

Making a difference to the rural communities

10 April 2013 | Views

Making a difference to the rural communities in Mittur village



The harsh conditions of the rural life in India are driving an incredible number of farmers to migrate from villages despite the cleaner air to nearby badly polluted towns and cities in search of a more reliable income, better access to schools/amenities for their children and ironically a better life for all in the family. This is a double-pronged attack: more crowded cities and continuous deterioration of urban life; and more importantly the drastic reduction in agricultural activity, productivity and animal welfare which are fundamental for food, feed and fiber security of all in India.

Our focus needs to be on creating a better ecosystem for village folks to stay back with trust and confidence of reliable access to food, health care, education and regular income. This requires investment of ideas, money and time into better agricultural technologies and practices, infrastructure development, health care and education for all. While the governments are continuously establishing numerous schemes to meet various challenges, it is never sufficient and swift enough.

Recognizing such a gap, many like-minded well-wishers of the villages have come forward in a manner that is making a huge difference to the rural communities-in this case in Mittur and surrounding villages. The development and transformation hub is the humble high school (SKRSHS - Sri Kodanda Rama Swamy High School) in Mittur which has students coming from many other villages in the region and thus well set to spread goodness in a fast and efficient manner. The measure of success lies in reverse migration- i.e. people heading back to the villages for a quality life and to help conserve natural diversity that our country India is well known for generations but rapidly declining.

India's youth potential in a village high school

Carrying the richness of a pioneering civilization for thousands of years, India today is being termed by many as a very "young" country. The term "young" here applies to the very large number of youth we are fortunate to have in contrast to many developed nations being termed as "aging". The core strength of India rests in the villages and in the untapped potential of millions of children especially those in their teens as clearly reflected in their eyes. In an environment for teens to surface their talent and inner strength combined with new skills and hard work, sky will be the limit for their contribution to the

present and future of India. High Schools are great entities to identify and nurture such talent for better India.

SKRSHS has a teaching staff of eight members and around 125 students coming from eight other villages and thus well set to spread new ideas and benefits in a fast and efficient manner through their fresh teenage minds.

SKRSHS in Mittur is a state government-aided school with basic support from the state in form of provision of staff, mid-day meals and bicycles. The building and its associated infrastructure is facilitated by the village folk. This high school enrolls children graduating from primary and middle schools in Mittur and other surrounding villages providing an opportunity within a distance of a few kilometers for continuous education for all children in the region. The frequent get-togethers of children from primary, middle and high schools creates opportunities to learn from each other in a rapid manner while also creating a spark in younger children to pursue studies in high schools. Attention is being put on the overall development of youth encompassing a balanced integration of quality education, health and hygiene, creativity and leadership attributes.

Creation of a better ecosystem for learning and sharing at SKRS High School:

Civil infrastructure

- School building (built in stone for longevity) and infrastructure including procuring the surrounding land from village donors
- Building of stone slab fencing around the school to provide safety, security, and serenity
- Construction of a shelter on the school platform for assembly
- Installation of platform safety fencing
- Upgrading to provide access to wheel chair bound individuals
- Construction of Ranges (stone platforms for trees) for open air meetings and discussions (courtesy of Dr Hiranya Gowdaru and Family)
- Building of kitchen, store room, dining hall (multipurpose hall)

Health and hygiene

- Access to free monthly dental and eye clinical services by expert doctors from Bangalore, complementing the state primary health care centre facility
- Health check up for girls and boys from the volunteers of YFS (Youth for Seva) that includes haemoglobin levels, personal hygiene, sanitation methods and follow up where required in alignment with parents/guardians
- Involvement of teenage girl children and mothers for better awareness of menstrual hygiene and sourcing of affordable healthy sanitary ware from a women's college in Bangalore
- Installation of the Bio-Sand water filtering system to provide safe drinking water to staff and children. This has now been extended to 75 households and provision for another 25 is being worked out.
- Installation of parallel bars for daily exercise.

Creation of science and technology temper

- Frequent visits by a stream of professionals/scholars (national and international) for interaction with students and staff
- Initiation of creating a science park with concepts of a sun dial clock, Vidya Jyothi lamp, telescope and other rewarding units
- Creation of a kitchen garden for students/staff to grow vegetables and flowers.
- Provision of a radio; working towards internet access for worldwide touch.
- Conducting of a workshop on plant propagation to better understand the beneficial power of genetics and new traits in plants.
- Conducting of a workshop on Medicinal and Aromatic plants (MAPs) in collaboration with Central Institute for Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (CIMAP), Lucknow and Bangalore for high school children and farmers. This has led to the establishment of demonstration plots on the lands provided by various farmers, cultivation of aromatic plants such as lemongrass and palmarosa. First batch of harvest upon distillation yielded good amount of oil and fetched reasonable returns. Aromatic compound distillation plant unit has been fabricated by CIMAP-Lucknow and will soon be installed in Mittur which will be a major attraction for many farmers to cultivate MAPs for reliable income.

IT and energy infrastructure

- Provision of a few computers by an IT company and relevant gadgets by well-wishers.
- Supply of 28 LED lamps along with batteries to children for (re)charging at school and using at home for studies. Highly motivational to attend school
- Installation of alternative energy sources such as solar panels and a bicycle pedal power generator

- Installation of rechargeable (solar or pedal) LED lamps in class rooms for evening classes and general learnings
- Provision of fans, water connection, solar steam cooker and peanut roaster.

Waste segregation and management

- Initiation of waste collection, segregation and management plans
- Provision of garbage collection bins and familiarity with waste segregation at source.
- Installation of green washroom facility with feasibility for water and refuse recycling mechanisms in future.
- Leadership and ownership
- Starting of eight student clubs under the sponsorship of individual teachers and leadership of a student secretary. The focus is on:
 - Safety
 - Nature and environment
 - Debate
 - Arts and crafts
 - Sing, dance and act (GLEE)
 - Kitchen garden
 - Animal welfare
 - Sports
- Initiation of HR sessions on leadership, ownership, accountability & team building (first workshop held on October 13, 2012)

Energy efficient transportation vehicle

Help is continuously being sought and will hopefully arrive from like-minded individuals and organizations to assist in meeting the challenge of reinforcing rural aura for productive and peaceful living in the villages of India.

One such major requirement is for an energy-efficient transportation vehicle to be used for the following purposes:

- Daily transportation of several children from far away villages (2-4 kms) to enable them arrive with fresh minds into the class room and then back home in the evenings
- Transportation of volunteer teachers from bus stops in the high way (3 - 10 kms). A few professionals have expressed interest in sharing their skills and knowledge with children in villages
- Emergency transportation of sick children/staff/village folks to nearby hospitals
- Carrying of light to medium weight cargo required for the school.
- Animal welfare
- Collaborated with SOACTINDIA, an NGO focused on animal welfare to conduct 10 animal welfare camps (7 villages) with expertise provided by leading veterinarian physicians and doctors. Farm animals diagnosed and treated
- Over 200 dogs neutered, treated and released to lead peaceful life
- Found homes for over 15 pups in street pup adoption drive
- Introduced a concept to change mindset for saving male calves
- Regular counselling for small animal welfare.

Other projects (work in progress)

- Initiated work towards establishment of Village Knowledge Center (VKC), a collaborative effort from O Mittur Panchayath, IIT Mumbai - Bangalore Chapter, SVYM (Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement and a NGO Project 1947). VKC once in place will be open to children and adults of Mittur and other villages in the area for computer education and training. For high school students, VKC would be providing access to educational DVDs carefully prepared by SVYM/Project 1947 along with a DVD player to supplement their learning curriculum in a graphical and interactive manner
- Discussion is going on with a trust to establish a resident school for visually impaired children in the region
- Discussing with friends to help build a Vocational Skills Training Center to provide opportunities to academic drop-outs to learn skills such as carpentry, plumbing, masonry, electrical and mechanical, sewing, waste management etc. for them to become self dependent.
- Assistance to the Ministry of Rural Development to identify youth for training for employability in urban franchises.

The power of face to face networking in real time has been the single most significant factor in our attempts towards initiating changes in the village of Mittur. We were fortunate to meet two individuals namely, a young dentist Dr Sameer Savakoor and an elderly octogenarian Mr Radhakrishna Kalawar (former executive Indian Railways) who have performed enormous roles in setting examples for creating interest amongst many urban professionals and NGO representatives to visit Mittur and share their talent, skills and knowledge.

We are grateful to them and many well-wishers, the management and staff of SKRS High School, the members of O Mittur Panchayath and the people of Mittur for their help and interest in making a difference in this O Mittur region of India. Their support has been an incredible source of positive energy for many more people to volunteer.