

# Report of my visit to the Neerpair projects

Hannes Datta, February - March 2014

## Background

I recently finished my PhD, and needed a vacation together with Laura. We decided to go to the Andaman Islands (really recommendable – we ended up diving there!). Of course, we visited the Neerpair projects on our way. In total, I spent one week with Father Suresh and Nandhini. My overall evaluation of my visit is very positive.

## St. John's Boarding

- Father Jayaseelan is now the correspondent of the campus; he perceives his role to be strategic (i.e., “seeing the broad picture” about the development); he takes care about the daily business at school very well; in the boarding, he leaves the decisions to the expertise of Nandhini (and, if needed, Father Suresh)
- The boarding is very well maintained; all the damages of the past years have been fully repaired
  - The water purification plant has now been shifted to the boarding (that's the place of greatest water need)
  - The steam boiler in the kitchen is fully functional again
  - There is a solar heater on the roof for hot water; and it's working well
  - There is a new washing machine, saves the Fathers and Nandhini a lot of time!
  - The terrace has been covered by a new roof, preventing water to remain on the stage (which, in turn, helps to reduce mosquitos); also, the roof has a cooling function for the whole boarding (since the stones don't heat up as much, the air in the boarding remains chilly as well)
- The last monsoon has failed; there is surely going to be a water crisis starting in April/May; Father Jayaseelan is suggesting a new borewell
- A new chapel has been constructed on the roof of the boarding, used by Father Jayaseelan for his prayers; mass with the children has been celebrated in the downstairs hall; the chapel was very recently inaugurated (9 March 2014) by bishop Neethinathan, together with a retired bishop from the diocese of Liège, Belgium
- The kids seem all very happy, and I have had some great interactions with them
- Father Jayaseelan criticizes that the boarding students do not outperform the day scholars
- The boarding is surrounded by “Nandhini's jungle”: a beautiful flower garden, lots of palm trees, a sandal wood tree, lots of mango trees, and food gardening (tomatoes, lady fingers, etc.); kids work in the garden regularly; some try to cheat to work less, but most of them are very enthusiastic about it!
- The boarding now is equipped with broadband internet and Wifi access. The connection worked extremely well when I was there, though it should be noted that it never rained (I know the connection will become worse during rainy or stormy times)

## Dr. R. Arulappa School

- Kids were much calmer than two years back, and did not leave class rooms just to say hi to me: that's good news, signaling the correspondent and the teachers are again in control of the school (this has also been confirmed by the headmaster in a personal conversation)
- The computer lab has been revamped and now features ten new laptops with Windows 7
- Chemistry/Physics classrooms are in good shape
- The trees have grown a lot!
- Several watchmen control the gates (one at the main entrance, one at the boarding)
- The compound wall has been constructed fully

## WE Group

- The WE Group is the association for students that currently receive study support (or received study support in the past). Problems of the past were that students did not "repay" or "donate" some money after they secured good jobs. The group under their president Tamilmani have taken great steps to solve this problem.
- For example, a "wedding service" has been set up in which WE Group students are "rented out" to help with the catering at weddings in Chennai. They earn 300RS. per wedding, of which they keep 150Rs. for their own expenses, and donate 150Rs. to the WE Group; I am very happy about this development
- Next to earning money, students also started to contribute their work to the projects, e.g., they help out to organize events (for which Father and Nandhini would otherwise have to hire people); Father Suresh is very enthusiastic about it, because the amount of work people "donate" is huge (and, in monetary terms, is very significant!)
- Members of the WE group show much higher commitment than before (e.g., they inform if they cannot come to the regular meetings)
- The WE group prepared a wonderful function to celebrate my PhD. Dances and songs were performed, and students gave speeches.

## Personal situation of our project partners

- The past years have not been easy for Father Suresh and Nandhini (e.g., lots of accusations and problems that were created). To my great joy, these problems do not have a big impact on their mental fitness anymore.
- The project greatly relies on the daily efforts Nandhini exerts; the large responsibility and workload are impacting her own fitness, and Nandhini falls sick frequently. However, she emphasizes that she is happy to be able to achieve so much for the projects
- I have the deepest respect and compliments for the work of Nandhini, Father Suresh, and Father Jayaseelan

## Recent visits by European collaborators

- Currently, two Belgian college students from Leuven (Lissa and Sjanna) stay in the boarding to undertake women health surveys in the villages in cooperation with Loyola College; they are extremely positive about Nandhini, Father Suresh, and the boarding
- A Belgian student, Emanuel, stayed in the boarding for four months from August – December 2013; the purpose of his stay was to do some research at CRDS (analysis into how well-prepared the people are to face future cyclones, tsunamis, etc.). I think Emmanuel worked at

CRDS during the week, and came to the boarding on weekends. Kids were very enthusiastic about him.

- Jean-Pierre Wellens from Knokke, Belgium, visited Neerpair and the surrounding area for a couple of days in March 2014
- David Lemoine from Sartay School in Liege visited Neerpair for a day in March 2014; he has decided to stop his cooperation with Father Suresh and shift to new projects (I think near Pondicherry)

## Around Neerpair

- Porur now features a large wedding hall (which comes under the projects of Father Jayaseelan); during my visit, there was a big concert by a music superstar from Chennai; Father Jayaseelan hopes to rent out the hall locally for weddings
- I visited Anandapuram/Polambakkam, the leprosy center of late Dr. Claire Vellut. Father and Nandhini are currently planning the memorial for Claire; her ash is being kept in the boarding; children light candles and bring flowers regularly; when the memorial is ready, her ash will be brought to Anandapuram

## Miscellaneous

- I have visited the Family of Nandhini (her mother, her sister Viji, and her elder sister); her mother is now very old, she was very affectionate when she saw me; she is still cooking every day for the family
- Nandhini's nephew Prabhu is continuing his great career at Zoho corporation, for which he now takes care of a large branch of Zoho's business (WebNMS, for those interested); he is also writing several blog posts about his work.
- I have met many former students that I have known for the past ten years; it's great to see how they have come up! (a few work for NGOs in Chingleput now; others have jobs that enable them to support their whole family, another one is HR manager at a company)
- I have met Parthiban, who will soon finish his PhD (his supervisor transferred to another University, which caused a few problems to him; but he's now managing well); he is now Assistant Professor at a University in Chingleput
- Tamilmani got married, and I visited him in his house
- The surrounding area of Neerpair has changed; a lot of new real estate plots are under development. While it looks as if the villages are coming up, this is actually not the case, according to Father Suresh: because lots of poor people sell their land for low prices, they lose their source of future income.

## Photos

...about my visit are available in an online gallery:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/hannes.datta/Indien2014?authkey=Gv1sRgCO78vNbR26utaQ>

## More information

...is available on request! Just email me ([hannes@datta-online.de](mailto:hannes@datta-online.de)), or call me (+31 6 57194162).