



## Newsletter – October 2009-January 2010

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The year 2009 has sped faster than expected. As for Balamitra the last three months were not much different from the previous months. A lot more activities were packed in the three months between October and December. Festivals, camps, celebrations, training programmes at the village level as well as at the Model School made it a

hectic yet enjoyable three months. Exposure visits to other NGO run institutions in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat were eye-opening experiences for the team at Balamitra.

### Exposure visits

We have tried to build our education philosophy and approach around the tribal way of life. Though the planning and curriculum seem to address the basic needs of the children, we understand that there is always the need to improve upon the existing pattern, methodology and syllabus. It is necessary to enhance our capacity and learn innovative education methods which are practised by other alternative schools and innovative education institutions.

As part of this learning and sharing our teams visited ACCORD, in Tamil Nadu, Vivekananda Girijana kalyana Kendra BR hills in Karnataka, Centre for Learning and

Visthaar in Bangalore. Some of us went westwards to Gujarat to visit the Tejarh Basha Academy and their associate Gandhi an institutions. Firmly grounded in Gandhian philosophy, these organisations continue to reach out to a large number of tribal children and youth since pre-independence and some of these educational institutions have a historic symbolism where many stalwarts of our freedom movement lived and met here for planning India's struggles against the British colonialism.

The visits proved to be very educative and the team came back more enthusiastic and with a wealth of innovative ideas and inspiration.



### A memorable evening

When we (Bhanu, Sushila and Seema) went to Gujarat, it was with the intention of familiarising us with an organisation which runs on strong Gandhian philosophy. A pleasant surprise awaited us at the end of the day....a very memorable meeting with a young 92 year old venerable lady for whom Gandhiji is still alive. Frail but alert and agile in mind, Dasari Behn was a wealth of information. Even at the age of 92, her clarity of thought and memory surprised us to no end. She could recount the days



of her childhood when she met Gandhiji during our freedom struggle with so much precision and clarity, it left us totally enthralled. Her live narration of dialogues she had with Gandhiji, her pride in her instantaneous response to Gandhiji's call for eschewing jewellery and foreign clothes and even giving up their land, at the tender age of ten and the revolutionary songs that paved the momentum to the freedom movement- they are still fresh in her mind. All we could do when she related incident after incident, was to sit agape with wonder. This venerable lady has another feather in her cap...of teaching Kasturba Gandhi the basic lessons in reading and writing. Gandhiji's words of praise at her success in making Kasturba Gandhi literate and helping her write letters to Gandhiji when he was in prison, are something she keeps very close to her heart. Her memory is unsurpassed, her spirit unmatched. Our heartfelt wishes to her for healthy days for the rest of her life.

## Valasa( Labour migration)

The tribal youth in the villages are at crossroads of their lives... Quality education is a far-fetched dream. A respectable career like their counterparts in the cities is even more a distant dream. In the desire to make a living outside of their villages, all they do is fall prey to the wily contractors who take advantage of their naivety. Most of the youngsters migrate to distant places in the hope of finding some means of survival, but end up as bonded labourers at the hands of the contractors and employers. Many such incidences came to life at the Youth Camp conducted at Visakhapatnam. The youth narrated stories of the hardships they had to face in far away places, with hardly any decent accommodation or food and how they were often cheated of the remuneration they were offered. There were cases where they had worked for three to four months in a row but came back home with nothing in their pockets..not even the fare to complete the journey back home. For adivasi girls who migrate to the towns in search of work, social security and safety are serious concerns. At the youth camps, they discussed how we could address these issues-whether they could find more diversified ways of livelihood within the forest as the current subsistence farming is unable to meet their needs for the whole year, or whether to become more aware of the outside world and sensitise the youth against the exploitation of agents and contractors.

## Traditional Knowledge...What the world should look up to in our children

Our children from the tribal villages come with a treasure chest of indigenous knowledge that are still practised in their daily lives. Science exists in their daily lifethrough an evolved knowledge of observation, experimentation and imitation from elders, whether it is calculating time and seasons with the help of stars, preparing the fields for cultivation, choosing the right kind of pesticides made organically, identifying herbs and preparing home made remedies for various illnesses or even choosing a site for building their houses. To strengthen this knowledge, and



to bring awareness to the scientific richness of these communities and the need for practising the same with dignity, an adventure trip was organised for the children to Kamayyapeta village with the help of the CBO Adivasimitra. Kamayyapeta boasts of a wide variety of flora, fauna and knowledge systems apart from being the abode of a staunch freedom fighter, Marri Kamayya , who is one of the few tribal leaders recorded in the annals of our independence history.



The children interacted with the farmers, the Guniya( medicine women and the village elders and documented some of the information they collected. The enthusiasm showed at collecting all these was so contagious that the elders could not but impart their know-how with great gusto. We are in the process of visually documenting this trip and what we found there, not to miss the snack of worms under the palm trees. We intend to share this with the tribal children coming to attend the national level meet that we are planning in the month of February.

## **National Adivasi Children's Traditional Knowledge and Science Congress**

Come February, and the Balamitra Model School premises will be agog with an activity of a different kind....an activity which is going to bring tribal children from different parts of the country to Visakhapatnam and to Balamitra to interact, innovate, observe, share and learn about the great traditional wisdom each of their elders has passed on to them. An expected gathering of around 300 children, teachers and experts will converge to make it the first of its kind Congress.

Dear friends of Balamitra, we hope to be showered with your blessings and good wishes as always for this effort that we are taking up...

Thank you for all your support!

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### **Appeal:**

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