

Udavum Karangal School Visit Report to CVI Board (6/99)

by
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Vidyakar (who is the force behind Udavum Karangal, referred to as *UK*) started this school three years ago, feeling that it may be more effective to run his own school than to send the kids of his orphanage to other schools. The schools in the neighborhood of UK are mostly government run and are of notoriously poor quality. Sending the kids to better quality private schools in the city would have involved transporting the kids a great distance, and as well, paying the higher fees that private schools charge.

UK's main campus (this houses the orphans) is Tiruverkaadu, which is on the outskirts of Madras, on the Madras-Bangalore highway. The area around the campus is mostly agricultural. There is a fairly famous temple in Tiruverkaadu, and in fact, on the day that I visited UK, there was a big crowd of worshippers expected for some festival there, and there were a huge number of police persons deployed.

Vidyakar constructed the school using loans from a couple of financial institutions, chief being HDFC (Housing Development Finance Corporation). He is quite well known in Madras, and because UK does charity work, the interest rate (if I am not mistaken) was set at 6% - and in India, this is a very low rate. UK has some endowments (fixed deposits, the interest from which is used to partially defray the running costs), and the loans were given against this collateral. The school is situated adjacent to the UK campus.

What I personally liked about the school was that Vidyakar runs it not just for his own orphans, but for the poor children of the villages around UK. In fact, of the approximately 1000 students in the school, nearly 700 are children of landless laborers who live near Tiruverkaadu. The school itself is spacious, clean, and airy. The teachers are hired from all over Tamil Nadu, and most of them live at the UK campus itself. When I visited the school, it was the lunch break, and the UK orphans were having their lunch on the UK campus. So, the students I saw sitting in the classrooms were the children of agricultural laborers from the nearby villages (who had brought their own lunches). These kids, in their uniforms, seemed confident and disciplined...the confidence was quite amazing, given that they came from impoverished backgrounds.

I did see some teaching later on, after the lunch hour. I think the teaching could have been better, but the teacher seemed sincere, and there was good class participation. (I got the feeling that the teaching emphasized rote memorization - this is common in India, and is by no means a bad thing intrinsically, it is just that rote memorization is often used exclusively. Moreover, the teacher made a few mistakes - she confused area with volume at one point - but this could be ascribed to nervousness in the presence of visitors. All in all, though, this was a regular classroom with quite good participation, and I think the school can only influence the villages around positively.)

UK needs assistance with the school quite badly. For instance, the school has not been completed, and there were some rooms that were just in skeletal form - construction had stopped for want of funding. Vidyakar's friend from Singapore arranged for funding to pay the old loan off, so he is ready to construct the remaining rooms needed for the 10th, 11th, and 12th classes. There is need for furniture for the classrooms already built, as well as library shelves. There is a need for textbooks for the students. UK would also like help with the operational expenses, such as teachers' salaries.

Some other things about the school and about UK: The teachers work with the parents of the village children, trying to sensitize these parents about their kids' educational needs. These rural children are first generation learners, and typically, the teachers find that they do no homework and do all their learning in school. Clearly, this is a situation that they need to work against. They are in the process of building a science lab and a computer lab (and in fact, Asha, the US organization we talked about, is helping them set up computers.) The neat thing is that they plan on opening the computer lab to anybody from the larger community who is interested, in particular, to girls from the area who have graduated from other schools but who have not got computer training.

UK has plans of building a medical clinic on campus, where the local populace can come in for health-care (including prenatal and postnatal care and reproductive health). They also run income-generation programs for the local populace, and Vidyakar particularly mentioned tailoring schools for the local girls.

It may interest you to know that Vidyakar himself was an orphan - he was picked up by a businessman called Ramakrishna, who put him through school (Vidyakar now has a graduate degree in social work). UK's school, in fact, is named after Ramakrishna.

Just coincidentally, about the same time that I visited UK, a close friend of my wife started volunteering for UK, in an administrative capacity!