

Saturday, May 9, 2009

Subject: Happenings at Imlee Mahuaa

Dear friend,

Here is a report on the developments at Imlee Mahuaa during the last 4 months (January to April 2009).

a. Craft based earn while you learn program

During the last two years in Balenga Para, we have observed that a large (almost 85 percent) of school children drop out of school when they are in classes 4 through 7. These children typically come from impoverished families that need such children to stay back at home to attend to work such as taking the cattle grazing, or tending to the 'baadi' -kitchen garden or collecting minor forest produce or look after their younger siblings and free up their mothers or elder siblings for gainful employment.

We think that if we can get children at Imlee Mahuaa to become earning members of their families while they study at school, the children would fulfil the economic need at home and may also be successful at thwarting familial pressure on them to drop out of school, thus investing wisely for the future by continuing with formal education. Towards this end, we have introduced this term terracotta (pottery) work at school.

A trained craftsman from Saathi - a renowned NGO that works with artisans and craftspeople in the region visited Imlee Mahuaa on Fridays during the term that went by and spent the entire day training our senior children and staff in the art of making clay articles for the market. They started off with little articles such as beads and pendants that will be used to make jewellery. We expect the craftsman to continue to visit us throughout the coming year. We now have a small collection of clay articles which primarily comprise jewellery components ready for firing at the Saathi kiln next term.

In the coming term we expect to build up our stock of such components, finish assembly and packaging and sell the jewellery made by our staff and children in the local and regional markets and share with our staff and children the sale proceeds of such goods. We hope to take our staff and senior children to the local market "haat" and give them a first hand experience at selling too.

If successful, this initiative has the potential of creating substantial

supplementary income for the families of our staff and children, could push them up the socio-economic ladder and also stem the drop out rates of our students through middle school.

b. Children with learning difficulty

We seemed to have a vacancy in January as Ravi, one of our special children had stopped coming to school for about 6 weeks without any communication from his parents to us. We had heard that Ravi's parents wanted to withdraw him from school as he couldn't cope with the work at school, but they were unwilling to meet us. It was only towards the middle of February that we were able to meet with Ravi's father and convince him that Ravi could indeed cope with school work in the long run, despite his special challenges, with a little encouragement and support from home and school. So Ravi resumed school again and we ended the term and the year with 16 children (including Gaurav a new child we admitted during the term).

When we look around us, we find that children with learning difficulties abound in rural India, like in urban India and elsewhere. Of the 16 children who study at Imlee Mahuaa at least 5 show signs of dyslexia and other learning difficulties. While the awareness and resources for helping such children through their early ages is significantly high in the urban world, an equally crying need exists for such resources and efforts in rural India too!

c. New teachers and students for next year

We plan to admit another 14 children in the coming term that starts on June 1 taking our total student number to 30. Towards this end, we hired at the end of March, three new teachers - Budhni, Laksman and Hemlal - who are undergoing training during the summer, preparing for their work in the coming year. All new teachers have passed their class 12 examinations and are local tribal youth. Thus we will enter the next academic year with 6 local teachers and 30 children (maintaining our desired student : teacher ratio of 5:1).

d. Search for a resident Principal and Teacher's Trainer

We have commenced a search for a resident Principal and Teacher's Trainer for Imlee Mahuaa. Our search is being conducted primarily through informal networks of friends, friends in alternative schools and a professional services firm - JobsforGood. We are in the process of setting up a web page on Facebook for this purpose too.

We were hoping that the downturn in the economy would prompt some

wannabe 'do gooders' to turn our way, but that was not to be.... The consistent feedback that we have received from all our recruitment channels is that the positions at Imlee Mahuaa suffer from the huge challenge of residing in Balenga Para (read lack of basic physical infrastructure, Bastar, middle of nowhere, naxalite prone area.....).

It seems to us that we are going to have to be very patient in our search for candidates for these two positions..... . What we really need is a firebrand go getter volunteer who will not rest until she / he helps us fill these two positions that are likely to be key determinants of the speed and efficiency with which we do our work in the near future.

We are attaching to this note a profile of the two positions on offer at Imlee Mahuaa for your information.

e. Visiting Volunteers

During the four months that went by, we hosted our first lot of visiting volunteers from Bangalore, Chennai and Ahmedabad who stayed with us for periods ranging from a few days to a few weeks. Sheetal, Rahul, Alifa, Ershad, Avi, Jaya and little Mehar came, stayed with us, made a huge difference to our work and life and went back home leaving with us great smiles, memories, photographs, recipes, stories, learning and lots more. We now have a huge collection of digital photographs thanks to some of our volunteers and we are currently trying to sort them out into albums on Picasa and hope to send you links to the albums soon....We also spoke to CLSA, an investment bank that featured us in their recent publication that tries to capture diverse voices from across the country.

Many thanks to Archana, friends at I Volunteer and at CLSA for making this enriching experience happen.....

f. Fund Raising

We have made an application to the Ministry of Home Affairs for registration under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act. Such registration will allow us to receive donations from overseas sources.

Our application to Echoing Green Foundation, New York was chosen from among 1000 applications worldwide to participate in the second stage of the competition for innovative projects along with 300 others. Unfortunately, our project was not chosen for the third and final stage of the competition pruned to 20 applicants. However we learnt a great

deal while preparing for the second stage.

We also attracted a few more individuals towards donating financially to Imlee Mahuaa. Many thanks to everyone.

g. Construction of New Premises

We started off construction of our school premises this term on the land donated by Balenga Para community (vide a resolution of the village panchayat). The plan was to construct an open air assembly hall, 4 class rooms, an office and residential quarters for teachers from places outside Bastar this year. The construction has proceeded at a slow pace by and large and has currently been put on hold pending an official process started by the Tehsildar's office for officially allotting the land to the school. Typically such processes are known to take their own time. We have therefore obtained the community's permission to erect temporary structures made of bamboo adjoining the 'ghotul' where the school has run for the last two years, to see our increased numbers through the monsoon.

h. Student's work reports

As usual, at the end of the last term, we hosted our parent body at school for a morning. The children presented to their parents a snapshot of the things they had learnt at school during the term through a little cultural program and then parents and teachers met individually to discuss each child's work at school. A copy of a typical report that was given to the parents of each child is attached to this

note for your reading (it is rather long.....). The report was translated orally in Hindi, Halbi or Gondi and explained to the parents, before handing it over. Imlee Mahuaa closed for holidays on April 1 and will recommence academic work on June 1, 2009.

i. Wishlist for the coming year.....

Well, here's what we'd like to do with our students during the coming year besides studies and other regular work

a. three months of listening to Karadi tales and learning to listen to, understand and speak good English from the likes of Naseeruddin Shah.....

b. a month long theatre workshop culminating in a show for the entire community.....

c. three to four weeks of fun with clay.....perhaps a terracotta workshop with a wannabe / contemporary designer.....

d. an overnight outing to a nearby forested place

e. lots of fun time with visiting volunteers (perhaps some elderly visitors too...) listening to stories and tales, learning poems and songs and little tricks and games from all over.....

Any thoughts, ideas or suggestions??????????

Do write to us.....

Wishing you all Happy Holidays!

With warm regards from all of us at Imlee Mahuaa.
