

Account of our visit to the Gandhi Seva Ashram organisation

November 2017

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9TH 2017

Empirical science: First lesson of test demonstrations

We arrive at Kaup and visit the premises where the scientific equipment is stored. It consists of a single room measuring 12 square metres, the purpose of which is to store any new arrival such as books written in Kannada, educational posters on the human body, several video cassette tapes to help learn English, a spyglass, a single microscope, and a lone set of weighing scales as well as a computer and hardware.

Deodas tells us that students from grades 6 to 12 attend those scientific lessons. Ten classes, composed of 20 to 30 pupils each, will be present for these classes and professional training for the teachers is scheduled to begin in December 2017. Scientific demonstrations such as the ones we are going to show today will be carried out in the ten schools the classes originate from.

We arrive at the Malar school where the headmistress and the teachers greet us. The pupils help us unload our equipment.

There are 81 boys and 81 girls, ranging from years 5 to 9. Ninety percent of them belong to the untouchables. The goal of the demonstration that Deodas prepared is illustrate basic chemistry concepts that the children already studied in the general education programme. With this method, pupils can experiment first hand: they can handle the products and determinate the doses they will need, contribute to the experiments and see the chemical processes unfold with their own eyes (the chemical reactions, the various states of matter, what could impede the processes, etc.)



The children are waiting for us inside the classroom. They are all dressed in a blue uniform and are sitting on the floor. The girls are on one side and the boys are on the other. Each group comprises around twenty students. They are the oldest pupils in the school.

The pupils quickly gravitate around Deodas as he gives them instructions. **They are hanging on his every word.**



His assistant and the pupils he calls forth help him with the experiments. Each pupil has their turn. Deodas expertly handles the various products and tools.

During the course of the lesson, he and the pupils make caramel by heating up sugar in a test tube over a Bunsen burner, produce sparks by burning magnesium, cause metal to expand, and see how oxygen affects combustion.

The children are then divided into groups and Deodas joins each group in turn to explain them how a microscope works and how to weigh something precisely.



The lesson is lively. The children are attentive and participate eagerly.

They prepared today's demonstration with their teachers, as seen by the open chemistry books they all have in front them to check the formulas. Whenever Deodas quizzes them, they answer constructively which shows they are keeping up with the lesson and understand it.

Deodas says that it is only the first of many demonstrations. He tells us this one was a bit long but everything he showed today will be rehearsed throughout the year in smaller lessons and experiments.

We leave Kaup to go and meet the tutoring class in the Amasebail tutoring centre

On the road to the Amasebail tutoring centre, we cannot help but feel nervous and a little bit fearful. Rickshaws, pedestrians of all ages, motorbikes, scooters, cows, buses, lorries and cars – all of them

are cluttering the roadways, even those with four lanes. It is as though nobody cares for their own safety. Everyone moves at their own pace even though they could be knocked over at any moment. Indian roads are some of the most dangerous in the world; 120,000 pedestrians die every year on them. We honk our way through for the entirety of the trip. Our driver swerves left and right, wherever there is an opening in the traffic. The car we are in was not built with seatbelts in mind as we cannot reach them. Being seated in the front next to the driver or in the middle of the backseat is to experience a rollercoaster of emotions. Despite his risky driving, our driver is confident and exudes calmness, not unlike a fakir. **He honks and bulldozes his way through.**

Commuting time

The towns where the tutoring centres are are all located northern of Kaup and take between an hour and an hour and a half to reach. A social worker who does not live in the town would have to have a car or some other means of transport to take care of the children there every day. Transporting the scientific equipment for the experiments is a similar issue.

We arrive none the worse for wear at the Amasebail tutoring centre.

The children usually arrive when school is over and some are not there yet. As such, we have some time to walk around the town, looking at the houses, greeting the inhabitants who are standing on their doorsteps. Some even bring out chairs for us to sit on. Around the town, we notice some fields of crops and a few chickens.

We come back to the centre to see the children. They are all standing in a 40 square-metres room brightened by the sun. Their teacher is a young woman named **Shreelather** who is wearing a pink sari. There are **16 children, 8 girls and 8 boys**. All of them greet us with their palms together in front of their chest. We smile at them in return. Everything is light-hearted and lively.



Their teacher puts them to work; a text to read and questions to answer. As they sit on the ground, reading, she tests them one by one. They are very studious. Afterwards, they recite their multiplication tables all together and sing the numbers, going from 1 to 50, the days of the week and the months in English. The children open their English books and read.



Deodas explains us that they are reciting *recto tono* – in a rather flat, monotonous manner. He is teaching them how to give life to their words with their intonation. He tells us that it is very important for them to speak English correctly and understandably.

Shreelather teaches in another school than that of the children. As for them, they come from two different schools. They range from year 2 to year 6.

Their lesson lasts two hours and during that time, the children remain attentive. **Shreelather has a knack for motivating them and helps every one of them according to their needs while maintaining their cohesiveness as a group. She is really good at explaining.** There is a sense of dignity about her, coupled with rectitude and benevolent authority which make for a high-quality teaching.

At the end of the day, she invites the children to pick a book out of a cardboard box in which books are stacked. Each pupil takes one and sits down to read! I think she asks them to talk amongst themselves about the book they chose. Night falls and she turns on a battery-operated lamp which bathes the room in a white light.

Some parents have arrived and the children are going to perform a dance for us.



Before that, they had gifted a flower to each one of us and thanked us. We give them sweets and pieces of a Breton cake.

Christine says that it is the first time we have attended a lesson in India, that it is very interesting to see how it goes, the diligence of the teachers and how the children react. It is precious feedback for us.

Tomorrow, we are going to show scientific experiments and talk with the teachers at the Sri Rama school in Majoor, then we are to go to the Shankar Narayana tutoring centre and lastly visit the Bedrakatte educational centre.

End of the first day.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10TH 2017

SRI RAMA school in MAJOOR

It is a state school built on a private plot; its buildings and supplies belong to the Sri Rama organisation. There are six teachers; four of them are paid by the State and the other two by the Sri Rama organisation. There are 153 children; twenty percent of them belong to the untouchables.

They all speak Kannada, the official language of the State of Karnataka. They learn English as their primary language and Hindi as their secondary language.

Sixty percent of them are Muslims and the remaining 40% are Hindus.

The youngest ones are 3 years old; the eldest are 14 years old.

While Deodas and his assistant are busy setting up their equipment, we speak with some pupils ranging from 11 to 13 years old in English. They are curious about our names and know their alphabet very well.

Deodas starts speaking and the lesson begins.

This time, Deodas asks the children which experiment they would like him to show out of several so that he does not have to perform them all like he did yesterday. He takes into account what the children have already studied in class.



The children attending this lesson are the eldest in the school. Twenty or so girls and just as many boys. The teachers attend too at the back of the classroom. Sometimes they step in to bring order back to the class as some children show signs of boredom.



We take the same road as yesterday to go to the Shankar Naragana tutoring centre. We drive in the same conditions too: our driver honks and bulldozes his way through. The first part of our trip is

beautiful as we cross two large and picturesque rivers that flow into the ocean 2 kilometres from the road. Then we arrive on a narrower path ensconced in a labyrinth of hills amongst which we notice an obvious lack of tar. On the road, we see pupils who are going back home after school, men wearing dhotis, women carrying burdens on their head and as always, motorbikes, lorries, dogs and cars with incessant honking in the background.

At the SHANKAR NARAGANA tutoring centre, 16 children greet us.



Eight girls and eight boys of which two are very young. Here as well, the children recite what they have learned, all of them studious and motivated. They are supervised by two young women who are social workers whose names are Sukaya Abdul Kalam and Sunitha Keoda Beritur.



They take the register. The two youngest children are working on their letters.



The pupils are focused on the work Sukaya and Sunitha gave them to do. They are seated in two circles on the ground. They revise their English lesson and recite the alphabet and their numbers in unison.



They all belong to the same tribe, 1 kilometre from here. One of their teachers comes from that tribe too while the other does not.



It is still daylight when we leave them. Next stop: Bedrakatte centre.

At the centre, five girls and three boys are working when we arrive.

Ashai, their teacher, notices a lack of diligence on their part as there should be 12 of them. They are all Koraga children.

It is night time when we leave. The village chief invites us into his home.



He is a member of the board of directors of the Gandhi Seva Ashram organisation. He invites us to sit and brings us bananas, all sorts of fruits and tea. His wife and their three children join us. The eldest is studying to be an air hostess, her younger sister tells us she dreams of becoming an actress and their little brother does not know what he wants to be when he is a grown-up... They all speak English very well and are eager to talk with us. The atmosphere is very welcoming.

Tomorrow morning, we plan to have a meeting with Deodas in the hotel. We want to review with him what we have learned and how to manage our projects.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH 2017



We discuss ways to develop and improve the educational science support project with Deodas. We debate the issue of the scientific equipment and how to transport it around. The items we will need are suitcases and chests as well as a car.

Moreover, Deodas is considering implementing these lessons in the villages around the tutoring centres. There is also the issue of hiring another assistant as he cannot very well do this all on his own.

Deodas tells us that studying science and English enables the children to broaden their horizons. He strives to spark an interest in science in these children. To do that, he mixes the experiments he does with the district educational program. He aims to teach a complete course at 10 schools within a year. Once he accomplishes that, he intends to ask for government approval and funding. As such, he emphasises the need for another assistant.

We discuss the tutoring centres with him.

There are currently 8 of them as we write, located in 5 different areas. He could open another one if he could just hire another teacher. It is the same old problem: finding someone willing to help him. Lately, he interviewed two social workers but it came to naught. It is no easy task, he tells us. However, the 8 centres currently in existence are running well enough as it is and there are already results: children that attended them have managed to get jobs in many sectors: administration, education, IT and more!

We ask him if it would be possible for his actions to be higher-profile.

For example, he could raise his profile by having his own office and a communication and press department. He has friends who work for a regional newspaper, after all. However, he has not talked

much about his contribution to tutoring or about the current educational science support project, even though there is much to say and show!

He tells us about a project he holds close to his heart: the development of an educational camp that would be “Gandhi-minded”. With it, he would like to foster a non-violent moral code in 17- and 18-- year olds. He would place an advertisement in the press, then choose applicants based on their motivations. The main reason he would like to implement this is to mitigate the tensions that have grown between Muslims and Hindus. He intends to ask for governmental funds to do this as it is an Indian problem, he tells us.

Yves who is the eldest among us reminds Deodas that people get old before they know it then asks him if **he has ever thought about a successor**, as nobody can go on forever.

Yes, he has. He has never invested much money into his projects so that, should he pass away, few things would be impacted. However, if we started to put more money in, such as to buy cars and equipment or to hire a new employee, things would be different. He believes his son will succeed him in the organisation. He tells us he is proud to have raised him to think about others. Never has he thought about another NGO taking over his actions in the event of his death.

We talk about the meeting of the Gandhi Seva Ashram board of directors that will occur the next day in Deodas’ home in Kaup. What does he want to talk about? He says that he will focus on two topics where decisions need to be made.

First, he wants to talk about the educational science support project.

Then, about the tutoring.

There is a third item he wants to discuss but it falls out of our support activities: the “Gandhi-minded” educational camps. (See below)

In the afternoon, we visit another tutoring centre located at Gangoli where a fishing community, the Adi Dravidas, lives.

Two teachers and 12 children, aged from 5 to 13, greet us there.

Each one of the teachers has their own subject: Nagaraj Hemmady teaches English whereas Naduraj Gangoli teaches the other subjects: Hindi, Kannada, maths, etc., as well as physical education. The aim is for the children to be self-sufficient.

Deodas tells us that it is the first centre where there is an English-only teacher which truly shows that mastering this language empowers those who have learnt it.



We watch them work, see their eagerness to learn and their curiosity. The teachers succeed in motivating them and bring the best out of them. The children gift us a flower, sing a song for us, and clap their hands.

Along with the community leaders, the centre put on an annual spectacle that occurs every 14th April to congratulate the children who successfully pass their school year. They have also created an Art Knowledge class to teach their youths all there is to know about art, should they want to work in this sector. They show us the celebration costumes they made during those classes.

We attend a meeting of the organisation which manages the local residents' projects. There are discussions about the mutual assistance funds that the villagers created based on their annual contributions to help those with disorders or disabilities. The organisation is very active in the village. Thanks to funding from the government, they managed to build a small theatre and a permanent job application centre as well as implementing an IT training programme. It has three classes, one of which is composed of non-caste trainees.



Deodas the activist is the one who debates with the “non-caste” group, that afternoon. They discuss the reason why grants and subsidies are more readily granted to members of superior castes.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12TH 2017

The meeting of the board of directors takes place; Deodas, the chairman and the village chief who invited us in his home two days prior as well as his wife and their three children, are attending in addition to us. Many have been unable to come.



We make several decisions about what we discussed with Deodas the day prior:

- To rent an office
- To buy a car
- To teach the Koraga children the science programme and organise an educational camp with them
- To coach 15 public school teachers for the science programme designed to complete the government policies about the teaching of science in December.
- To hire two new teachers, one to teach science, the other to help with the tutoring
- To pave the way for the future of the organisation

The chairman tells us that he is not ready to assume Deodas' responsibilities. For now, his role is to record the decisions we make.

We lunch in a restaurant in Kaup before leaving for the last tutoring centre on our trip. On Monday, we are going to Mangalore to meet with the Deep Welfare organisation which fights for women rights and provides education and legal assistance for them in order to protect them and help them emancipate themselves and find their place in their family and society.

Then we proceed with our trip. Next stop: Varanasi.

The last tutoring centre is located nearer to the urbanised area. We come across children on bicycles on their way home. They will not be present at the centre.

It is Chandrasekhar, Deodas' young assistant, who is at the helm this time. There are 6 girls and 7 boys this time. A celebration will be held at the town theatre later in the day. Teenagers have already started to get in the mood as they listen to music while lighting paper lanterns. The building next to the centre has electricity while Chandrasekhar's classroom does not. Soon, we have to light up a battery-operated lantern. The children are becoming more restless. Deodas steps in and helps the children work along with his assistant.

As we thank them for welcoming us, Yves asks the children what they would like to do once they are grown-ups: two want to become doctors, another wants to become a mechanical engineer, another an IT engineer and many of them aspire to be teachers.

It is heartening to see these children full of beautiful goals, having faith in the future even though they are outcasts, coming from remote Karnataka tribes. They intend to seize the day while their parents, who did not have that chance, try to get their bearings in an ever-changing world.