



asha kiran

A unique project of tremendous social impact: MICDA and the eradication of the Mathamma practice in Southern Andhra Pradesh

by Sunil Laxman

When I first read the project proposal from MICDA proposing to tackle the "Mathamma" practice in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, I was quite astounded. Firstly, I was amazed at the scale of the project proposed. Eradicating the "Mathamma" practice prevalent in the Madiga (a "scheduled caste" community in Andhra Pradesh) was more symbolic. What the group wanted to do was to work with this highly neglected and backward community, and help them move forward by spreading health awareness, of their social and economic rights, ensuring that the Madiga kids go to school, giving the community some idea of living with dignity, all the while eradicating the Mathamma practice.

What is the "Mathamma" practice, and who are the Madigas? The Madiga are classified as extremely neglected Scheduled castes. They are an "untouchable" community, but what is even more astounding is that they are considered outcasts even by other Scheduled castes. Primarily, the two major Scheduled castes in the region are the Mala and the Madiga. The Madiga community were traditionally involved in work such as tanning and leather making, but now consist predominantly of landless laborers. The basic literacy level in the entire community is extremely low, and even today is estimated at barely 10% of the Madiga population. The female literacy levels in this community is worse. Given that the community makes up nearly 10% of the total population of many regions of Andhra Pradesh (which boasts of a literacy rate of over 70%), the statistic is telling. The community lives in extreme poverty. They are also steeped in extreme ignorance and superstitious belief. What is more poignant is that the community has been almost prevented from benefiting from various Government schemes and reservations that exist for Scheduled Castes. This is largely because the Madiga community has no concept of social empowerment, and is politically powerless. This is in stark contrast with the other prominent Scheduled Caste, the Mala. The Mala are politically powerful, and have used all the existing reservations and schemes, and are economically and socially far more advanced. This is a typical case (seen across India) where one backward community usurps the rights of the others. The Malas view Madigas with scorn, and ostracize them, taking advantage of the simple and ignorant Madigas.

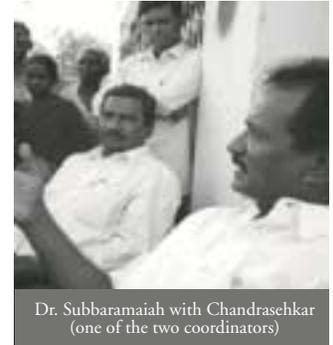
Moving on to the Mathamma practice, Mathammas are girl children who have been dedicated to Goddess Mathamma (a form of Devi or Shakti). This practice stems from strong and blind religious beliefs, ignorance and encouragement. Their only source of income is what is given to them by people during the annual Mathamma "kolupu" (festival), which lasts for just one week. These Mathamma girls are often sexually abused from very young age. Most take to prostitution to survive and feed their children. Many of them are infected by sexually transmitted diseases and die very early (only 1% are above 45 years in the region). Though this practice can be superficially compared with the "devadasi" system that exists in many parts of India, there are significant differences. One is the fact that here, most dedications are almost always due to superstition, total ignorance and lack of awareness within the community.

The organization is working actively to help the community, MICDA (Mother India Community Development Association), is largely the creation of Dr. Subbaramaiah. His life story reads like one from a typical Indian movie. Born of extremely poor parents in a small village, his story is one of extreme determination. He practically educated himself, with his family undergoing extreme hardship in the process. He obtained an MBBS degree and is a practicing medical doctor (now at the Government Tirupathi Medical College Hospital). He has dedicated his entire life to fighting for the rights of the landless, and the organization has been fighting powerful vested interests for over 20 years, and has ensured the rights of deprived communities in the Putur area. The 20 year struggle has now finally

resulted in the allotment of 750 acres of barren land to the landless, the building of a new village, creation of check dams and bore pumps, and the building of a school (supported by Asha). But I digress. The effort by MICDA to eradicate the Mathamma practice is one of the most ambitious projects being supported by any Asha chapter, in terms of size as well as socio-economic impact.

The project covers a vast area of 19 mandals in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. The mandals are in the regions surrounding the towns of Puttur, Tirupathi, Renigunta and Kalahasthi. The project is organized to have one trained social worker per mandal (19 in all) and two coordinators in charge of the mandal. Each mandal has about 30-40 villages, and about 20 villages in each mandal have significant Madiga community populations. These are the focus villages. The project involves comprehensive community and pediatric health care programs for the Madigas, education of Mathammas and awareness campaigns by the group of social workers, one per Mandal.

The project objectives are (1) To save the innocent girls of the Madiga community from this contemptuous evil; (2) To eradicate the superstitions, unscientific beliefs and myths promoting the Mathamma practice among the Madiga community by undertaking a comprehensive community organization health, education and pediatric health care programme; (3) To eliminate the role of the traditional caste council (kula Panchayat) in promoting the Mathamma practice and dances during festivals, etc., by undertaking social awareness campaigns; (4) To ensure effective implementation of the Mathamma prohibition Act with community support; (5) To facilitate and promote economic support programmes for the rehabilitation of Mathamma women and their children; (6) To facilitate



Dr. Subbaramaiah with Chandrasehkar (one of the two coordinators)

and promote education and training of young Mathamma women; and (7) To work with the government for effective delivery of public services for the development of the Madiga community.

A typical Madiga house and some Madigas



I spent about two days with Dr. Subbaramaiah visiting the Madiga habitations, and meeting Madigas as well as Mathammas to learn more about the issue (for a detailed report, see <http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/409/sitevisitjan2004.htm>). What I saw made me realize that the project proposal from MICDA was not overstatement of the facts. The condition of the community as a whole, including the Mathammas, was pathetic. A major reason for the practice still prevailing is extreme superstitious belief and absolutely no awareness of health care. In spite of the fact that the region has a number of (relatively decent) large hospitals, and accessible health care, the Madigas often went to local "quacks" (unregistered, self-declared doctors). Thus, even the simplest of treatable diseases (minor dysentery to more severe jaundice, Malaria and Cholera) was not being treated. Diseases which could easily be treated in early stages were mostly ignored leading to more chronic conditions later. The community often felt that dedicating a girl-child as a Mathamma would cure her or the affected family member. Other reasons like securing a good future for the family, or wanting a son would also be enough to persuade a parent to give up a daughter to being a Mathamma. Interestingly, even though the community is extremely poor, they took great pains in making a beautiful Mathamma temple in each habitation.

Part of the proposal from MICDA proposes to have community level events around the temple, and wean the community away from the dedication of the girl children as Mathammas. The other factor is that the habitations are very well connected by road and bus services. So the villagers actually have access to schools

One of the 19 workers in a Madiga village with a Mathamma temple in the background



and medical care (which includes Government hospitals, and those run by the Tirupathi Devasthanam). A major part of the social-worker's job is to educate the community and identify extremely sick individuals and ensure that they are taken to a hospital (and not to a quack).

A major fall out of the

Mathamma problem is not just the fact that Mathamma girls and women are forced into prostitution. Almost all of them end up being courtesans of other Madigas and eventually being abandoned along with their "illegitimate" children. Invariably, these men are married as it is; so not only do they destroy the Mathammas' life, but also destroy their own families by abandoning them. Mathammas' children are literally fatherless, and highly prone to various forms of exploitation and this perpetuates a vicious cycle.

Thus, the Project approach would be to initially carry out a comprehensive survey of each Madiga village in each mandal (the responsibility of each social worker). The data collected would then be put together to identify and prioritize issues for each mandal. For example, in one mandal it could be health awareness

and access to the local hospitals, in another it could be availing pensions and other government schemes, in one education or community rights and habitation level problems (like the right to use the cremation grounds). This survey/problem identification should be very rigorously carried out, and each worker would need to know his/her mandal. Subsequently, the community would be educated about the best use of the available resources, and avail of the government facilities. The social workers would ensure that the children were taken to health centers for regular vaccinations, etc. They would encourage family planning for the adult Mathammas (who are sex workers). A longer term goal of the group is to work on starting self help women's groups in the community (especially Mathamma). Finally, there will be the effort to try to bring Mathammas out of the sex trade, and fully use the resources allocated in the budget for mainstreaming of Mathammas & marriages etc.

I was extremely moved after my visit to the region. I was able to interact extensively with the social workers working under Dr. Subbaramaiah for the proposal. They were all well-qualified, and seemed highly motivated. However, only two out of the 19 workers were from the Madiga community itself. Only Dr. Subbaramaiah had a complete understanding of the issue which has complexities at many different layers. From what I saw though, this effort will go a long way in improving the lives of the Madiga community, and help eradicate the social evil that the Mathamma practice has evolved to.

The First Schools - The Wheel of Change

by Swati Sircar

Champa Mahila Samity, a self-help organization based in the Sunderbans area of West Bengal, has been connected intimately with Asha Seattle since.... and I had the opportunity to visit them for the first time on September, 2002. It appeared to have a very good infrastructure & accommodation compared to similar other organizations I had visited till then. However, as I ventured deeper into the more inaccessible areas and interacted with the organizational base, I realized that nowhere else had I encountered the same high quality Montessori way of teaching in the local language. The children were very bright & clearly used their life experiences while answering our questions.

Sundarban, situated at the Ganga delta, is a collection of over 100 islands. The main occupation is agriculture. However, the subsistence on mono crop method means that the people are forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence most of the time. For families without cultivable land, there isn't much choice other than fishing in the crocodile infested rivers or venturing into the forests for collecting firewood, honey & bee-wax. The stray Royal Bengal tiger or the silent crocodile make sure that life is always at risk. No wonder there is a saying that the people fight "crocs in water, tigers on land & snakes on the roads".

Under these circumstances, a group of local youth started the CMS in 1979 in an effort to improve the quality of life of the people around them. It began as a simple out-of-doors primary school for children. To make it effective, along with the village schools started Self Help

Groups (SHG) for the mothers. Now CMS runs 35 pre-primary schools in different villages.

The need:

The Government-funded Anganwari program, founded on similar principles as CMS, has evolved into more of a centre for providing food than anything else. This does take care of the immediate problem. But to provide a sustainable all round development, the villagers need to be imparted at least primary education for earning a livelihood outside farming and agriculture. Also as per government rules a village cannot have more than one Anganwari, even if there is a river or brook intersecting the village. This raised the commuting problems faced by villagers in harsh weather conditions. So even though more than half of the CMS schools cannot provide any food, parents prefer them since the children have a quality time and learn a lot there.

A major deterrent for the villagers in accessing the facilities is commuting large distances. The road condition in most villages is very poor and deteriorates during monsoon. The sleet covered roads of Seattle (during 1st week of January this year) is a close approximation of the situation. These treacherous roads not only make even short distances difficult to commute, it also causes some people serious injuries. The grass that occasionally grows on the side makes it less slippery and more walkable but there is always the hidden danger of a snakes. This makes it hard for the parents to send their children to schools situated far from home. The fact that most of the CMS schools are in close proximity to the settlements does take care of this problem.

The effect:

In addition to bringing education closer to the children, these schools have also ensured that the parents value education and most of the children continue to go to the nearest primary schools after graduating from the CMS schools. A very crucial time for a child's education is early on when he/she is forced to drop out due to poverty, ill-health and/or unsafe commuting. Children also get into the habit of going to school and enjoying the experience. CMS, being a grass-root organization, has ensured that the children, many of whose parents are closely involved in CMS, properly motivates the kids not to drop out. As a result, going to school has become a norm to both children and parents. We have also got requests of expanding these schools to include primary levels (class I-IV).

In addition, the schools have provided opportunity to the mothers to join hands and thus uniting the women. They have started their own micro-credit with almost no seed money from outside & are very close to starting a cooperative bank. The concept of kitchen gardening is steadily becoming popular and they want to get training in rearing small animals in their efforts to self-sufficiency. In addition they have become more health and hygiene conscious. They have even stopped isolated cases of wife beating. Most importantly, they have become confident, organized and can face the world as a united team.

The schools & classes:

Each school is supervised by a group of parents, mothers in particular, and villagers. This fosters a sense of belonging and local ownership of these schools in

the villagers. The funds collected by Asha Seattle are disbursed by the villagers themselves; in one instance, a supervising team of the concerned villagers decided what type of construction would be the best for them. However, most of these schools are still without any proper structure. The classes take place under the open sky, or a tree, or someone's front yard with tarpaulin mats to sit on, fences and outer hut walls serve as blackboards, charts & other teaching aids. The children learn Bengali, English & math. They also get familiar with different animals & birds, fruits & vegetables & flowers through flash cards. They take part in games, story telling, arts classes, songs & action-rhymes. The teacher student ratio is generally 1:25; however, the total number of children in these schools vary from 25 to as many as 100.

The Teachers:

Virtually all of the teachers hail from their own villages and have gone through extensive training from Vikramshila*. They create their own teaching and learning materials using cloth, paper, cardboard boxes & colors based on the Montessori method. There is an intimate bonding between the teachers and students. A very promising feature is that these teachers are very eager to learn more & improve their teaching skills. In 2002 & 2003 my mother (also a Montessori teacher) held workshops for them which were very well-attended. They collected newer poems and stories to make the teaching process less repetitive. They also asked us to teach them simple drawing & interesting games which the children could easily learn and re-enact during their annual sports

programs. The teachers also share best practices. They also visit every home to make sure the children continue their education into the primary schools. If some children are inconsistent, they also try to find out the reason(s) during these weekly visits. The teachers are supervised by two local youths who are very responsible, very open & eager to learning themselves.

The children:

In the last three years, I have visited several of these schools, some more than once. Not once did the children hesitate or fail to answer any questions we asked them. In fact, sometimes, they really took us by surprise with some very innovative answer. On one occasion, a child told me a story that we had told one year back in a different school. At another school, the

children took over the microphone, long after the speeches and the formal program ended to continue with their own impromptu stories and poems. They are very enthusiastic & keen to show what they know what they can do. The general level of participation and awareness is very high.

Role of Asha vis a vis CMS schools:

Asha Seattle started working with CMS in 1994. Initially, Asha supported five of the schools; in recent times, our support base has broadened to accommodate over ten schools in this area. However, the major thrust of Asha now is to expand its operations by sponsoring all the thirty-five CMS schools in this area. In that scenario, CMS would then be able provide daily meals to these needy children by itself; not only would that

make attendance more attractive, it would also ensure that these kids have a healthy and nutritious meal every day which is necessary for their all-round growth. The projected expense for covering the entire SAC would be 1\$ per month per child which would ensure a wholesome and all-round early childhood education of these needy children.

For more details contact Srijan (asha-seattle-info@yahoo.com) or visit <http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/43/CMSlist.htm>

*Vikramshila (<http://vikramshila.org>) is a Kolkata based education resource group with a view to provide in-service training to grassroots level organizations working for the education of the disadvantaged sections of the society.

Reviewing Text books

by Srijan

Asha supports education all over India. We have supported infrastructure expenses, various recurring expenses and worked with projects to improve the quality of education in schools. But one thing we had not done was to look at the school text books in detail that are being taught to the kids back home. So we took up this project of reviewing text books in August 2003. We found this exercise immensely helpful in understanding the present state of the curriculum and the difference we could make in the content and quality of the text books.

We started with the 5th standard Social Studies text book of Gujrat State Board. To summarize, what we found after a thorough review was depressing and very stilted presentation. Not only is the material incomprehensive and the presentation manner poor, the book promotes biases and stereotyping, presents myths as part of history and has many factual inaccuracies. It starts history with the Vedic era, without any mention of pertinent previous historical events including Indus valley civilization. Out of the 19

chapters for History, 6 chapters are devoted to stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata. The common thread of mythological story-telling, without factual support, are repeated throughout. Though the effort to present history through stories, which might be more appealing to a child, are commendable, the poor presentation and excessive reference to mythologies made us rethink the strategies employed by the present Government-aided Text Book Review Boards. The foremost questions that arise include the relevance of these stories to history and whether history should be made into a moral science lesson. Instead of presenting history through a factual approach, this book tries to pass on a value system derived from myths, which, in more than one instances, can be very subjective and inaccurate. In a rapidly shrinking world, education should help the children recognize and understand the cultural, regional and other differences in the world without being biased towards one or the other. But a common theme that emerged from these books was excessive and repetitive gender bias, social bias, color bias and

stereotyping. Few examples will illustrate the point:

- “They possess the courage needed for business” [Reference to people of Gujarat, Pg 210]
- “Punjabi people are jovial, easy going and hard working. They are stout and well built.” [Pg 211]
- “People are cool minded” [Reference to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, Pg 212]
- “People are short and strong” [Reference to the people of southern India, Pg 213]
- “People are slightly short” [Reference to the people of West Bengal, Pg 213]

This type of presentation of Indian social life is bound to promote stereotypes in young minds and foster divisiveness and subjectivity.

This is an ongoing project. We will gradually broaden our work to include text books from different boards on different subjects. Eventually we would like to see our text books changing in a direction where learning is fun and comprehensive, cohesive and one that promotes healthy thinking.

Coming soon to an auditorium near you

Chhoti Si Asha

June 2004.

Come see the little ones in our community dance, sing and act and show you the colorful diversity of India.

All in an effort to raise funds to educate kids just like themselves back in India.

We had a blast last year, we will have a bigger one this time!
It is still not too late to register to perform.

Contact Asha Seattle for details.

On the evening of March 20, 2004, about 350 folks gathered in Kane Hall, University of Washington to enjoy a fabulous evening of music, dance and comedy – the event was O’ Podu, an entertainment show hosted by Asha-Seattle in an attempt to raise money for a couple of projects that Asha-Seattle supports in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. The highlight of the event was a light music show by a popular Seattle-based music band, Geetanjali. The group consists of enterprising young professionals from in and around the Seattle area, who take pleasure in pursuing their passion for music in their spare time. In addition, we had a couple of enterprising youngsters, Anusha Shankar and Surekha Gopi, dancing live on stage to Geetanjali’s rendering of “Manmatha Raasa”, a popular Tamil number. The audience gladly joined in the dancing for the songs that followed. We also had a group of volunteers who drove up from Portland, OR to entertain the audience with their comedy. An abundance of talent, mixed with good humor and excellent singing and dancing resulted in an outstanding show for the audience. The comperes, Deepa and Pradeep, did a fantastic job of keeping the audience

engaged and entertained – that’s no mean task in a show that lasted well over four hours, but they made it look easy. Udipi Café, based in Bellevue, provided some delicious south Indian fare at very reasonable prices, much to the satisfaction of the audience. Overall, we had a great show that provided the audience with some outstanding entertainment. On behalf of Asha-Seattle, I’d like to thank all the performers for their tireless efforts that contributed to the success of the event. Elmo Rajah, the key coordinator for Geetanjali took great interest in planning the eve’t was very instrumental in ensuring that the event got the necessary publicity, even if that meant spending hours together at local Indian grocery stores handing out flyers to passers-by. Thank you Elmo! We’d also like to thank our sponsors whose generous support made this event possible. And finally, I’d like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the Asha volunteers for their support – Ravi, Swati, Binay, Sree, Arindam, Pushpa, Joyeeta, Tapoja, Srijan, Krishnan, Sunil and Anupa – we simply couldn’t have done this without you.

by Arvind Krishnan

Asha for Education
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