

Village Matters

news and views from rural india

In partnership with rural India: Action Village India (AVI) supports initiatives amongst rural communities which promote self organisation to combat poverty and social injustice

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AVI Partners Forum Issue

This edition of Village Matters covers the meeting with all the partners and the field visits which preceded it. The whole programme for this first Forum was organized over two weeks. The first week was devoted to field visits. A group of eleven AVI supporters saw ASSEFA and CRUSADE's work in Tamil Nadu, whilst four supporters travelled from Chennai to Bhubaneswar to join four more who had spent the previous four weeks with Ekta Parishad on its Orissa Land Rights Yatra (march) for the final rally and the youth camp which followed.

First AVI Partners' Forum

Earlier this year, Action Village India, with wholehearted support from our first partner ASSEFA, organised the first AVI Partners' Forum at ASSEFA's Pooriyambakkam centre, south of Chennai. The two-week Forum provided the first ever opportunity for all the founders or directors of AVI's six partners to meet, and the first time so many supporters and committee members have been invited to meet them.

The first week saw field visits to AVI's partners Ekta Parishad in Orissa or ASSEFA and CRUSADE in Tamil Nadu. During the second week at Pooriyambakkam all the partners presented their work and there were plenary sessions on aspects of the Gandhian Movement for the UK delegates. There was a visit to ASSEFA's milk processing plant, and the filmmaker Anwar Jamal came from Delhi to show his film, 'Swaraj' on women and panchayats.

Collaboration

The Forum more than achieved its aim of providing an informal setting to enable people to better understand each other's work. The most exciting and unexpected outcome though, was the dialogue between

AVI's partners on ways that they could support or learn from each other. Five themes were identified for future collaboration: CRUSADE will co-ordinate credit, savings and loans; Ekta Parishad, livelihood rights/campaigning; NBJK, Panchayati Raj/local democracy; KGSN, education on non-violence; and ASSEFA, livelihood promotion/income generating activities.



Ivan meets delegates from all six Partners

Such collaboration will require support from AVI to co-ordinate the programme, and to enable the partners to meet, share good practice and develop training programmes for other partners. All organisations agreed to identify a co-ordinator. Ideas on initiating the process were discussed when Jothi Ramalingam, founder of CRUSADE, came to London for AVI's AGM on Gandhi's birthday, 2 October.

Campaigning

There was pressure from some partners for AVI to take on a greater campaigning and awareness-raising role. Issues such as land reform, dalit rights and the damage done to tribal communities by conservation and tourism projects were raised. However, Girija Satish of NBJK, stressed that whilst advocacy was necessary it should not be AVI's main activity: "AVI should not forget development work".

During a broad-ranging final session on the kitchen roof, Loganathan, ASSEFA's Executive Director, revealed that ASSEFA are discussing with 20-25 other NGOs in Tamil Nadu the idea of pooling all their women's SHGs' savings for development purposes. ASSEFA wants to develop a fund of Rs 1 Billion.

The partners were all very keen on a second Partners' Forum. Ekta Parishad offered their Tilda centre in Chhattisgarh as the venue, and this October they will meet there to deepen their understanding of each other's work on the collaboration issues.

For AVI's supporters, this year's Forum will be held in tsunami affected areas of Tamil Nadu where three of our partners are actively involved in relief and rehabilitation programmes.



Before the Forum

Sheila Grosvenor, on her first visit to India, travelled to Orissa to join Ekta Parishad's Land Right March for a week. She then took the train back to Chennai for the Tamil Nadu field visit

Arriving in Chennai, hot, tired and slightly smelly from our 24-hour train journey from Bhubaneswar, we were delighted to be unexpectedly met by Ivan and Jennie with a car to whisk us back to the Woodlands Hotel. Awaiting us was a de-luxe room with a real bed and, joy of joys, a western toilet and paper to use (instead of leaves). Clean and rested over the weekend we met up with the rest of the AVI group (a delightful bunch, all ages and from various walks of life, bonded together by a love of India and its people) to go through the well planned programme of visits by Jothi at CRUSADE and Loganathan's highly organised staff at ASSEFA.

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting the women's self help groups and in particular the girls' tailoring centre where I had a go, much to their amusement, on the old Singer treadle machines, our interpreters ever ready to answer our many questions. The jeep journeys were always long and bumpy but the experiences far outweighed any discomfort and I learned a great deal about the structure of village life, the still-existing culture of the caste system, and the many problems faced by the women and children who were always so happy to meet and welcome us 'Europeans'. Thank you Jothi, may CRUSADE continue on to future successes.

Time passed so quickly and soon we were repacking our rucksacks ready for the next experience, the journey to Pooriyambakam, the

ASSEFA centre for our conference week. I was a little apprehensive, thinking "would this be back to sleeping on the ground with little in the way of washing or toilet facilities?" Not a bit of it, our bungalow home for the next week was delightful, although the iron bed with its fixed mosquito net was a little hard. Rajeswari was a wonderful hostess - how nice to see a

ASSEFA's interpreters, guides and drivers were so friendly and helpful, interspersing our fact-finding visits to the well-run milk production operation, women's self help groups and ASSEFA schools, with some sightseeing at Mammalaporam and Pondicherry and for me a memorable swim in the Bay of Bengal.

As an ex-teacher, I found the school visit a fascinating experience and would have spent days there if I could have. Never again will I complain about the lack of resources. What those teachers achieved in their small concrete classrooms with next to nothing in the way of furniture, paper or textbooks was remarkable and the children were so happy, attentive and well behaved.

The conference was ready to begin, our old friends from the Yatra had arrived with representatives from all the organisations AVI supported - but more about that from Jenny and Michael.



A tribal welcome!

woman organising this very large compound - and the food prepared by her staff was superb, with new dishes appearing every day. I couldn't believe the variety and quality of vegetarian dishes and didn't miss meat at all.

I must say how proud I am to be a small part of AVI's support and encouragement towards our partner organisations wonderful achievements in India and can't wait to travel there again next year.

Ekta Parishad March to Victory

Simon Morrow, one of four AVI supporters, spent the whole of February with Ekta Parishad on its land rights padyatra (foot march) through the Eastern state of Orissa

Ekta Parishad is a grass-roots organisation that campaigns for the rights of landless people in several states throughout India. It employs Gandhian methods of non-violent civil disobedience to press for land reform.



Ekta Parishad march through a fishing village

In early 2004, Ekta Parishad launched a month-long padyatra (foot-march) through the state of Orissa. The aim of the march was to raise awareness of the problem of landlessness and to pressure the state government into distributing land to the landless.

Although the Indian constitution theoretically guarantees sufficient land to enable everyone to be self-sufficient, the reality is different.

Poor people, particularly dalits (untouchables) and tribals (adivasis), are particularly vulnerable. Despite forming nearly 40% of the population of Orissa, dalits and adivasis are politically marginalised, only appearing on the government's agenda at election time. Many have no land and live at starvation level. Others face the constant threat of eviction from the land they are occupying, either with or without land title. They face pressure at every level, from government bureaucracy that does not recognise their land

rights and government policies that causes them to be evicted or persecuted in order to make way for multinational corporations or wildlife sanctuaries and forest reserves. At a local level, villagers face threats of violence and bribery from local mafias and corrupt officials.

The padyatra visited over 100 villages throughout seven districts of Orissa. At each village a public hearing was held, where the villagers were

given the opportunity to air their grievances and hand over petitions for Ekta Parishad to present to the government. Many villagers walked distances of up to 30km to attend these hearings.

The hearings highlighted the sense of insecurity felt by many villagers. Without land the poor are marginalised. Land title (patta) gives them access to welfare and education. It means that they are not forced into looking for migratory work and they don't have to pay bribes to officials in order to stay on their land. Many are so restricted in what they can do, that they can be arrested for cutting down small amounts of fire wood from government forestry land, and in certain areas need permission from government officials to travel through the very forest that they have lived in for generations.

In Lanjigarh district, tribals told of how they were being evicted to make way for a multinational mining operation. Tensions were running so high that the public hear-

ing had to be cancelled because of intimidation from locally-hired thugs.

During the course of the padyatra, national elections were declared. This, coupled with a general lack of response from the state government of Orissa, led to a change of tactics on Ekta Parishad's part. An ultimatum was issued to the state government, stating that if they did not agree to adopt Ekta's ten point plan for land reform within ten days, then 5,000 people would close down the national highway for 3 days and march on the state capital, Bhubaneswar.

Ten days passed without a response from the government, so the march commenced. No doubt influenced by the effect of the march and the new Ekta Parishad slogan, "Give us land, then we will vote", the chief minister of Orissa, Navain Patnaik eventually met with Ekta Parishad. He agreed in full to the ten point plan, the corner-stone of which was the setting up of a joint task force which will oversee land reform and distribution. This decision was publicly confirmed by Patnaik as he addressed the final rally of 3,000 people in Bhubaneswar.

Now that the national election results have been declared, Patnaik has been re-elected. The question now remains as to whether Ekta Parishad can maintain the pressure on him to make sure that his election promises are kept and that the task force is effectively implemented.

Since Simon wrote this piece, Ekta Parishad says that in a few Districts the local government has set up task forces and in Kalahandi, over 1300 people have been given secure title to the land they live on and cultivate.

Michael Willis, an AVI Committee member, also spent February on Ekta Parishad's march in Orissa. This is an excerpt from his diary, from the hill village of Budlimendi

The world looks different from under a mosquito net. As well as keeping the bugs out, mine offers the nearest thing to privacy to be had on a yatra. This morning, as I peer through it at the others huddled on the schoolroom floor I wonder if it could possibly have contributed anything to keeping me warm last night, and give thanks for my khadi sleeping bag. Bought in Tilda at the last minute, it is not only an essential aid to survival, but does great things for my Gandhian credentials! Unlike at home, here I am instantly awake, and go straight out to explore the vil-

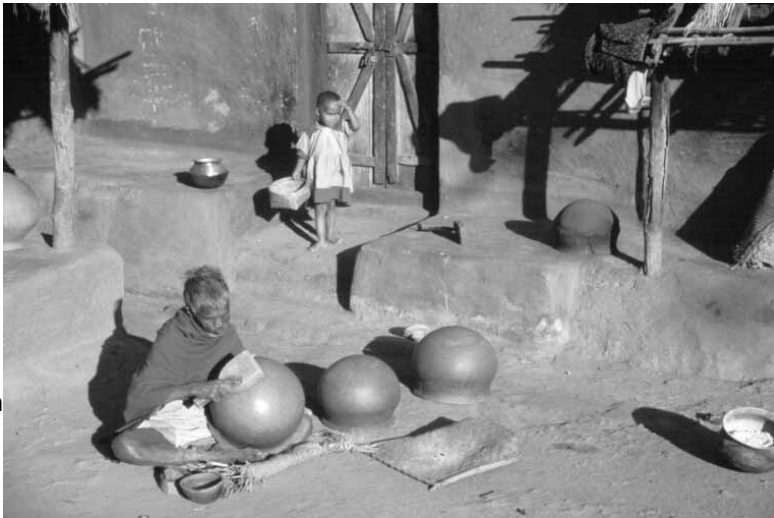
lage. This early start meets with approval from Jai Kumar, and Karuma makes me black tea with no sugar - I am being spoiled, as she knows I don't like the chai that everyone else exists on. Harendra takes me round the village, and now it is my turn to ask questions! Last night these three now very good friends had sat with me around the fire

under a clear sky with the moon and stars. Wrapped in my blanket I had tried to answer their many questions, some about home and family, but mainly about the differences between India and the UK. It was a salutary but satisfying experience.

We find a potter at work patting big 'cauldron-shaped' pots perfectly smooth with a wooden paddle. Despite having no common language he shows me everything with great pride; the foot-powered wheel where the pots are thrown, part-dried pots awaiting final shaping and the simple pit where they are fired. The pots have very thin walls, and break easily - I begin to notice potsherd everywhere - but this allows them to be put directly on the fire, for toasting rice (not only did India invent the zero, she came up with breakfast cereals too).

Then we find ourselves at the beautiful mud and thatch meeting house;

it is not the village hall but built especially for a forum of 170 women's groups. Two of the EP workers and some of the women are outside, and we talk about the meeting last night. After a 150 km drive we were three hours late but the room was packed. Their leader had given a powerful speech about the work of the groups, which are well established and strong. It was encouraging to hear of some success after so many problems and difficulties in other places. Appropriately Barbara was called to speak; she gave thanks



Budlimendi's potter

for our welcome and explained who we are and why we're here. There had been a really good atmosphere, with us lamp-lit at the front, the audience listening intently in the dark, and we would have liked to spend longer, but it was too late. Outside Simon discovered he had lost a bootlace; a concerted search culminated in one of the EP activists having him take off the boot in question to shine a torch inside . . . the lace is found on the path but we realised that no one wants us to think the lace was stolen. Another example of how, as strangers, we are regarded.

I take a photo of the group outside the meeting house, then we make our way back down to the bottom of the village. The houses are well spread out, and have fenced-in compounds. One has its own well, already in use by the women. Below the school two teams of oxen are ploughing a field in the early-

morning sun, and Barbara and I find ourselves taking the same picture.

The rural setting makes it easy to find a quiet spot for 'ablutions', though cautiously, as there are lots of cacti planted as hedges . . . The pump outside the school is broken (as are about half of the pumps we find), but a group of people are washing at one that is working. I have time for a quick shampoo as the jeeps are loaded, but not for breakfast, so share half of Simon's puffed rice and banana

in the jeep as we set off. Our driver Shiva and the two Barbaras sing prayers, as is their happy custom—always a good way to start a journey. We drop down from the plateau through forest, across plains and up a rough track to Bhaliamal village, and an amazing wild welcome. We have lunch under a leaf-thatched awning, then the 'Adivasis Mahapanchayat' is opened with a welcome song by the tribal women followed by introductions

and reports. The problems of the area are outlined (and, as ever, translated and explained by Satiya); the problem of land snatch is the main issue, with the all-too-often exploitation and corruption. There is conflict between adivasis and the Forestry Department, and the Government is not intervening. Rights are not being recognised. People should not have to bribe the Forest Dept. but are being harassed to do so. People have no land records. There are no village wells. Adivasis are said to not be eligible for welfare aid as they are from 'forest villages' (this is an official designation for villages within forest reserves, and which precludes any development). All is carefully noted by EP workers.

The meeting ends just after sunset, and we set off on a two-and-a-half hour walk across country with no moon and two torches between 50 people! All is carried off with the usual yatra good humour. It is good to walk after the long jeep

trek, but not easy. We think we passed the bungalow for our night stop at one point, and we certainly made a wrong turning to one village and out again - what they made of a padyatra turning up unannounced in the middle of the night we shall never know! The last stretch, along the side of a big irrigation canal and across a precarious bamboo bridge, brings us to the village of Sabitribagada. Amazingly Simon and Helena are here; after leaving them in Bhanwanipatna we thought we had finally thrown them off, but, no, here they are again. At least they have brought back Uppendra, our fa-

vourite driver and a genuinely lovely man who once braked to avoid a pigeon and who would never run over a dog. (The obsession amongst the drivers to drive in strict number order has led to some hairy overtaking moments, including one in a small town where a dog sleeping on the verge was run over. It survived, but had its day spoiled. The Europeans protested on its behalf at the next stop).

We have dinner, which gives us the chance to catch up on developments at Lanjigarh, then the jeeps take us to the Inspection Bungalow at Dhanei dam. It looks

promising, but there is no electricity, and no water despite being next to a ruddy great lake! I go down to the lake's edge in the dark for a much-needed wash, then rig a washing line in the bathroom to dry clothes still wet from being washed days ago in Bhanwanipatna. In between deciding who sleeps where, and what variety of incense stick to burn, Simon, Kurt, Simon and I talk about the yatra, and nibble savouries bought in one of the villages. I drift off to sleep listening to the sounds of the lake and looking at the moonlit ceiling through my mosquito net . . .

1000 children! ASSEFA's schools competition

'A thousand children! Coming here! When?!' I am not sure if my face showed horror or disbelief. Yes I had heard right. 'A thousand Maneswaram (ASSEFA's Project Co-ordinator) assured me. ASSEFA's local schools' competitions were held annually and this year's finals day was to be on the 5th March. Maneswaram looked very calm but then despite insuperable odds, Indian NGO workers seem to remain resolute and unruffled...a quality I would like to emulate! Although it was not my problem, the logistical requirements of such an enterprise set my mind racing - of particular concern to me were issues relating to catering and toilet requirements - two key issues for me personally whilst travelling anywhere! My selfish thought of how this event would spoil what I valued most about Pooriambykam - its peace, quiet and unhurried pace - was then disturbed by, 'Would you like to participate?' Stifling my 'No-way!' response, I asked 'How?' the answer, 'By judging some of the competitions.' I felt an instant sense of relief as that sounded easy enough. By answering 'Yes', I thereby volunteered many of the AVI supporters to take on the role of judges in what turned

out to be an enjoyable, entertaining and memorable day.

When the 5th arrived, it was yet again another sunny day and before 8am buses started arriving, dropping off the children before departing and returning with more. Whilst some of the children were coming from local areas (1-2km) others would be travelling 15-20kms - for these children, it was a very early start and a very late departure. Some were still waiting quietly to be trans-



The Rangoli Competition

ported home at 11.30pm - when I was going to bed!

There was a range of competitions for the 7 and 11 year old pupils: an art competition based around the themes of 'The Environment' and 'Communication' judged by Fran and Sheila; a Rangoli competition for girls who 'drew' detailed and intricate mod-

ern and traditional designs on the earth using coloured rice flour. This was judged by Simon, Sharon and Audrey. And, finally, a fancy dress with actions competition judged by Helena, Tony and I.

We sat in the open-air training room while more than 50 children paraded in front of us in fancy dress with an accompanying performance. The fancy dress included many famous Indian historical/ political personalities, travelling sages and even

common household items. We decided to score on grounds of originality and creativity and gave the First Prize to 'Ancient Man' due to his use of natural resources! Second was a tube of toothpaste - a novel idea (and which showed how western commodities had penetrated village India as mostly dental care is based around the traditional use of Neem twigs). And Third, a realistic leper who had

used mustard and Ketchup to create oozing sores!

After our judging and another very good lunch, we were ushered into the classrooms to see, touch, discuss and be awed by the range of craft, scientific displays and equipment. Children (and teachers) had set up the displays and were very keen to demonstrate experiments

that in this country would be banned, for example the production and ignition of gas made by blowing air through water and petrol! I wasn't sure what point the mini-cannon was trying to demonstrate – but it was quite entertaining - entertaining, that is, to the children who found my startled response and precipitous evacuation from the room, extremely funny.

ASSEFA had hired a couple of cooks to prepare food for the children and somehow they all got fed. Clusters of youngsters sat in the shade, eating off their banana leaves, chatting and giggling quietly. Where was the noise I thought would be associated with 1000 children? In England 10 children can be bedlam! Granted there were 40-plus acres of fields, orchards and paths to sit on but no signs of cavorting children. Another stereotype to re-examine!

As the day went on, the sun was getting hotter, but it was now the turn of older, secondary age, pupils to perform for us. About 4pm, when most of us were already wilting, we were treated to a display of drill and acrobatics. The groups of boys who made themselves into shapes to spell out WELCOME and then performed a variety of human pyramids ending with breathtaking somersaults, were particularly impressive. This was soon followed by some traditional singing and dancing and eventually the show finished after 8.30pm. It was clear that all the boys and girls enjoyed participating. As foreigners, however, performance was not an idea we relished and we declined the opportunity to sing in front of the children; our excuse being that we had not rehearsed. On reflection I feel we should have done, as in India taking part is so much more important than a polished performance.

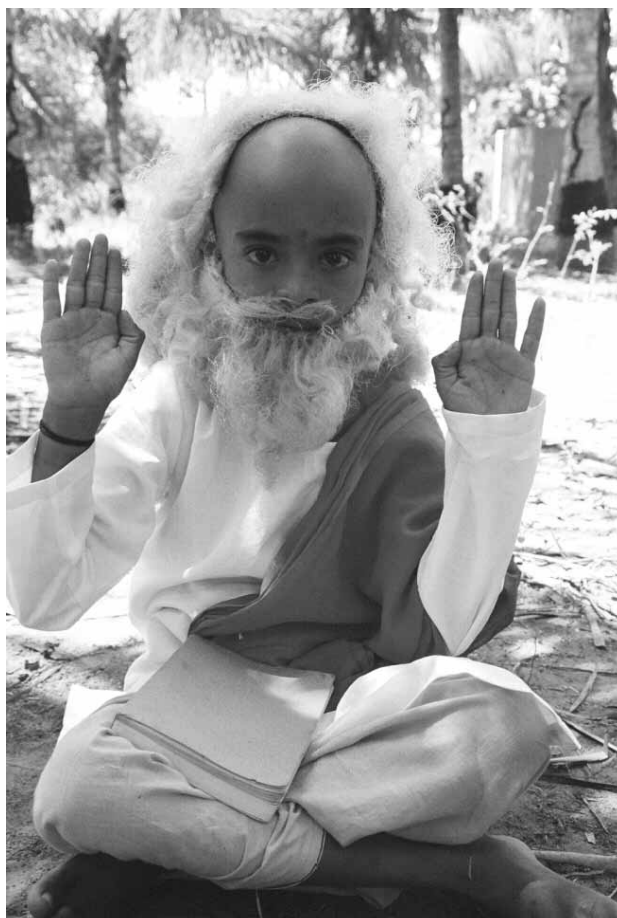
It was an remarkable day for me as a teacher, not only because of the seemingly effortless organisation that went into this size of event, the levels of participation and enthusiasm from the children and staff, and the range of creative skills and abilities on display, but also because of the way that the children conducted themselves – they displayed a patience, a stoicism, a generosity and a maturity which went way beyond their years and was, actually, very humbling to observe. A very enjoyable and uplifting experience!

Forum Reflections

Jennie Kitteringham took care of the AVI supporters' social needs during the Forum. Six months after the event, she contacted the participants to get their reflections on those two weeks.

Six months on and my memories of the AVI Forum are still distinct. Before the Forum, Ivan and I had visited ASSEFA's resource centre at Pooriyambakkam (Poori). We went to check that the hostels would be suitable for foreign visitors. I noted bedrooms with beds, nets, electric fans, cupboards shuttered windows; western and squat toilets, shower rooms, and more importantly a large rural campus with lots of peace and quiet... What more can one ask for - I knew then and there that Poori would be a welcome respite from City life and a place to slow down and reflect on one's experiences. So I was curious to know

Poori. 'The journey there was hopeful and mind expanding as, the further we left Chennai, the more the landscape lost its burnt and arid cast and the deeper and more widespread the green became. We passed fields of ground nuts and the occasional late rice crop. I was excited to realise that we really were going to step into the Indian countryside, and with experts to guide us. The focus on 'Village India' became a reality for me when we reached our destination at Pooriyambakkam. The compound with its clear air and room to walk unfettered by traffic was an asset that many of us took advantage of: its calmness encouraged reflection.'



Fancy Dress at Pooriyambakkam

what the AVI participants felt had made such an impression on them.

Carol Penn provides her thoughts on the transition from Chennai to

Hospitality at Poori - Made to feel like family

Clichéd but true when Loganathan said that we were to be treated like family. I knew from previous visits to India that we could expect good hospitality but were awed by the level of attention and hospitality that we got: bottled water was brought in, computers were laid on; a fridge provided, chairs, tables so we could sit down in the communal spaces in the hostels; a dhobi brought in to do our washing and ironing (!). If there were any problems, then I went to Rajeswari (ASSEFA's charismatic resource centre Manager) and she would sort them out with a murmur: nothing

was too much trouble for them. Tony Mortlock speaks for us all when he comments that 'Superlative is the adjective which most accurately describes the feasts we enjoyed at every meal.'

The prospect of lunch really excited me – what would we be having; how many different types of rice dishes; vegetable dishes – it was truly amazing and most of returned to our tables with thalis laden down with tasty, freshly cooked food: and then there was the fruit (that they had brought in especially for us); jackfruit, pineapple, watermelon, oranges, bananas, etc.

The formal dimension

The days were long and demanding for us all as Tony recollects. 'The Forum discussions: the concentration which was required in order to cope with poor acoustics, unfamiliar accents, references made to names of organisations and Gandhian concepts...then the tea and coffee breaks – what a relief to have time to stand up walk about and relax concentration for a few minutes.' Before returning to the next session. These lengthy sessions helped Fran Wilde to 'develop a hugely better grasp of the enthusiasms and interests of our partners than I had through just reading their material at home.'

Whilst it is true AVI's partners' delivery style was based on lengthy monologues, there were chances for interaction as Simon Morrow says 'I could not help but be struck, as a discussion on rural education turned into a debate on cookery and the blue-print for a socialist state that we should have fun in what we do. It's often easy to forget this. This was reinforced when I got back home and re-read a biography of Gandhi in which he berates "killjoys who help people with long faces and grudging spirits." Certainly there were no long faces and grudging spirits from ASSEFA's staff as they dealt with the culturally distinct, yet varied, demands of a group of 16 foreigners!

Seeing and feeling the connections: Gandhi's philosophy

For some of us our sharpest memories are premised on the connections made with others' experiences and our own. Sheila Grosvenor writes 'one of my main impressions was how caring and committed

people were to their ideas and the practical realisation of them. Despite different cultures and economies I could feel a shared passion where experiences cross. For example, talking with Neema (Lakshmi Ashram) about the purpose of education as a deepening and developing relationship between self and roots. In visual terms this could be seen in the final day's Rangoli competition.' Another connection was identified by Tony who writes 'Whilst Gandhi's philosophy and teaching of non-violence is fundamental to partners' programmes, in ASSEFA schools non-violence is being taught as a subject in its own right. What effect will this teaching have on the present and on future generations of students when they go out into the world? And how much we in the West would benefit from the application to our lives and our politics of this principle. Is it an impossible dream or a way of life which might become a reality?'

The Way Forward - out under the stars

Ivan Nutbrown writes 'The idea for the Partners' forum grew out of AVIs' questioning if it can do more to support its partner organisations and if we have our relationship with our Indian partners right.' Did the forum provide that opportunity and what were the outcomes? Michael Willis gives a clear account of the final review the partners. 'On the last day everyone gathered to reflect. I was sure the Forum had been a great success but didn't seem able to see where we could go from here. So with some misgivings I anticipated a smaller meeting arranged that evening for representatives of the six partners, and members of the AVI Managing Committee. Just as we were about to start the meeting, the power failed (for the only time in the whole forum). No lights, and worse, no fans! Sri Loganathan immediately saved our confusion by suggesting we meet on the roof of the dining hall. We followed him up the outside steps and found a flat roof with a low parapet. We sat cross legged in a circle on smooth concrete still warm from the sun. A cool breeze brought Pooriyambakkam scents. After a flutter of conversation the real discussion got under way.

Everyone had their say, ideas were put forward and suggestions made. There were murmurs of dissent and quiet nods of agreement. Ivan took notes by moonlight. Under the stars everything seemed to crystallise and become clear. Agreements emerged and decisions were made – between *partners*. Would it have been so memorable sitting on chairs under fluorescent lights, trying to hear over the noise of the fans – somehow I don't think so.'

For Simon Morrow the reflection is on-going 'I did think that it provided a good time for reflection. I sometimes think that we need to step back and reflect on what we do. Are we looking for problems that aren't there? Are we really serving our partners in the right way? It's something I am still mulling over.' But for Ivan the seeds have been sown and signposts for action are clear '.. the forum brought AVI, its supporters and partners closer together as intended...it was inspirational to see the partners interact so positively with each other and the UK delegates....now I can look forward to working with the partners on the next AVI forum with greater confidence and a clearer idea of where we are **all** going.'

Informal gatherings - under those stars

Besides the formal encounters, there were chances to chat informally over meals and at the end of the day. As Tony comments '...and then there were conversations and in the evenings, sitting outside in the warm darkness until bedtime. Never mind the mosquitoes!' And those stars again were important for Fran too 'sitting out under more stars than I had seen for years.'

A uniquely friendly and 'friend-ful' experience

For me this was a very satisfying experience because it combined lots of opportunities to satisfy my curiosity about AVI's partners and heighten my awareness of issues, make new friends in India and also to have social encounters with many of AVI's fantastic supporters. It was a unique and warming experience and one I shall treasure for a long time. Thanks to those who views are included above.

NEWS

from Action Village India

Second AVI Partners' Forum

The Second Action Village India Partners' Forum will take place in Tamil Nadu between Sunday 23 October and Friday 4 November.

The Forum will be aimed at AVI supporters with an interest in raising funds for our south Indian partners' work in tsunami-affected areas. There will be opportunities to see our partners' work and to meet people from other organisations in order to get a good first-hand understanding of the problems, work carried out so far and our partners' long term plans to support devastated communities in their rebuilding efforts.

The Forum will start at ASSEFA's Pooriyambakkam centre, 100 km south of Chennai, followed by a few days travelling down the coast to see our partners' work near



UK participants listen attentively at Pooriyambakkam

Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Nagapattinam. We will then go inland to Ekta Parishad's CESC centre near Madurai for discussions with other organisations, before returning to Chennai for a final session and flights back.

Participants will be responsible for organising their own flights, insurance, visas and vaccinations. AVI/ASSEFA will meet everyone at Chennai airport or railway station and take care of accommodation, food and travel from then on.

If you are interested in joining the Forum, please contact the AVI office.



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Action Village India (AVI) supports projects devised and managed by six partner organisations in India. These organisations, which are personally known to AVI's members, all work within the Gandhian tradition with marginalised rural communities and all promote self-organisation as an answer to poverty and social injustice.

ASSEFA - works with over 300,000 families in 6 states of India. AVI now supports its programme in the Maduranthagam area of Tamil Nadu to raise the incomes of 16,000 below poverty line families by enabling women to start small dairy enterprises, promoting vegetable farming and providing training in farming and setting up small businesses. This three-year project is funded by individual donors and trusts.

CRUSADE - a women's development project just north of Chennai, where over 5500 women in 100 villages have joined self-help/micro-credit groups. The project has four elements: training women to start small businesses, health promotion for women and children; an adult literacy programme and training women to be more actively engaged with the panchayats (village councils) to see that more resources reach poorer areas. It is funded by individual donations and trusts.

NBJK - is developing a network of grassroots groups in Bihar and Jharkhand who work with marginalised groups to ensure that they benefit from government programmes. With funding from individuals and trusts, AVI provides subsistence for 5 of the groups and training for many more. AVI has just started supporting a project run by one of the groups to enable 20 girls from below poverty line families to attend secondary school by paying their school fees. And, with support from DFID, NBJK is deepening marginalised people's involvement in the panchayats (village councils) in 22 districts in these two states.

KGSN - is running an organic farming project in three Kerala villages near Trivandrum. About 150 families are involved in this project which, by teaching farmers how to grow companion crops on their household plots, has increased incomes from land by over 4 times.

Lakshmi Ashram - this residential school in the Himalayan state of Uttaranchal provides a Gandhian basic education for 80 girls as well as running some kindergartens in surrounding villages and environmental projects. Volunteers are welcome to help run the school and its beautiful grounds.

Ekta Parishad - is a people's movement campaigning for land reform and tribal people's access to forests in six north Indian states as well as in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. AVI's support enables its Orissa team to organise public meetings, raise awareness of people's rights, run youth camps to strengthen adivasi (indigenous people) communities' ability to protect their livelihoods and culture.