

Report of school field trip to Coimbatore

Mohan, of Mannargudi, our 'spokesperson' in Tiruvarur and Mannargudi, convinced Miss Anita to visit our school. Miss Anita is a research scholar at IIT, Madras. She visited our school in early November and she decided to sponsor about 20 children for a three day tour of Coimbatore. She and Mohan had one request - that the children travel by the Jan Shatabdi from Tanjore. We were absolutely delighted by the proposition. It was decided that those in the second and third standard who had not visited Mumbai with us should go to Coimbatore. The dates were 16th to 18th Nov.

Teachers who accompanied the group: Mr Shivakumar, Padma, Suryakala, Aruna, Mr and Mrs Mohan We left at 0500 hrs from AVK by bus to Tanjore. The bus ride was noisy with the kids too excited and exclaiming with delight at the rising sun. Raghavan drove me and six children to Tanjore. The idea was to take six who have never been anywhere in a car. We surprised a lone fox that raced in front of the car before jumping and disappearing into the sugar-cane fields There were squeals and oohs. We took that as a nice omen.

At Tanjore we met with the others. Every child carried his/her own bag and the 'big' 8year olds helped in carrying the lunch baskets and water cans. Before the train arrived, Shivakumar conducted a railway platform tour; showing them the signals, other trains, the vestibules and sleeper coaches.

The ride on the Shatabdi was smooth. A lot of giggling and laughter when the train first moved. They had a massive and tasty breakfast of idlies and gun powder given by one of the parents - Natarajan - whose three children study with us and whose five year old was on the trip. Then in groups of five we took them to see the air conditioned coaches. The TTE was most amused by the parade and helped us by giving the children more information.

We reached Coimbatore at 1430 and were met by Suresh at the station. We were taken to Geeta Hall for a delicious lunch. The kids ate happily. Mr.Kishore of the restaurant as well as his staff were very surprised at how neatly the children ate, wasted nothing and were so polite. They said they had never seen a school group where everyone behaved equally well.

We then took a mini bus to Arshavidyashram Gurukulam - Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Ashram. The drive is through the forest area. The words conjured tigers and elephants but we saw none. We met Swami

Siddhabhohananda. He blessed the children and invited us to dinner there. We then visited Lord Murugan temple there - on top of a small mountain. The climb was not too steep but for the little ones it seemed an adventure in itself. The view from the mountain left them speechless - for exactly half a minute. Then they rained questions at us and there were constant requests to see what they liked. The Ashram is situated at the foothills of the Nilgiris and it feels like a funnel with big mountains all around. As luck would have it, there were clouds on the top and it seemed like snow. As the sun went down there was a light mist and we walked to Lord Dakshinamurthy temple. They joined in the evening shlokas chanting wherever they could and felt quite pleased with themselves. We asked them to pray that they learn well, acquire a good 'buddhi'. Dinner at the Ashram was lovely. The children enjoyed the 'kootu' most they said and wanted to know how the 'uppuma' was made and if we could make such at school.

We checked into "Seetharams" at 2245. The children were bushed (not saddamed). 17th : they were up by 6 and with a lot of noise and rushing about they were ready by 8. Breakfast was a la carte and the kids had a great time being confused by what they could choose. The favourite was poories and by 9 we had chivvied them to the bus.

First stop : Landmark, the best book shop of CBE. A ride up the lift to the topmost floor to come down three! They were in four groups so that we could help them. We showed them how the books were arranged, the name plates. They spotted Winnie the Pooh books and they went aah and ooh. When they came to the toys and games section the eyes popped out. Quietly they touched the stuffed toys and hugged the 3 feet high Winnie and oohed over the crystals. They wanted to buy out the shop - the excuse the other children hadn't seen it!

They then used the pocket money they had brought along - to buy books. All got a 'winnie-the-pooh' book; those who had brought along more, got two or three books or a book and an audio cassette. We had the shop bill each child separately which delighted them. They left the shop walking on clouds they had seen the evening before.

A long drive to the Malampuzha dam near Palaghat. Driving along the Western Ghats and through rubber and teak plantations was fun. When they were told that we were entering Kerala, there were round eyes and they all looked around expecting to see something !!. They did - greener land and much cleaner.

We reached at lunch time and the lunch, sponsored by Mr Kishore of Geetha Hall, was delicious lemon rice and curd rice with chips and pickles. The children ate with relish and were off to play in the park. After we finished we took a ferry on the Malampuzha lake. The Western Ghats all around and the islands made even the quietest poetic. They understand the meaning of 'range'. We should see the effect in their drawings now.

We walked down the dam and the mechanisms of the shutters and sluices were explained in detail. The children asked intelligent questions such as: where will the water go? How many places will get water? How much water can the dam dam? How long did it take to build the dam? When was it finished? How many people did it take to build the dam? If the dam took so long to build, what happened during the monsoons? Did the rain wash away what was built? How did they stop that from happening? Which are other dams in India and which the biggest?

It was early evening and they had an ice-cream. Most of the children had not seen a cornetto before. So, Pavithra, daughter of Shivakumar - our staff - instructed the other children. She did it with vigour.

Dinner was at Gowrishankar Annapoorna. It was decided that we take to an 'A/c' restaurant; the children asked for the ever favourite poories and barottas. We also ordered for some stuffed kulchas and had the children taste them. After two heavy courses they refused sweets! We had the chamcham [Bengali sweets that drip sugar syrup] packed. Then came the surprise : the sweets were declared complimentary from the F&B manager, Mr. Ramesh. We thanked him and asked him why. "Very nice children, very well behaved. I am very happy."

We came out feeling very nice. There was a balloon man - with 'gas' balloons. So every child was bought one. Outside Seetharam's, at 2330, the children played with the balloons while we set two free to demonstrate that the balloon was filled with gas that is lighter than air. It was midnight when we repaired to our rooms. The children were too excited to sleep so we rubbed some 'magic' oil on the legs. The teachers got to bed at half past.

18th: Fully energetic and wide awake at half past five, the kids went through their routines and packed their bags. Then a cup of milk and chamcham - truly Bengali style. I am sure the world heard them slurp and there was a deep, respectful silence for the sweet we wish they accorded us in class. Moments later noise broke loose as they requested that they be taken to the same restaurant. Which we did.

Shivakumar had an agenda. Teach them to eat with two spoons - so vada sambars were ordered and at each table one teacher demonstrated while the children quickly mastered. Then it was dosa time. Mr Ramesh walked in, and there were cheerful 'Sweet was wonderful, sweet was tasty, sweet was super... each trying out a different adjective and superlative. He laughed and sponsored 'snacks for the train'.

We then went to a fruit and vegetable shop - pazhamudirsolai - and had them see what they had only seen in books. At the end of the visit, we bought spring onions, lettuce, celery, carrots with the greens on them, red cabbage, goose berries, apples from Himachal and Kashmir for explanations back home.

We drove to Mr Gunashekar's SMB flour mill. They saw the entire process of how wheat is scraped, broken, ground, sifted to make sooji, wheat flour and fine flour. But like all six to eight year olds they were more fascinated by the noise the machines made and how they moved. The size of the machines was in keeping with the ideas they have from watching movies and they felt very happy! We are sure, if the machines were smaller and made less noise they'd have not been impressed.

Which is what happened at the hosiery export company we visited. They were told that the yarns come from other factories and that they cut the cloth to make T-shirts etc. They stood around looking bored and with a 'what have you brought us here for' expression. No amount of enthusiasm on our part and saying magical things like 'clothes from here go to Italy, Canada and Chile' made any impression on them. Shivashaktivel - our brightest 7 year old - asked if there were there any machines upstairs. When I said no, he nodded and went off to the bus!

Mr Gunashekar gifted the group with sooji, flour and wheat flour. Since December is just round the corner and we have a number of birthdays in December, Shivakumar is planning some interesting menus!

It was time to take the train back. The train stopped for precisely one minute. The kids got in with the alacrity of a Mumbayya and we loaded the food stuff and the train pulled out. The return was very uneventful. The children were left to their own devices, while the adults wrote up the accounts / had a meeting on ways to help the children do better. We got back to the school at 2230 hrs and the school cleared up at 2231.

I do not remember when three days flew by faster. The decision to take the children seemed so simple when in school. It was when we had to care for 11 six year olds and 1 five year old - brush and braid long hair, wash

and dry clothes, we learned a new connotation to the words 'a merry dance'.

Yesterday we had a debriefing. We asked them about what they enjoyed most - covered in Padma's report.

The children who had been given crayons by the lady at Landmark were called. We reminded them that the Mumbai group had been given clothes and that they had given them away to the juniors - themselves. Raghavan asked those children who felt they had behaved excellently through the trip to step up. 10 children came up confidently. A few got up and then had second thoughts. '50% - that's not bad; and looks like we almost made it to the 70+ %. Good,' was Raghavan's comment. As some of them have recorder players and they were given small promissory notes - to collect a cassette on Monday. The others were given crayons and art material.

They were then asked to elect the best behaved group. They were at first unable to decide between Shivakumar's and Kala's. Finally, they voted Shiva's. The group got a pack of biscuits and a toffee. Kala's got a toffee. Then Raghavan said that since the others had not really been such great bother either, they too should be given. And those children who did not see CBE should be given too.... So every body ended up with sweets.

Report from Shivakumar

Among themselves the children were very helpful, cooperative and compassionate. The children were energetic and enthusiastic all the time. This could be because of the following reasons: Priority in the school is to keep the children happy all the time. Being happy, was giving them energy to be enthusiastic. They were given information about the places they were to visit by the teachers. With that information the children were eager to learn more about things. By and large their behaviour was satisfactory. To be specific, at all mealtimes they were complimented by everyone. Areas requiring further attention Need to make them independent Giving them opportunity to take responsibility. To increase the time frame where silence is required.

With special thanks to

Miss Anita - who began the concept of this trip agreeing to sponsor

Mr. Shivakumar - a large part of the cost
- who not only took care of the children on
the trip but

also sponsored part of the cost.

Ms. Nirupama - who has agreed to sponsor to the extent of the deficit.

Mr Mohan - who was the enthusiastic finder of Anita and urging us on to make to trip Swami Siddhabhodananda, Arshavidyashram Gurukulam

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Mr Vaidyanathan - Nanadini's parent who gave packets of biscuits and snacks for the children

Mr Govindaraj - Tashildar of Erode and grandparent of Vaishnavi who gave biscuits and snacks

Mr Kesavan - whose eats delighted the children

Mr Suresh - who helped us with the arrangements at Coimbatore

Mr Kishore - Manager at Geeta Hall

Mr Ramesh - F&B Manager - Gowri Shankar Annapoorna

Mr Gunashekar - partner SMB flour mills

Mr Chenniappan - partner SMB flour mills

And all staff of Seetharam's, Geetha Hall, SMB flour mill