



Trip Report: Vanavasi Ashram Trust, Kerala, India (January 17-18, 2002)

And 3 busses later, we had arrived. I was traveling with my father (and guide) in our impromptu trip to Wayanad. Periya 34 (the 34th mile from Thalasseri to Manantawadi, a big town in the Wayanad district) was the address of the Vanavasi Ashram Trust. Prof. Appanu Nambiar had sent Unnikrishnan with their Jeep, which was waiting for us as we stepped off the bus, to bring us to the school. The school was around a kilometer from the bus stop. The road to the school - stone and sand, was new, and the only mode of transportation until recently was by foot. It is still unmotorable in the monsoon months.



Even with the Kerala tourist office pitch – “Gods own country”, clearly plastered on billboards and all over the media, one would be hard pressed to find the link, agnostic or not, when one sees the pollution and sanitation problems on the streets of urban towns, but as we traveled up the mountains of the western ghats, and took in the beauty of the landscape, it was clear that we were in fact closer to heaven or at least the sky. The air was cool and clean; the foliage was lush and green. We had left behind the problems of fast urbanization and much more...



We got to the school around 16:30 hours. As the Jeep stopped in front of one of the buildings, I heard children reciting in unison. Some young inquisitive girls and boys were peering out of their windows to see who their visitors were. Prof. Nambiar welcomed us, and showed us to a room where we would spend the night. We left our bag in the room, and he proceeded to give us a tour of the school. My father and



Prof. Nambiar exchanged fond memories of Wayanad of the late 50's (my father was a Malaria inspector in the late 50's as part of the WHO's malaria eradication program. Prof. Nambiar's journey from his college years to professorship had begun in this area).



I proceeded to take photographs of the school, the children and the buildings that were under construction. Prof. Nambiar told us how the money and resources sent by AID, ASHA and IDRF were being put to use. ASHA Stanford had most recently sanctioned the construction of 3 rooms for a sum of 2 Lakhs each. The I2 funds through AID Boston were used to buy the second hand

jeep that received us, a milch cow, 1.69 acres of land to grow tapioca (which was a favorite with the children and supplied 40 days worth of breakfast a year) and a few other vegetables for food. Prof. Nambiar mentioned several times how useful and critical the jeep has been in providing them with mobility for medical and other purposes. We had a few curious boys following us around on the tour. The children were uniformed - pink blouses or shirts with maroon skirts or trousers. The children - bright eyed with big smiles were definitely not shy, and asked questions about us, what we were there for, where we came from etc. A few of the boys put together a show for us at the spot of a local dance they performed there, similar to the dandia raas of Gujarat. Then the instructor also rounded up a few girls to do a similar performance for us. The energetic display of dance was mixed with curiosity regarding their guests.



We proceeded to the land they bought through the I2 funds. It was a couple of miles away since Prof. Nambiar was unable to buy land next to the school - this was tribal land, and could not be purchased under law. We took the jeep, and were accompanied by two children from the school, incidentally belonging to two different sub-castes who did not interact typically. It was nice to see a Gandhian tenet such as caste equality actually being practiced in these parts! Incidentally, the only picture or symbol in the school was a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi in Prof. Nambiar's office. We stopped on the way for tea and light snacks for the kids. Prof. Nambiar later told us that these two children had without instruction watered the concrete structures for one of the buildings. This was an important task and these boys took it upon themselves without asking for help. Unbeknownst to the children, Prof. Nambiar wanted to reward them with this small trip.



After walking the perimeter of the land, we proceeded back to the school. When we got back, we visited the field behind the school, where the parents of these children were working on the recent rice harvest. They were given food for work. A rented tractor was being used to separate the rice from the chaff. Last year, they were able to get thirty sacks of wheat, but this year they were short. One of the tribe members - the tribes still having very traditional orthodox beliefs, suggested that it might be because the land used for separation was different.



We washed up and joined the children for evening assembly. This is when all 230 students sat together, the girls in one group and the boys in another and they proceeded to evening prayers. Three to six boys and girls led the group in song. Their command of slokhas was strong. The rhythm was kept up with a hand drum that one of the teachers played and with synchronous clapping by the students. The prayer lasted for one hour. Then Prof. Nambiar wanted to

let us interact with the students. First, some of the children sang songs for us. Four boys and then four girls sang songs in Malayalam, Tamil and Hindi. At this point some of the children suggested that I sing them a song to which I replied that if I sang, the dogs would start howling. This got some laughs from the children. Next, we prompted the children to ask questions about America. The children had more general knowledge it seemed than some of the adults there!



They asked questions about September 11th, and why some one would do that. They asked about computers, at which point, my father asked which was important to have, computers or food? One of the children correctly suggested we needed both!



After we broke from assembly, Prof. Nambiar continued to give my father a tour of the cooking facilities. They were given large steam cookers, the kind used in weddings, (through IDRF) to cook for 200 or more people. I hung around with the children and we sat together chit- chatting. They were very curious about America, American children, snow and other things. They wanted to know what kind of animals we would see there – a natural question when

these children live in a habitat quite frequented by wild elephants. Though it was getting cold at night, as it does high up there, I broke a sweat surrounded by so many energetic and inquisitive children.



What I learnt that night was that these girls and boys from five different local tribes had an appetite for learning unattained by most children in urban areas. For them, education is a luxury no body else in their family has had an opportunity for. It is quite evident after talking and interacting with these children that they have transcended years of traditional tribal life filled with mysticism, superstition and sub-caste divisions. Traditional

inequities have already been broken with the establishment of this school and provide a valuable example of how literacy and education are determinants of modernity. With a formal education, tribal culture it would seem would be lost, however, it is clear that this school reinforces with its practices the importance of preserving tribal culture by providing opportunities and freedoms to these children that will enable them to understand the importance of their heritage. An opportunity for education especially for the girl child was unimaginable to any women here before this school and provides hope for a brighter future for them. These children walk a fine line and have an uphill task of being the first in their families to break from a status quo of dependence to a future of self-reliance.

We joined the children for dinner – Kanji (rice soup) with lentil curry and bean curry. I followed the children to collect utensils that each person first washed. Then we stood in line to collect the food. The serving size was quite large. I was stupefied at the amount a child half my size was



able to eat. I was later informed that all these children belong to a community where every member of the family works all day long, so their consumption was proportional to their output. In fact, it was quite obvious that these children for their age were quite strong and still performed miscellaneous duties to help continue to build the school. Prof. Nambiar mentioned that before they had roads there, it was a group of five boys that brought 270 bags of stone and sand to the school compound. During dinner, I also asked some of the kids what their parents thought of the school, and the education they were getting. They said their families were happy, and prompted them to study well. There was an undeniable level of trust the families of these children had in Prof. Nambiar and the school.



After dinner, I followed the children around to see what activities they were involved in. Some were back in the classrooms doing math problems; others were following me around asking about other aspects of life abroad. It was heartening to see kids take such an interest in learning without being prompted by grown-ups. I guess to a certain degree, these kids were already acting like grown-ups by showing a level of

discipline few their age in urban schools would show. Their routine - wake up at 5:30am, followed by assembly, physical training, bath, breakfast followed by studies from 8:30am to 2:00pm, vocational training, playtime, evening assembly at 6:30pm, dinner and bedtime was rigorous. Their initiative was impressive.

Next, we met up with Prof. Nambiar and discussed his current/future plans, hopes and concerns before retreating for the evening. The next morning, we awoke to nature's alarm clock - the rooster. Prof. Nambiar was already awake and



about his routine at 4:30am. I know this because I was kept awake with my father snoring. That day, Prof. Nambiar had to visit the local tribal commissioner to secure the grant (Rs. 12 per child per day) due to them for the previous year. Since he had to go to the town, he generously offered to drop us off at the bus station in Manantawadi. We had some hot tamarind coffee in the morning and proceeded to depart. After the early morning assembly, we took our leave from the kids wishing them well for a bright future. We huddled around for some final pictures for which all the kids were eager. The children, clasping the cuffs of their sweaters from the cold,



were off to physical training led off to the foggy fields for their morning stretching and running routines by Subhash. We got back in the jeep and followed the nine hairpin descent to Manantawadi. We had a quick breakfast, and Prof. Nambiar wished us farewell at the bus stop as he proceeded to meet the tribal commissioner.



It was clear what we left behind on our ascent to the school, and what we were coming back to as we approached urban life - politics, not for social development but economic gain is alive and well. Secular organizations like the school were not fostered by the government as much as they should be. Prof. Nambiar mentioned that he has been able to resist political pressures, though party alignment was common in these parts to attain the ends one desires. One would hope that the Kerala government promotes and supports both the ideas and ideals behind educational institutions such as this to exemplify to a national and international audience, the recognition the state holds in literacy in India.

And 3 busses later, we were back. We left "Gods own country". The best part of the trip besides meeting bright young children like Raman, Santhosh and Rajakrishnan, seeing the results of a dedicated teaching staff (13 teachers), and Prof. Nambiar's devotion is to realize that up on this mosquito free mountain landscape we can find a school that easily challenges any of the best urban schools. The Vanavasi Ashram School is an excellent example to show us the real meaning of what it takes to deliver education to every Indian child...

