

Thulir

Newsletter – May 05



Greetings from Sittilingi.

We are in the middle of a heat wave and the weather is quite unbearable. The only consolation seems to be cribbing about the weather to each other!! We were lucky last year, as by this time [mid may] the monsoon rains had already started. It looks like the usual long wait this year though. In the meantime the famed "kaththiri veiyil" is here. Luckily, the children don't have classes this month [a lot of them are away visiting cousins!], and we are on a 9 to 5 routine with classes for our trainees and the senior dropouts [3 of them now]. Apart from academics, these sessions included training in accounts, stock taking and keeping stocks, arranging the library [entering of books, stamping etc], and much physical work in and around thulir buildings [the nursery, white washing of walls etc.].

Organic farming

Mr Sundarraman, an organic farmer from Sathyamangalam in Tamilnadu visited Sittilingi. He gave a talk on 'why organic farming' and various simple organic, cost effective do-it-yourself formulations as alternatives to fertilizers, pesticides and growth promoters. He also visited many farms of enthusiastic farmers of Sittilingi area who are keen to learn organic farming. During the 3 days he was here, our trainees had many opportunities to interact with him and consequently, there is great enthusiasm now to try the methods suggested by him.

Thulir has a small nursey now, where saplings are being grown to be planted after the rains. We hope to plant quite a few trees this year around Thulir. Seed collection has also started in a modest scale.

Why Education?

We had a small discussion with Selvaraj [25], Anbu [25], Baby [25], Senthil, Mohan and Balu [all 15]{the former three being our trainees and the latter three senior students at Thulir, all adivasis from Sittilingi area} on what they feel about

the need for education. We found this a very interesting discussion and would like to share it with you.

The discussion was initiated with the question:

" Why should one get educated and what skills should ones education aim to give an individual?"

Senthil: Education should help us in our practical life. Without education we get easily cheated in a shop while buying or selling. We should be able to read and understand documents so that we do not lose our land or property.

Mohan: Education should teach one values in life-- one should be honest one shouldn't steal etc.

Selvaraj: Education should provide us with an awareness of what's happening elsewhere in this world. It should help us to learn from others' experiences.

Baby: Education should consist of arts and crafts. Arts and crafts help us when we are tired or when we are sad.

Mohan: It should teach us scientific facts about our bodies, plants and animals etc.

Baby: Education should teach us about farming.

Anu: And most importantly education should teach us to think for ourselves and not blindly follow dictums.

We then discussed each of the above points made.

Practical life

Does school teach us to buy and sell things in the market without getting cheated? [this is an important skill for an agricultural community like theirs]. One or two of them felt that school taught them basic addition and subtraction, but the others felt that they do not add and subtract in the method taught at school while they were in the shops. They compute mentally either by experience or in a manner taught them by their parents.

School never taught them to read and understand the Tamil Govt. documents related to their land, electricity connection etc. Though educated, they were still illiterate as far as documents important to them were concerned.

Values in Life

We discussed why knowing and adhering to values were important in life. It was surprising that teenage boys had brought this up as an important aspect of education. So we probed. "Why should one not lie?" " why should one not steal?" etc. Most of them said that values were necessary to have a good reputation and status in the community. We challenged that notion saying aren't the

crooks getting richer and richer in our village. Don't honest people seem to suffer more? What happens if the entire community accepted lying and stealing as good virtues? After a lot of heated discussion, they decided that values were absolutely necessary for an individual's mental peace and happiness and also for communal harmony and order.

But does school teach one about values? The answer again was that School teaches one discipline but there is no discussion about anything else. All of them felt that discipline was very important but when asked whether school taught them self-discipline or discipline before a cane they sheepishly admitted that it was the latter that school taught. [Note that when we say 'school' here, we are talking about bad Govt. Schools they have experienced, where there is no teacher for most of the time, and usually a local youth with the stick minds the kids]

General Knowledge and awareness

Everyone emphatically said that they needed to broaden ones horizons and to learn from others' experiences. Throughout all these discussions we kept playing the devil's advocate. So they were asked why is it necessary to know about others. Aren't people who don't know about anything outside our village happy? A discussion ensued and they concluded that it was necessary. The outside world was fast intruding into their lives and general knowledge and awareness were necessary so that they could cope with it better and not get exploited when they were forced to deal with the outside world.

But School never taught them all this though many of them have studied up to class 10. Senthil said "I did not even know that America was a place or that the Earth was round till I came to Thulir."

Arts and Crafts

All of them agreed that Arts and Crafts were necessary for mental and physical rejuvenation. Education has actually made us ashamed of our traditional singing or dancing instead of enriching our knowledge of Arts and Crafts. Nobody in the village sings or dances anymore like the old days. Everyone only drinks alcohol or watches TV in the evenings.

Practical Science

All of them said they had only memorized Science, written it in their exams and promptly forgotten about it. Education should have taught them Science practically and helped them take care of their bodies, their plants and their animals. If school had taught them that there is science in agriculture, may be they would have learnt Science and farming with interest.

Independent thinking

School definitely had not helped them think in different situations, but had only moulded them to stay quiet, follow the crowd [and accept their exploitation

calmly?]. They agreed that independent thinking was important in education.

During this entire discussion we were surprised that none of them ever said that education should provide them with the skills to get a good job or a better status in society or earn more money. Nor did they say that education should consist of gaining more information or more skills or learning English, Tamil or other subjects.

There seems to be a gross mismatch between the perceptions of the educators and the educated on what education should be. Is it that the people being educated expect too little and too unimportant things out of education? Is it too much to ask the educators to fulfil these basic desires?

Anuradha and Krishna
