

Thulir

Newsletter – November 04

Greetings from Sittilingi.

We have had an eventful and trying month, not all of it good!

The fury of the monsoon:

This month, we experienced the North East monsoon at its full fury. We had weeks of continuous cloudy and rainy days. Not very good for our Solar based Electricity supply! To make matters worse, at the beginning of this spell, one night, our Solar PV panels got stolen. Luckily, one set of panels, that were comparatively better fixed, couldn't be stolen, so we have some source of power. The local villagers came to meet us after the theft, to commiserate with us, and we found that they were mostly parents of students using Thulir. Their expression of outrage, and promises to catch the culprit helped us cope with the theft, and made us realize that the parents do appreciate what is happening at Thulir.

The rain has been a mixed blessing. We had hectic days of trees and vegetable planting, to take advantage of the rains. But the rain raised the water level in the stream, and made our mud access road completely unmotorable. Some of the children who have to cross the stream to come to school and Thulir have dropped out as they rush in the evenings to cross the stream before it is too late in the evenings. Of course at this time of the year, the sun too sets early.

The last time we had heavy rains in May/June, the attendance in Thulir almost came to a naught. But this time, many children made it a point to come to Thulir. In fact on many days the Govt. school closed early due to the rains, and the children made use of it to stay longer than usual at Thulir! This was really heartening for us.

We felt pretty isolated, as for days we could not move out of our house. The buses to Sittilingi almost stopped coming, with very erratic timings. This meant that our one-day old newspaper along with letters stopped coming, increasing the feeling of isolation. The clouds have dispersed, the sun has come out, and it is much more cheerful now. The children are back and are currently engaged with traditional village riddles [math puzzles] that we got from Dr.L.S.Saraswathi from Chennai, who has collected these from diverse sources.

Visitors:

Sonati and Sundar, our friends from a nearby village visited us. They have been teaching children in alternate schools and now have settled in a remote village to do farming and are home-schooling their two children.

They interacted with the Thulir children. It was a lively session where a lot of questions were raised. Why have they come to a village leaving their homes in the cities? , Why farming? etc.

Srikanth a doctoral student in immunology who was visiting us also talked to the students about microbiology and vaccination.

Network meeting:

We attended an education network meeting in Hyderabad. The theme this year was "language and culture". There were very interesting discussions and sharing of experiences from other participants. We found the meeting very useful as many of the questions that we are grappling with in Thulir, such as teaching English v/s teaching Tamil, teaching to write in spoken language/ local dialect v/s "pure"/ written tamil, etc. came up for discussion. One successful attempt was to first teach to write/ read words of the local dialect. With this basic literacy skills are introduced and confidence of the learner boosted. Once this was done it was found that the learners themselves expressed interest in learning the standard form of the language as most written material [textbooks/ newspapers etc] use this form. At this stage due to the self- motivation of the learners, the progress in learning was very good. This is perhaps a good approach that we could try in Thulir.

There was also an interesting point made about oral tradition/ knowledge. With very interesting case studies Dr L S Saraswathi from Chennai showed that rural "illiterate" people have their oral tradition and knowledge which is very different from the knowledge of the literate tradition. Often the teachers of literacy are dismissive of the students as having no intelligence, and of not knowing anything. In a literacy programme, the teacher's awareness that the students do possess some knowledge, will impact positively on the students' learning.

There are many alternate schools that are part of the network. Some of them have shown interest in bringing their students to Thulir. This would be good for our children as it will give them exposure to the outside world.

Field meetings:

This month, the hospital staff has been going on a padayatra, walking to all the houses in and around villages in our area, discussing and identifying issues that need to be taken up for organizing the villagers around for action. This has been a good opportunity for us to get familiarized with the area and its problems, and we joined the team in some of the villages.

As always we would be happy to hear from you, and look forward to your continued support for our activities.

Anuradha and Krishna