

January 14, 2010

Subject: Since May 2009 at Imlee Mahuaa

Dear friend,

When we wrote to you last in May 2009, we had just closed our second academic year and were looking forward to the third one. As we write to you this time, we have just begun the third term of our third academic year having shed our warm clothes a week ago as it has already started warming up in Bastar while most parts of North India still are reeling under the cold wave.

These last six months have been exciting and fulfilling as have the times before.

We started off this academic year on June 1, 2009, took a break for a couple of weeks at the end of August, reopened on September 5 and continued until the first week of December when we took another break for three weeks, starting our third term in all earnest on December 28, 2009. From last year's 16 students and four teachers, we have grown to 30 students and seven teachers.

Students are currently taught at three different academic levels - Arun, Uday and class 2 (we promoted our class 1 to class 2 in December 2009). The oldest child is about 15 years old and the youngest is three. About 8-10 children show signs of being dyslexic. Five are government school drop outs who are all enjoying their work and learning at their current school with enthusiasm.

We now have Milan Baghel - a professional traditional potter on our staff. 50 percent of our staff are women and all except one of us are locals. We expect to close our third academic year on April 30 and reopen on June 1 for the next year.

Some of the highlights of the six months that have gone by have been:

❖ **Learning to communicate**

We rolled out Karadi Path - a creative way of learning English with Karadi the bear - from actions, songs and stories written especially for Indian children and sung and narrated by the who's who of Indian performing arts. With the help of Karadi Path - a production of Karadi Tales Company, Chennai, children at Imlee Mahuaa who had been exposed to a year of basic English are currently learning English like they have learned their mother tongues - Halbi and Gondi. And we are already seeing results in and outside the classroom when occasionally children burst into spontaneous English words or phrases while addressing each other or their teachers. Every class holds wondrous surprises for the teacher and the kids alike. And when children appreciate the nuances of the language as only they can...just this morning six year old Kundan rhymed 'pansy' and 'chimpanzee' - words that he had learnt from the charts for flowers and animals respectively, the joy of the teacher and the child know no bounds.

Our English work also got a big boost when Emily, an English girl and a graduate in Human Geography who had come to India to do a one month course - Development from the Inside, decided to volunteer with Imlee Mahuaa through our second term. For three months, Emily resided at Balenga Para, and adjusted to the lack of basic infrastructure without fuss. She learnt to hoist pots of water on her head and make chapaatis as enthusiastically as she partook in the day to day work of the school and taught English. Emily has promised to return after she is done with her Masters in Development Studies next year.

While our children and teachers continue to learn English with Karadi the Bear through their third term, we expect to start using Hindi Karadi Tales in boosting our Hindi language work with the children in the coming months.

In order to be able to make our reports on the children's work more understandable to their parents, we wrote our reports for the second term in Hindi. Of course wherever required we translated the reports orally in Gondi or Halbi while talking to the parents. A copy of our reporting template is attached to this email.

We also feel that it is essential that the children keep in touch with their mother tongues (Gondi or Halbi) at school too and to learn to speak both local languages (most speak only their mother tongue). Learning the local languages at school will also serve the useful purpose of building bridges between life at school and at home (real life) - in contrast to the walls that are often built around life at school by conventional systems of education. With these objectives in mind, during the second term this year, we started off assemblies in Gondi and Halbi for the entire school, using actions, songs and stories in the two languages as aids for communication and learning. Children have taken to learning the languages with ease and enthusiasm and seem oblivious of the fact that they are actually learning four different languages at school already. We hope to develop this initiative into a full-fledged language program for Halbi and Gondi in the coming months and years.

The trip to Kerala in December was also an initiative in helping the members of our staff to broaden their understanding of the world outside Bastar and to communicate better by meeting people from another part of the country and also see, taste and experience the life and landscape in those climes from close quarters. During this trip (that a friend Mr Jinan from Kerala helped to plan), we met and visited people doing interesting and socially useful work in different walks of life and about whom we had all learnt during our training meetings in the months that had preceded our trip to Kerala with information from the internet. Among the people we met and places we visited were:

- + Mr Pokkudan - a septuagenarian who has planted thousands of mangroves along the coast of Kannur to protect the land from the

ingress of the sea. Mr Pokkudan has a repertoire of information about the life and uses of various species of mangroves native to his region;

- + Kanavu - a unique school for tribal people of the hilly Wayanad region, which was started off by an award winning playwright Baby and his wife Shirley, and which the founders have recently handed over to the Kanavu Makkal Trust whose trustees are the senior students of the school. Kanavu is today an intrepid residential community of tribal youth and children that works hard in the paddy fields and stages music performances across India to keep its head above the water and continue to help the tribal youth and children of Wayanad take confident steps in life;
- + Latha, Geetha, Divya, Unni, Ravi, and their friends and colleagues at the Chalakudy Puzha (River) Samrakshana Samiti who have been working zealously for the last several years trying to successfully block the construction of a dam and hydel power project on the river Chalakudy at the picturesque Vazhachal waterfalls. The four days that we spent at Vazhachal gave us fascinating insights into the life of a river and its environment as well as the various sides to progress and development arguments as viewed by various constituencies from their own points of view, especially those whose voices are often the least heard - marginalized tribal populations uprooted ceaselessly over the years from their natural habitats;
- + Dr Vijayan and his team of tribal ayurvedic practitioners at Body Tree on the banks of the Kallar where we corrected our habits of drinking water, breathing, walking and posture, were introduced to the principles of auto-urine therapy, and got to see the varying topography of Kerala when we visited Ponmudy in the Western Ghats, barely 30 kms away but only after a steep climb exceeding 1000 metres;
- + Mr Ali Manikfann, a septuagenarian retired officer from the Indian Fisheries Institute, at his Do Nothing Farm, who is credited for discovering several new species of fish such as the Abdudeduf Manikfani a slender fish chocolate brown in colour found in the waters around Lakshadweep. Mr Manikfann is a gifted individual of varied interests. An ecologist at heart, he lives on fifteen acres of land near Vallioor in Tamilnadu, that he has left untouched allowing the soil to recoup its natural strengths over the years. He has also built in 1981 a replica of Sindbad's ship Sohar, that was 27 metres long and used four tons of coir to sew the planks of its hull, using a 16th century Portuguese design. The Irish adventurer Tim Severin sailed in this ship over 9600 kms from Oman to China in its 8 month long journey.
- + Kanyakumari where the Indian Ocean meets with the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, with the breathtaking green and blue waters on three sides and the eyesore of thousands of environmentally friendly aluminum windmills that dot the landscape for tens of miles in every direction.

❖ **Working with our hands**

pottery, building the kiln, maintaining premises, cleaning premises, sharing a pool of pullovers and leggings, farming operations at each others farms, helping each other build mud houses, eating together and cleaning together, cooperation, manual labour, nai talim, man's natural instincts are cooperative and not competitive, grappling with dyslexia and similar learning disabilities in our own way....

❖ **Premises and Infrastructure**

❖ **The Bigger Picture**

We appreciate all your feedback...do write to us when you can...Thank you.

If you are a new addition to our mailing list, do write to us if you would like to have notes of our journey at Imlee Mahuaa since its inception in April 2007. Right now we are struggling to find someone who can design and have our website up and running so that we can populate it with notes on our journey and photographs from the very beginning...

And if you would like to be excused from this semi-annual routine of receiving news from our neck of the woods, do feel free to let us know and we'll make sure that we don't bother you any more (there won't be any hard feelings we assure you...).

Many thanks for your support and encouragement...

Warm regards

All of us at Imlee Mahuaa
