

Vaayo!!

a child beckons...



A Purposeful Adventure

About nine months ago, in April 2007, we embarked on a sort of a purposeful adventure, knowing largely what we wanted to do but clueless of where we were exactly headed or how we were going to go about doing what we had in mind. A little school, where it's most needed, without the strings of the modern educational system attached to it, where we can learn to think and to observe and to be sensitive, where we are not preparing for a foreign society but for the one that we were born into... were some of the stray thoughts and feelings that we carried (and still carry). Tucked away into some corners of our psyches were insights from Krishnamurti and Gandhi that we'd chewed on and digested a bit along our respective journeys in life. We agreed with Krishnamurti that the highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is

capable of dealing with life as a whole. We knew that when in doubt, if we applied Gandhi's test of recalling the face of the poorest and the weakest man we had seen and asking ourselves if the step we were contemplating was going to be of any use to him, then we were probably on the right track.

This is an account of our initial steps in this long journey that we've embarked on. We hope to keep sharing our experiences with you from time to time as we go along.

Wandering About

Our journey took us during April, May and June 2007 into the forests of Gadchiroli – one of the poorest districts in Maharashtra and then to Bastar, its neighbour across the Indravati river in newly founded Chattisgadhi.

In Hemalkasa, a little village in Gadchiroli, we met and stayed with the Amtes (Dr Prakash Amte and his family) who have been successfully running a rural hospital and school for several decades now. We had a close look at the work that the Amtes were doing and had several fruitful discussions with different members of their team including Dr Prakash Amte himself, who shared with us very useful insights into the nitty-gritty of working amongst 'adivasis' - natives of Bastar and Gadchiroli.

Shree Ranjitbhai and Shree Rambhau Mhaskar at the Paunar Ashram in Wardha referred us to Shaildidi Chauhan who lives in Gol Kumhra in the Kanker district in Chattisgadhi. Shaildidi, a Chattisgadhi by birth, is trying to propagate the use of herbs and

traditional medicine. In our very first meeting we hit it off very well with Didi. She willingly introduced us to people who were working at the grassroots level in Bastar. We met her friend Rajesh, a businessman in Dalli. Rajesh, along with his friends, takes care of 50 children who have lost their parents in the Salva Judum movement (a state sponsored civilian armed struggle against the Naxalites in Chattisgad).h).

Didi also introduced us to Shree Dharampalji Saini ('Tauji'), at Jagdalpur. A Gandhian and close associate of Vinoba. Tauji has been running the Mata Rukmini Seva Sanstha for many decades now in the heart of Bastar. The Sanstha manages several residential schools in rural Bastar. Tauji spent hours talking to us sharing his experiences and giving valuable advice. Like Didi, he also continues to give us time whenever we need it, and his advice has stood us in good stead all along the way.

Through Didi's contacts, we also met with Shree Bhupesh Tiwari and Shree Hari Bharadwaj, founders of the Saathi Samaj Sevi Sanstha ('Saathi') at Kumhar Para near Kondagaon. Bhupeshbhaiya and Haribhai started Saathi fresh out of college, along with their friend, the late Shree Bhupendra Banchor about eighteen years ago. Over the years, Saathi has worked with artisans in Bastar, spread over nearly 100 villages empowering them through training, equipping them with the latest designs and helping

them market their produce all over the world.

Like with every new person we were meeting, we shared our story with Saathi; and they shared theirs with us. Haribhai and Bhupeshbhaiya who are ceramic engineers by training, arranged for us to visit 10 villages (all within a radius of 50 kms from Kumhar Para) with whom they have working relationships. The objective was to selecting a place that could be suitable for establishing our little school.



Survey And Selection

From there on things moved rapidly. There were villages of all sizes among the ten

that we visited – clusters of 40 to 50 houses on the one hand and largish conglomerations of 8 to 10 such clusters on the other. The basic infrastructure available at these villages also varied vastly. We knew from the very beginning that we wanted to work in a place where the apparent need for education seemed to be the most and where the least development aid had reached till date.

Of all the villages we visited, we liked Balenga Para the most. It topped our list for having the worst infrastructure – no electricity, no land line or mobile phone coverage, no primary health centre, no piped water, no bathrooms and toilets, no sewage, no public or private transport service to the village, no provision store... Surprisingly there is a government school up to class 8 in Balenga Para!

All the residents of Balenga Para hail from one tribe - Muriya Gond. The village itself is set amidst beautiful surroundings – paddy fields, sal forests, undulating landscapes and huge boulders piled on top of one another. It is one of the few villages in Bastar that still has an active 'ghotul' – an informal educational institution that trains tribal youth for life in the tribe and also a tribal dance group. We loved the place at first sight.

Saathi arranged for us to meet with the villagers in a village assembly that was called at short notice by beating the drums and blowing the conch from the



ghotul premises which were to become the venue of our school later. We explained to the villagers our raison d'être, the broad concept of the school and sought their permission to set up base in the village. A little deliberation later, the village assembly had



assented to having us over in their village and the 'upasarpanch – an elected representative to the village council' soon showed us a little house that he could spare for our residence.

Soon we were busy regrouping, getting resources together, purchasing educational material, shipping boxes, hiring masons to construct the bath and toilet and supervising its construction, lining the tiled leaking roof with plastic sheets, cleaning up the house, getting beds made, and doing a thousand other things that go towards setting up house and a small school. Saathi kindly hosted us right through those two months of July and August when our house was getting ready and provided every help we needed, putting all their resources and facilities at our disposal.

As we commuted every day by bus to Kokodi (the nearest bus halt) and walked the remaining 3.5 km to Balanga Para, word got around about the crazy new people who were moving into Balanga Para of all the places, who'd decided to stay there than stay at Kokodi (where there was electricity), and about the school that they'd decided to establish. People talked to us hesitatingly at first and were curious to know where we had come from, why had we chosen Balanga Para to start a school and why we weren't going to stay in neighbouring Kokodi that had more

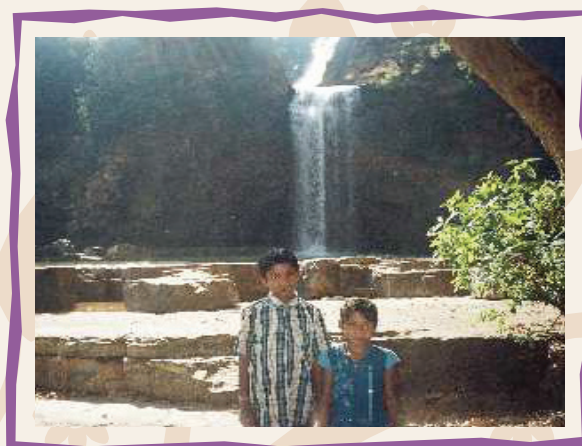
amenities. They asked us about the school we going to start, about our antecedents, and our families and why we were there ... Their questions were endless.

Imlee Mahuaa

By the end of August, our house was ready and we moved in on August 22, 2007 and started off our little school – Imlee Mahuaa Naee Taaleem Centre for Learning on August 27 with two students from our village – Anaamikaa (about 5 years) and Heeraalaal (about 7 years).

Both Anaamikaa and Heeraalaal had been to the state run schools before joining Imlee Mahuaa. Heeraalaal had dropped out of school due to diffidence and lack of interest and his parents are keen that he studies. Anaamikaa's guardians are keen that she learns English.

Along the way 3 year old Aganti, 4 year old Raghu and 5 year old Maneesha joined Imlee Mahuaa too, but dropped out for reasons varying from lack of interest to not being able to cope with the school work as they were too young.



Our first two students have continued with the school enthusiastically and completed their first term in December 2007. In our first Parent – Teachers' Meeting held on the last day of the term, the children presented to their parents glimpses of their school life in a short presentation of half an hour. We also gave the parents an overview of our approach to education and details of the progress their children had made through the term in the form of a written

report in English that was translated and explained to the parents.

As the term progressed, our thoughts about the purpose of education evolved. We feel that education ought to be an exploration into the self and one's surroundings. It should facilitate an understanding of our relationship with the environment in which we live. If possible, education should enable us to be truly free and to engage with life and its uncertainties securely and sensitively. We feel that education is a life long process for all of us children, parents and teachers.

During the first term, we explored with the children among others, the potential that their bodies hold through yoga and praanaayaam, the range and capacity of our voice and the role of rhythm through Indian classical and semi-classical singing, initial steps in English and Hindi conversation, the universal beauty of words expressed through poetry written in Kannada, Hindi and English, our relationship with the environment and the need to use material resources fully through recycling of waste paper using 'appropriate paper technology or APT' and artistic expression in the visual arts through drawing and colouring.

During our interaction with the children, especially at mealtimes, we tried to emphasize the role of hygiene in health and introduced to them the basics of polite speech that could be useful to them while interacting with people from other cultures.

Given the widespread malnutrition in the district, we had decided that we would also take up partial responsibility for the health of our school children. Towards this end we provided wholesome and

balanced meals at breakfast and lunch times this term. During the winter, we also started providing the children a hot beverage on arrival at school.

We are often asked about the longish name for our school. Well, Imlee and Mahuaa are the names of



two trees that are never cut down by the adivasis, as they yield considerable economic and social benefits. The Bastar region is one of India's largest producers of tamarind and the flowers of the mahuaa are used by adivasis to distil an intoxicating drink, its nuts and seeds yield oil. The common English name for 'imlee' is tamarind and 'mahuaa' is known in botanical terms as *Bassia Latifolia*.

The words 'Naee Taaleem' stand for 'basic education' propagated by Gandhi for the masses. Among others, it emphasizes building life skills drawn from every day life in the spirit of cooperation and the use of a child centric approach to learning.

Over the next decade and more, we hope that Imlee Mahuaa will evolve as a place where rural children can explore and assimilate in an integrated, free and yet orderly way – local and native arts, crafts, ecology, communication skills, quantitative techniques, nutrition, health, livelihood and the many questions of life. We plan to keep the intake of students low (about 5 every year) as we would like to ensure the quality of our work as go along within our limited resources. For the arts and crafts we expect to engage local master artisans as facilitators and teachers. We would like our teachers and facilitators to be people who have an integrated (as against compartmental or specialist) approach to life and who come with a complement of skills and abilities from any walk of life.



Our Neighbourhood

There are about 50 houses in Balenga Para. Most families are nuclear families and the common occupation is farming. The average family has about six members. Most families till their own land and that of others too. Paddy, black gram and maize are the primary crops. A variety of vegetables are grown in the kitchen gardens - gourds and pumpkins aplenty.

The people domesticate poultry, pigs, sheep and cattle. Adivasis do not milk their cows and buffaloes in the belief that the milk is meant for the young ones of the domestic animals. Usually the old men and women and children tend to the domesticated animals and take them to the commons for grazing. The poultry and domesticated animals are slaughtered occasionally, especially on festive occasions.

Women work in the fields after taking care of their household duties, especially fetching water twice a day for the entire household from the common hand pumps. The men work in the fields and also collect the firewood. Many youth are outwardly bound and spend enormous amounts of time (often unsuccessfully) working as marketing agents for direct network marketing companies.

Firewood cut from the nearby forest is the sole fuel used for cooking and for keeping warm during the cold winters. Oil obtained from the seeds of the

‘mahuaa’ or the ‘kusum’ – safflower or ‘carthamus tinctorius’ is used for lighting. People stay in mud houses with tiled roofs; the mud for the houses is dug out from a part of the same land on which the house stands.

The men and children bathe in the open at the hand pumps while women bathe in ‘open to sky’ enclosures near the hand pumps. Everyone goes to the nearby forests to attend to nature’s calls as there are no toilets or bathrooms in any of the houses.

Women wear sarees and blouses (most middle-aged and elderly women wear just sarees) and men wear shirts and lungis. Young children

typically move around in just shorts almost all round the year.

Men, women and children (except the very young) chew tobacco and drink the homemade brew – salfi (the sap of a local palm), landaa (a fermented concoction made from rice and a millet called madia – similar to raagi) and mahuaa distilled from mahuaa flowers. The staple food is rice and black gram curry with the seasonal vegetable added in occasionally. Food preparations are by and large free of oil and spice as the adivasi does not have the cash resources to required to purchase cooking oil and spices.

Illiteracy is widespread; hardly anyone can read or write in the village. But most men and some women are able to speak Hindi besides Halbi and Gondi – the native tongues.

The people of Balenga Para seem to grow enough to feed themselves and spare a little for sale in the weekly haat. Young men and women seem to be by and large healthy and happy. But the children seem underfed by city standards and are always hungry. Average life expectancy seems to be in the region of 55 years. Most middle-aged people seem to emaciate early in life – perhaps as a result of heavy drinking.



There is a primary health centre in the adjoining cluster of Kokodi Para and the nurse makes a weekly visit to Balenga Para. However, when disease strikes, the residents of Balenga Para prefer to first consult one of the two 'sirahas' or witch doctors



for all ailments. The sirahas use a combination of mumbo-jumbo and herbs obtained from the forests to treat various ailments. The sirahas are among the most respected persons in the village and hold a lot of clout among the villagers.

Malaria, diarrhea and jaundice are widespread in these climes. During the three months that we have been in Balenga Para, we have already witnessed 3 deaths (all of young people and children) due to malaria or hepatitis – none of these were treated, except at the very end, by modern western medicine. Death requires the bereaved family to provide meals to the entire village and all walk in visitors for at least three days from the day of death and creates significant financial pressure on the family.

The most common mode of transport for distances is walking or cycle and people cycle or walk to Kondagaon (15 kms each way) routinely. Their limited means do not permit the people of Balenga Para to take private buses that ply on the routes to Narayanpur and Kondagaon from Kokodi. However when they do travel on such buses, they are often cheated by the bus conductors who take advantage of their poor arithmetic and subject them to semi-apartheid treatment while traveling on such buses.

A visit to the weekly 'haat' or bazaar in Kokodi at a distance of about 3.5 km is the sole source of

entertainment or outing for the people of Balenga Para, most of who have not traveled outside a radius of about 20 kms from their homes ever in their lives. During the winters and summers, the men take their roosters to the haat for a round of cock fighting. On a Friday evening one can see both men and women straggling back home from the haat after having downed a few glasses of the local brew.

In the evenings, some of the youth gather in the 'ghotul' and sing traditional songs and dance to the music. This happens round the year. During the Dashehraa festival and in the run up to Deepawali, the community gets together to read the Ramayan after dinner. Such evenings are hosted by different households in rotation.

As our house stands on the main road leading into the village, we have several visitors of all ages from time to time who drop in without notice. Our interaction with them has grown over the months and has also helped us pick up a little Gondi and Halbi. Besides, some of them have now started consulting us for the treatment of minor ailments such as skin rashes, head aches, coughs, colds and fevers. Borrowing



and lending assets to each other is a common practice in the village and we have been included in this custom. Thus our neighbour often takes our bicycle, especially on Fridays when he goes to the haat and we have often borrowed his spade to clean up our yard. We have the occasional visitor in high school boys and girls who are keen to be helped in English or other academic preparation.

Our Life In Balenga Para

Our typical day begins early in the morning at about 5.30 as we start to get ready to welcome our little students who arrive between 7 and 7.30. A quick hot drink with the kids is followed by the first academic session comprising lessons in yoga and vocal music. That is followed by a breakfast of hot cereal and fruit prepared by one of us and then a longish session where the children learn English and Hindi conversation, poetry, arithmetic, art and craft. This is followed by lunch and cleaning up. The children usually leave by 2 pm, but sometimes stay till the evening especially during the harvesting season, when their parents are unable to come and fetch them in time.

Our afternoons are occupied in personal chores, washing, cleaning the house, cooking the evening meal and a little rest. We get help from one of the village girls in filling water in the morning and evening. We try and go for a walk early in the evening (one can walk in any of the four directions, every walk is through beautiful natural surroundings) but need to return before sundown as there is no public lighting. Lighting the oil lamps, an early meal, the occasional game of Scrabble, watching Taurus and Krittika rise in the starlit sky and finally dozing off with the little fruit bat ('gaadul' in Gondi) hanging from the roof for company brings down the curtain on most working days.

Weekends are spent in Kondagaon, shopping for vegetables, provisions and other necessities required in the following week. Normally we stay the night with our friends in Saathi catching up with our families and friends on the phone and return home on Sunday mornings to prepare for the week that lies ahead.

About us

We are a group of friends who have been working together for several years, trying to reach out to people in need, through Akanksha Public Charitable Trust, Chennai a registered voluntary organization. Akanksha was established in the year 2000 and is currently engaged in taking care of the educational and medical expenses of needy children in Chennai besides running Imlee Mahuaa as a free school in Bastar, Chattisgarh.

For specific information about the people behind Imlee Mahuaa and Akanksha or to share your feedback, comments and questions, please feel free to write to us at:

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