

GROUP 18 IN KRISHNAGIRI, TAMIL NADU

After two weeks of desk research, preparation of project plan, research plan, questionnaires etc. it was time to pack our bags and board the bus to **Krishnagiri** - famous for its granite and mangoes, but also distinguished as one of the most backward districts in TamilNadu in terms of all development indicators.



July 4 - The day of departure, saw the three of us me, Priya and Erin in a state of heightened excitement and anticipation. Though we had worked on the strategies and methodology, the apprehension that we shared was regarding the response we would get when on filed. Attribute this to the sensitive yet intense nature of the topic of research '*Effectiveness of HIV Peer Education Program*', or our lack of experience in dealing with such a subject. Arriving at Krishnagiri at an unearthly hour of 3.45 a.m., we were pleasantly surprised to find that the climate was cool. Well any place seems cool when compared to Chennai!

July 5

With Mr. Ganeshamoorthi (nothing short of virtues personified), the UNICEF consultant in Krishnagiri as our guide we set about our field work. Our first stop was one of the child labor schools in Krishnagiri.

CHILDREN AT THE CHILD LABOUR SCHOOL



We set about the task of breaking ice with the children, and what better way to do it, than to click away. This task accomplished, we decided to test them on their HIV awareness levels and lo behold... 'HIV is transmitted by saliva, so one must wear chappals'.

Some **GYAN...** to start our research with. Later we found out, that not only those innocent children but many grown ups too shared these myths and some more.

While we were getting acquainted with the realities or more precisely the popular



BANU & RIYAZ

myths on the field, Riyaz, an ex-student of the school walks in to meet his teachers. He had been mainstreamed that week. To me it seemed like a success story in the making, when one of the teachers' informed us that Banu; Riyaz's younger sister had stopped attending classes.

What started as a visit to his family (residing in the next street), in an attempt to coax them send the girl to school, became a full fledged affair of talking to the parents of other out of school kids residing in that street. It was not a wasted affair, for, when we went back to the school towards the end of our field visit, we found Banu and one another girl were taking lessons.

Our next stop was Godletti, the first village to field test our questionnaire. Our surprise and joy knew no bounds, when we found that HIV awareness level was more than appreciable.

Murugamma (the lady in blue)



All thanks to the Peer Educators Murugamma and Moorthi. The lady is deserving of all praise for her unmatched knowledge of the subject and exuberance. Though we met Peer Educators a many we never came across another Murugamma.

July 6- We set off to some tribal colonies where the communities of Iruzhar reside. This community leaves their village for 3 months every year to go guard the mangoe orchards. We met men who had braved bears and snakes, but alas, neither they nor the women folk knew much about HIV. The contrast was stark and disappointing, because, technically the village is under the Oppadhavadi panchayath jurisdiction, where HIV awareness intervention has taken place. They hadn't attended any of the awareness workshops (which take place at night) for the main village is far from their place of residence.

So much for HIV awareness! But we were in for other shocks as well. 10 yr old Nagesh is a bonded domestic help for a sum of Rs. 3000 per annum at the house of the ex-panchayath president.



NAGESH

VARALAKSHMI

16 yr old Varalakshmi (9th std. drop out) was to be married in 8 days to a man who had no family and thereby needed someone to do the domestic work. Chembaratthi (12 yr) said she missed her friend Usha (around the same age) who had been married off to somebody in Krishnagiri town.

July 7 – After two days of field testing the consensus was that the questionnaires had to be revised. On a lighter note....how many of us would make the cut if somebody tested our HIV knowledge? Say, if not HIV, how about plague or elephantiasis or malaria? I recollected the various times I had turned away people who had wanted to do a survey questionnaire. If somebody walked into my locality and said that they wanted to do a focus group... I wonder if I would even cross that path, let alone sit through the half / three quarter of an hour.

July 8 – The final drafts were translated in the regional language and photocopied. The first two days set us reworking on our strategies and we decided that it was impractical to go from village to village to collect the samples, for Peer Educators are only two per village. So the better strategy was to call a meeting of all peer educators - block wise.



July 9 – Venue: Community workshop, Bargur

Food for thought – how many of us wouldn't mind going into a village to do a training from 7.30 to 11.30 p.m. after having toured the villages in the morning to



Joan (Peer Trainer) mobilizing the Community with a SHG member

follow up? When you wind up you realize that you have to walk 5 k.m. in the wake to reach the nearest bus corridor, that is, if you are not too late for the last bus. How better would you like it if you were this lady with worried husband or parents back home? If you retort saying 'if the pay is good I would work', think twice.

Odd encounters with a drunkard, a parent not so happy with the structure of the workshops, being stranded without a bus in the dark etc. are just added attractions. This is precisely the job the peer trainers do to generate awareness in the community.

July 10 & 11 – The days of the Peer educator's meetings. The turnout was 30/90 and 38/150 in the Bargur and Kaveripattinam blocks respectively. This, after the 4 RIDO trainers and the 2 NYK organizers having spent the better part of three days intimating them on a door to door basis.

July 12 & 13 - These two days were spent collecting samples from the target peers in the two blocks, in other words the intervention villages. Lack of



awareness, poverty, malnutrition, drop out rate etc. ceased being statistics.

You could see living breathing examples of it, all around you. More often than not, we ended up guessing the age of many kids on the lower side (by 3 to 4 years).

July 14 & 15 – The days were spent on collecting youth samples in Matthur the non intervention block (where there are no P.E.), community FGDs, interviews with the trainers and meeting the Collector.

July 16 – Back in Chennai I feel that all hope is not lost. With dedicated people like Mr. Ganeshamoorthi, the trainers and the Peer educators on the field one can't lose. Every life saved, every man/ women counseled can be a household



My Team, Trainers & Mr. Ganeshamoorthi

saved. Its funny how “it’s easier to be wise on the hind sight “(like my team mate Priya puts it) and think of so many different things you could have done in different ways. In such moments, I find comfort in the words of our guide Mr. Devashish Dutta – ‘It’s fair as long as you have learnt **SOMETHING** from it’.

Many more instances, many disturbing facets of life.....and some rays of hope.