

Chennai,

Sunday, 9 May, 2010

Dear friend,

Greetings from Akanksha and Imlee Mahuaa! Please do accept our apologies for this mass mailer.

Hope this letter finds you coping well with the summer heat, perhaps holidaying in cool climes with friends and family.

We have a lot to share with you about the year that has gone....

- **Financial Support for Education**

In Chennai where Akanksha offers financial support for the education of needy children, the two younger girls continue to put in strong performances at their school and will enter class 1 this year at Manuel Mony Matriculation School . The two older girls are doing well too in their bachelor in electronics engineering and master of literature programs at colleges in Erode and Chennai respectively. The immediate objective of this work is to ensure the continued education of the girls through school and college. In the long run we expect the children to pull themselves and their families out of the vicious circle of poverty once and for all with the power of education.

- **Imlee Mahuaa Nae Taaleem Centre For Learning**

In Balenga Para, Bastar our work revolves around Imlee Mahuaa and its activities. Attached to the school, we also run a primary health centre where the residents of the village and nearby villages are treated for minor ailments.

This year we took several steps forward on various fronts at Imlee Mahuaa:

- a. School building and application for land

Armed with a resolution passed by the local Panchayat last year allotting a piece of its land to the school for constructing a building, we took earnest steps to collect the necessary material and started construction on the premises in April 2009 after getting a tube well bored on the premises. But within a

month of starting construction, some vested interests brought the work to a standstill by getting the Tehsildar to pass orders stopping the construction and getting the Panchayat to withdraw its resolution. The same interests then approached the Trust and asked for a payment of Rs 20,000 to facilitate cancellation of the Tehsildar's orders and expedite allotment of the land to the Trust. The Trust decided not to meet the demand.

When news spread about the happenings various villagers came forward asking the school to consider taking their lands on lease for construction of the school premises. After considering all proposals, the Trust finally made an application for allotment of land to the Collector of Bastar district in November 2009 short listing three alternate properties. No substantial action has been taken by the Collector on the application yet and we expect that the process of allotment of land will take a few years with due follow up. In the meanwhile, Imlee Mahuaa continues to function from the 'ghotul' premises in Balenga Para.

b. New children, staff and volunteers

This year we grew from 15 children to 30 (17 girls and 13 boys). Three new staff members Meena, Hemlal and Milan (a traditional master potter) came on board and have stayed with us through the year.

An English girl, Emily volunteered with us during the winter. For three months, Emily resided at Balenga Para and quickly adjusted to rural life sans basic infrastructure with aplomb. She learnt to carry pots of water on her head from the hand pump and to make chapatis as enthusiastically as she partook in the day to day work of the school and taught English.

Murali has recently joined us as a volunteer in Chennai and Reeta a local girl will start teaching at Imlee Mahuaa from June 1 this year.

c. Exploring and Expressing

This year we have used Halbi, Gondi, Hindi, English, Math, theatre, storytelling, pottery, art, yoga, music and dance to explore and understand the world we live in and to communicate with each other and express ourselves creatively.

Halbi and Gondi

Halbi and Gondi are the local languages in the region. Most children and staff speak Halbi but Gondi is spoken by some. This year we started learning the two languages in school assemblies – listening to stories, learning songs and actions – slowly building familiarity with the vocabulary and sounds of the languages. The children really took to the assemblies well and soon became

enthusiastic teachers to those of us who were at sea. Some of them have become enthusiastic storytellers too!

Hindi

We have chosen Hindi as a medium of instruction at school as neither Halbi nor Gondi has a script and Hindi is the language that our teachers have studied in. The mainstay of our exploration in Hindi is a collection of 100 stories from the world over published by Room To Read India and the structured activities that revolve around those stories. In the coming year we expect to boost our Hindi exploration with stories from Karadi Bhaaloo, a production of Karadi Tales Company, Chennai.

English

We rolled out Karadi Path – a creative way of learning English with the mother tongue approach along with Karadi, the Bear - from actions, songs and stories of the jungle written especially for Indian children and sung and narrated by children and well known voices.

Thanks to Karadi, it is now passé to see our children and staff burst out into spontaneous English once in a while and appreciate the nuances of the language as only they can...a few weeks ago six year old Kundan who is the first in his family to speak English, joyously rhymed the words 'pansy' and 'chimpanzee' as he learnt the names of flowers and animals from the respective charts. Nowadays, English writing classes are full of enthusiastic calls to the teacher of 'look here' from kids who have caught on to the phrase that their teacher uses so often. Of course, no-one seems to be conscious that we are all learning four languages at the same time!

Theatre, dance, storytelling, poetry, music, art and pottery

Children love expressing themselves and Imlee Mahuaa offers them various avenues of creative expression. Bastar has a rich tradition of folk music, dance, storytelling and traditional craft too.

This year children enacted some of the stories and poems that they listened to and learnt in the theatre assemblies. Under Milan's patient supervision we are all learning to clean and prepare clay, centre it and mould it on the potter's wheel as it rises in our tentative hands into beautiful forms, cut it, carve it, decorate it, join it, polish it and bake it in the kiln that we constructed together. Through the year our kiln has been dishing out lustrous brick red terracotta lamps, crocodiles, rhinoceroses, ganapatis, pots, monkeys, beads, drummers, horses, elephants, and much more for our kids, staff and the occasional tourist who comes by our village.

News

This year children and staff took a daily peep into the outside world listening to the 7 am news in Hindi on the radio. This was always followed by a 10 minute discussion in which students shared and asked questions about what they had heard on the news and teachers helped them relate to the events, the geographical directions and distant places mentioned in the news. Slowly, everyone is getting familiar with the names of people and places and happenings outside our little world among the woods.

Picnics and Excursions

The school went on a picnic to Bastar Haat, a picnic spot on a hillock about 70 kms to the south on a breezy day in November. A few of our co-villagers also joined us on the picnic as has been the tradition, taking advantage of a few empty seats on the bus.

The staff trip to Kerala in December helped in broadening our understanding of the world outside Balenga Para, in learning to communicate with people from a different part of the country, and in seeing, tasting and experiencing their life, work and surroundings from close quarters. During the trip, that a friend Mr Jinan from Kerala helped to plan, we met and visited people doing socially useful work in different walks of life after having studied and researched about their work from published material during our weekly training meetings before embarking on our trip.

Among the people we met and places we visited were:

- Mr Pokkudan – a mangrove planter and environmentalist near Kannur;
- Kanavu a unique school for tribals run by its senior students in the hills of Wayanad;
- Uravu, an organization that has empowered tribal women through bamboo craft;
- The Chalakudy River Samrakshana Samiti at Vazhachal and Athirapilly that has worked successfully to block the construction of a hydel power project on the Chalakudy river;
- Body Tree on the banks of the Kallar – an ayurvedic hospice that trains tribal youth from all over the country in ayurved;
- A septuagenarian marine biologist and traditional ship builder turned ‘do nothing’ farmer from Minicoy – Mr Ali Manikfann at his ‘Do Nothing Farm’ near Vallioor; and
- Kanyakumari where the three seas meet at the tip of the Indian peninsula.

Work done prior to and on the trip gave our staff useful insights into the world outside Bastar and helped them prepare for their pedagogical duties too. In addition to this, our staff took courses in computer literacy and typing at a local institute this year.

d. Health centre

Our little health centre in Balenga Para continued to see an influx of patients of all ages from new born infants to wizened old men and women seeking succor from fevers, diarrhea, malaria, coughs and colds, cuts and bruises, skin disease, unwanted pregnancy, arthritic pain and night blindness.

Our approach in running the health centre has been primarily educative – disseminating information on personal and community health and hygiene and rendering free medical help where possible with safe over the counter and home remedies, referring the ill to doctors where necessary.

e. Financial aid for medical purposes

This year we also got an opportunity to help raise funds for a kidney transplant surgery for a resident of Balenga Para. While we are not sure whether the work will be worthwhile as the patient's ability to accept a kidney has been significantly undermined by medical complications, we have got useful insights into kidney transplants and the ways and means of medical practitioners and hospital administrators along the way. We are all praying that the young man will rise from his medical complications soon and will be able to accept his father's kidney.

f. Life in Balenga Para

Living in Balenga Para through the year and slowly becoming part of the community has opened up different aspects of tribal life this year. Among the most useful lessons that one has learnt are those in cooperative living, here are a few examples:

- The 300 odd residents of Balenga Para have recently bought a moped from the money that their dance troupe has earned over the years entertaining tourists that visit the village. The single moped is used by anyone who needs it to visit the nearby town.
- The village has an old tradition of samitis – groups of 30 or more men or women who go and perform various agricultural operations on each others' farms for a payment of a few 'paaylees' of grain, all of which is collected and is used in the village feasts that last between 3 days and a week and are held after the harvesting season.

- When there is a wedding in someone's house, a few days before the wedding groups of village girls and women go into the nearby forests to pick sal leaves that are then stored in the village ghotul and made into leaf bowls and plates for the guests and last the entire 3 to 5 days of the wedding.
- When a villager needs her roof tiles to be re-laid before the monsoons, the men and children from the village come to her house on the appointed day and between early morning and noon take the roof tiles down one by one, clean and repair the wooden framework underneath and relay them in exchange for a few rounds of gorga and budkaari (sap from the salfi palm and fermented rice liquor) that are served after the work is finished.

At Imlee Mahuaa too children are very comfortable in cooperative initiatives and use resources such as pencils, erasers, textbooks, desks, sweaters and leggings from common pools. Elder children help their younger friends spontaneously in doing work that the younger ones find difficult.

g. Imlee Mahuaa gets a face on the net

We understand that though many of you would like to visit us in Balenga Para and partake in our experience, you have not been able to do so yet for various reasons. Technology constraints have also kept us from sharing photographs of the happenings in Balenga Para with you.

But recently, we were able to create a page on Facebook and upload 16 albums of our photographs on the page. Do have a look at our Facebook page which is titled Imlee Mahuaa Nae Taaleem – Centre For Learning and don't forget to read the notes on each album before you see the photographs.

We have also started working on the school's website with help from some friends from Gudalur.Net a not for profit organization in Gudalur. We hope to have the website up and running during the coming year.

- **Fund raising**

Thanks to spontaneous offers from so many of you, we were able to raise funds for all our activities in Akanksha this year. We are touched by your generosity and trust. Many thanks.

- **Outlook for the coming year**

During the coming year we expect to continue working on all three projects – educational support in Chennai, Imlee Mahuaa and the kidney transplant matter.

In Chennai, one of the older kids will be finishing her masters this year and we are ready to take on the responsibility of a seeing a few more girls who need the support through their entire formal education.

At Imlee Mahuaa, we expect to admit 15 new children this year and then grow the school through higher classes with the 45 children in all, without taking any new admissions for the next few years. We believe that this approach will help us focus on the quality of our educational processes adequately. We will focus this year on teachers' training and further enriching our curriculum while ensuring that the journey through school for the child and her learning teacher is joyous and educative.

Adding to our skill sets and medical knowledge and getting a few doctors to visit Balenga Para during the year are the small objectives that we have set for our health centre this year.

And of course, we would like to very much see our friend from Balenga Para end his ordeal, shed his medical complications, receive his kidney and embark on a new life during the current year too.

And is some of you do find the time to look us up, that would be wonderful....do visit us.....

We are also happy to share with you our Annual Report and audited financial statements for the year that has gone by (please see the attachments). This year we have voluntarily made disclosures in our Annual Report that we hope would enhance the transparency of our work and transactions. These disclosures are based on norms recommended by Credibility Alliance, a consortium of voluntary organizations that have come together to enhance the quality of governance, accountability and transparency in the voluntary sector.

That's about it from us for now...

With good wishes and many thanks,

Warm regards

From all of us at Akanksha and Imlee Mahuaa