

Site visit to Dr. Award by Vijay Srirangam

Date: July 11, 2009

Location: Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu

Pick up:

I took a bus from Trichy central bus stand to Mathur. It was a 45 minute ride. I reached Mathur by 10:00 AM. Kalaimagal arrived in a Taxi to pick me up. It was a 15 minute drive from the bus stand to the village.

Dr. Award office

After I reached their office, I started talking to Kalaimagal and her husband. I learnt about their background and the scavenger community who are benefitting from this project. Ms. Kalaimagal herself is from the scavenging community and faced strong discrimination at her school. She was forced to clean the toilets at school, while being a topper in her class. With the mentorship of one of her teachers, she enrolled in graduate studies and got herself post graduate degree in social studies.

At the office of Dr. Award, they counsel women on different types of right issues. Cases are racial and often involve sexual harassment. The office of Dr. Award ensures that a case is filed at the local police station and action is taken. Getting justice is a very long process.

Due to the sensitivity of some of the cases, Ms. Kalaimagal and her husband have received numerous threats on their life. They have been attacked in the past.

Scavenging community

In the Pudukottai area, dry latrines were common until late 1990s. Though flush toilets were mandatory, they were not enforced. The scavenging community earned their living through waste removal. Dr. Award worked on enforcing the law, converting all latrines to flush toilets. This caused lack of employment opportunities for the community. They started taking odd cleaning jobs.

Due to the stigma of cleaning human waste, these people face various discriminations. They are not allowed to handle anything related to food or clothing. They are not allowed to hang out in public areas. The working conditions are horrible – smell, safety, locality and timings. The conditions force them to be drunk while at work. They have very little representation in law – when crimes get committed against them, the police don't want to deal with them.

The scavenger community is comprised of about 20 families, over 3 generations. They are living next to the local dump yard. The local municipality is always forcing them to move to the outskirts of the city. Their children face humiliation at School. They don't have any government issued IDs and are not eligible for any of the government employment schemes.

Thatch making

The Dr. Award organization is working on improving their living conditions - permanent residence, income, legal representation, protection for women, schools for children. They believe that economic independence can solve a lot of these issues.

To begin with, they have come up with a thatch making project, using coconut branches. These thatches are used in constructions. It is not capital intensive. The working conditions are safe and there is not stigma towards buying thatches from scavengers.

A tall coconut branch costs 1 Rupee. Thatches made out it can be sold for Rs. 2.50. It takes about 15 – 20 minutes to make them. Such an employment opportunity will give them a real choice of employment. It will help them improve their status and living conditions.



