us. The programme 'Kalpavalli' is forest regeneration through community protection and it is spread across 10,000 acres. Natural resource management and protection of water in forest land, rain water harvesting, fire fighting are some of the important activities of Kalpavalli. Seed collection is a regular feature in which the community is also involved. The natural habitat of the forest is protected through the years. There is also a sharp increase in birds and animals of the forest.



Mr. Gopal of Timbaktu guided us to Kalpavalli and explained us in detail about the various activities. Kalpavalli is situated near the village called 'Musti kovela'. There was also an attractive stream in the forest which had very clear water. The beauty of 'Kalpavalli' is really admirable. Many villagers earn their livelihood from the products that are grown in the forest. All of us were excited by looking at the herd of deer. After returning from Kalpavalli, we got a chance to spend some time with the

children of the 'Timbaktu' Badi once again.

Conclusion:

The exposure visit was a good learning experience for the team of Balamitra. It has created an opportunity for us to interact with different kinds of people engaged in development process in different circumstances. It is true that every thing we saw or that were described to us may not be applicable to the field conditions of our project. But, there was enough for us, which will definitely enhance the spirit of involvement in development process. It was a wonderful journey for all of us. We should thank all, for their contribution in making the visit useful and meaningful.