

Shikshayatan (A unit of Anugriha Charitable Trust)

Highlights of 2004 - 2005

Dhruv, Ramya and Arjun decided to return to Mumbai. The prayer and send off meeting was terrific. Children came up front and expressed themselves. All of them must have surely wondered on their popularity, so many children coming up and telling them how wonderful they were and how all of us would miss them. Dhruv has joined a school in Mumbai and Ramya and Arjun have enrolled for NIOS based std. X courses. Much as a farewell is sad, knowing that all must move on, we wished them all success in life.

Laxmi Mohan joined us along with her two year old son, Akash. Mohan who has been our constant assistor and positive critic for over two years now, decided to move to Arasavanangkadu so that he could admit his son into our school (I had made it clear that AVK children get the first preference during admissions). Laxmi decided to contribute by volunteering to be a teacher and has quickly proved to be a terrific asset. She is the first volunteer parent teacher of the school. This we hope will set the trend.

July saw the new batch begin their schooling with us, accompanied by their organ recitals. Silly symphony is what they were dubbed. But things got aground quickly and the end of the year saw us congratulating Bhuvaneshwari and Kanaga their teachers, who had done a wonderful job with the 'kutties' as they are fondly called.

August 15th this year was very interesting. After a prayer for the school – Shikshayatan was born on August 15th 1994 - Mr. Govindasamy of the Indian National Army of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose. He was the translator for Netaji, translating from Japanese and Burmese to Hindi. Eighty two years young, he gladly raised the flag, gave a very short but inspiring speech to the children and then there were questions on Netaji and about his love for Netaji. The children staged a small programme and of course there were sweets.

We wondered what we could do different for the kids this year and a great idea struck us (at least the kids thought it was a lovely one). We arranged for a buffet lunch setting up tables, cheffing-dishes, spoons and dinner

plates, for the spread with commies wearing uniform including chef-caps and offering each person the fare. The kids and the adults were really thrilled with the show and everyone appeared to dig in as never before. Watching them enjoy the food so, was really heart-warming. There has been a specific request that we repeat this performance every year (we agreed – funds permitting!!)

We are only 30 kms from Kumbakonam – a household name in the wake of the disaster that the school there. The upshot is that the state government has passed a rule that there be no thatch roof; that there be no class rooms above the kitchen. We've always had thatch for the nursery and the KG. – eco friendly and much cooler than the RCC roofs; we also had a class above the kitchen. Suddenly we are short of two class rooms. (The nursery and lower KG. have only half day school, so they share a class room.) At the moment, the library has been converted into a classroom and 'Utsav'-the indoor stadium has been converted into a class room until 1600 hrs. Then for an hour its games time anyway.

Our children are all doing extraordinarily well – a very modest statement. They learn at a great pace; in three months we'll have completed the year's 'syllabus'. We have special music appreciation programme where the children learn to identify ragaas and some songs in each raaga. The fourth graders have read a *full length Tamil novel* of 250 pages and are getting ready to begin the Tamil translation of the 'Wings of fire' by our President.; they write poems, do wonderful art work, play like they are at Athens and get into mischief. The younger ones have great role models and by being fast keep the older ones on their toes. The children look less and less like village children and the village has finally accepted us in full. So much so that they have, of their own, put up poles and have lit the entire school road – about half a kilometer. They maintain it too.

October: Vivekanandan who had looked to be a permanent fixture in the school after being with us for more than five years, decided to move ahead to Bangalore and from there to Singapore. There was lot of display of emotion on the day of the send-off party. Much was made of his constant presence in every re-construction, of his Tamil classes, of his ever-ready-to-help nature. During the years here we helped him take up MCA (masters in computer applications) degree and having passed that he felt the need to move into a programming career. We wish him all success.

December: Sivakumar and Sugandhi who had been with us along with Pavitra their daughter left us to move to Chennai and thence to Kuwait. We really missed them each with their specialty. Sivakumar with his penchant for orderliness, the defense discipline; Sugandhi with her amazing success with the youngest group of children; and Pavitra with her bright and extraordinary performances in class both academically and otherwise. We wish them success in their future endeavours.

Five children, Tanvi, Niru, Aruna and I found us at Bhubaneswar attending the IDEC-2004 conference, (a conference on Democracy in Education). Amukta was kind enough to invite us to present one session and she also agreed to subsidise our cause. When we were still wondering she decided it for us saying we could bring some kids along with us. The result was our very enriching week at Bhubaneswar a report of which is separately up on the net. [Bhubaneswar Trip](#)

Come December 26th and we were overwhelmed with working with tsunami affected people of the Vellapallam village – more specifics about it in [Comprehensive Note](#) Through the months of January to March we were completely immersed in the relief related operations. The upshot of this was a lot of questions in the minds of the teachers and ourselves – is Arasavanangkadu not a ‘tsunami affected-like’ village on a permanent basis.

We have people poorer than those affected in the Tsunami, we have people earning less than the fisher-folk, we have people living in poorer living conditions than the fisher folk. What are we doing about all this? Should we not be doing much more here? A fresh look and impetus resulted in the following actions from our end:

- we decided to continue to sponsor two teachers (paying their salaries) in the local government school, as the sanction was only for three teachers for a school with classes one to five.
- We undertook a training program for those teachers and have begun providing them teaching aids on a library basis, regularly.
- We have sponsored the proposal to bring electricity to the school (the school has been functioning without electricity for last 30 years!!).
- We have promised them a computer in their school.
- We regularly take part in their school activities with active participation of our teachers .

The tsunami brought us many visitors:

Jayshree and Manasa from Seattle (a three day visit)

Linda from Seattle (who stayed six weeks with us)

Nick Clements from London – he stayed with us for a fortnight

Avani, Ajay and Mannan from Gujarat – they stayed a couple of weeks with us

(We take the opportunity of this report to thank them all – it was really nice of them to have spent time with the kids sharing fond moments with them – that experience itself is invaluable!)

It was lovely that each of them took time off to come to the school and be with the kids, although their original agenda had been to work with the ‘tsunami affected’. The children really fell for them. There has always been a complaint that we were too indulgent with the children; these visitors made it even more their business. Walking arm-in-arm with them, joking with them, taking them around the village, showing them the fields and talking about the crops, the soil, the water; they had a wonderful time. More than anything else it was the exposure to visitors from other places, who opened up the world for them; speaking about their countries, their people, their beliefs and cultures, their experiences. We have always believed that only such exposure from visitors would make a big difference to the thinking perspectives and this year the tsunami brought us all this in abundance.

Holi was played in its traditional form. Water and ‘gulal’ (red colour powder), water sprayers, buckets, hoses and finally a dip in the swimming pool to cool off. We are quite sure that the colour and gaiety of the day would be vividly imprinted in their minds. (It is not everyday that one can dunk the principle or trustees or visiting dignitaries with coloured water!)

Linda took on herself Halloween as a project - pumpkins, trick or treat and all. It was great that Manasa (she must be five) was there at that time putting in her share of comments and suggestions. Trick or treat, trick or treat they went around each teacher, to the grandmothers’, to the grandfather’s and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Purim with Nick was a bash! He was taken to the local bakery shop and Tiruvarur and he thought in GBPounds and did not know when to stop buying – everything seemed to cost so little (in pounds!). The result was a load of goodies which they brazenly gorged. Nick talked about the Purim

and why and how they celebrate it. When it was time to leave Nick was close to tears and so were the kids. It was a heart-rending scene, the children offering flowers, greeting cards, bouquets and hand-made pots and candles to Nick; and Nick looking at them so emotionally. The children are sure to remember his two weeks with us forever.

February: A month of much fanfare. Tanvi who had been with us for the last five years was to return to Mumbai to continue her studies there (joining into Standard IX). She was therefore made the architect of the school day in which she was allowed a free hand. The dance choreographed by her to a popular Hindi number “Koi Kahe, Kaheta Rahe” was a big hit with the children and the viewers. In fact we made that a Hindi lesson and most of the kids in the school know at least this one song in Hindi with the meaning of the song!

At the beginning of the year clubs had been formed – the creative writing and drama club, the art club, the music club, the reading club. The culmination of the efforts of the children during the year was a display of all their work during the year:

- the art club put up an exhibition of the drawing and paintings during the year. Murugesan the art teacher headed this and the whole class-room (Sagar – a four hundred fifty square-foot room) had its walls and floor filled with the best of the work done during the year. Painted scenes of nature, sketches of landscapes, portraits of people, gaily painted pots, dancing scented candles, colour-filled greeting cards just packed the brightly decorated room. Every parent was forced to visit the exhibition (they do not really understand what we meant by art exhibition and so were initially reluctant !). Once they were there and back, we had volunteers urging other parents to visit the room. All in all a great success of a terrific effort round the year.

- the creative writing club, wrote out the dialogues and scripts for the plays that were put up

- a Tamil saga of the life of Swami Vivekananda played by Govinda brought tears to the eyes of the on-lookers; it was so well written. About 14 pages of solo dialogue and the guy just sailed through the whole script, even we were amazed with the effort.

- a play in Hindi, written by Tanvi and choreographed by her and Chitra received standing ovation. Most of them spoke the words with little trace of Tamil – an astonishing feat indeed, to say the least.

- the ‘kutties’ (the youngest group) danced to the tune of popular poems they had learnt during the year amidst much confusion and consequent laughter.
- There was a play demonstrating the poor hygiene and ‘littering’ ways of the people, and displaying their abhorrence. (During the school days they are constantly provided with opportunity with small things like not throwing bits of paper, chocolate wrappers etc. anywhere in the campus; participate in programs cleaning up the campus regularly;
- the music club planned the songs to be played in the skits, as numbers, as play-back for the dance sequences. They did a fine job spear-headed by Niru

All-in-all it was a fine performance, the fine culmination of the team effort. This year the audience used up all the space in ‘Utsav’ the auditorium. We have never seen such a large gathering in the school before – surely a good sign.

This year we held three work-shops for parents and two work-shops for teachers at Arasavangkadu. All of them were well attended. A small activity we began – supplying our ‘Integrated Knowledge Program’ flash card set of 350 picture cards, set of books of the reading program cards with over 700 word cards and over 100 math cards – has been quite a good program. One girl from the village is thus gainfully employed in this activity.

This year we were invited for several sessions by the Tamil Nadu Directorate of Training and Research for Teachers. We held one session at Chennai, one session at Kilpennathur (Tiruvannamalai). We have had several visitors representing the directorates from Perumbalur district, from Namakkal district who have submitted very positive and favourable reports after checking our children for their bench-marks. Our children were graded very high in their evaluations. We held sessions at school here for Balwadi teachers of Tiruvarur district, two sessions at Koradachery for Balwadi teachers of other blocks including Kudavasal , Mannargudi, Velangiman etc. These sessions were highly invigorating and we hope to make deeper inroads into the formal system by discussing our methods in these forums. There has been a tremendous response from the participants who have gone back and then experimented in their schools and reported success with their children. They have requested for more sessions during the next academic year.

All this has been possible because of the unquestioning assistance given with so much trust and faith. We shall forever be indebted towards this spirit. We sincerely pray that we have the continued wishes of all our past and present donors. We thank you all.

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