

# THE VIEW FROM THE OUTSIDE- MISSION GAGILLAPUR

My name is Len MacDonald and I am a resident of Canada, visiting India for the first time. I met the CEO of MAS (formerly APMAS) last spring in my hometown of Antigonish , Nova Scotia, home of the internationally acclaimed, Coady International Institute. Upon his invitation, I have come to India to volunteer with a few non profit groups.

I am a journalist and author and my mission is to document the work that MAS is doing in Southern India. Because I am “not from here”, I can bring a fresh perspective as someone who has spent their entire life in a completely different culture. The account that follows comes from two visits to Gagillapur during the month of November, 2016.

When I look at the mission statement of MAS, it appears that its primary goal is to provide Self Help Groups and Self Help Federations with the necessary tools to alleviate poverty and overcome inequalities.

Affecting meaningful change requires partnerships, cooperation and coordination. Mission Gagillapur has three stakeholders: Shakti Hörmann, The Government of Telangana and MAS.

## ***So, what exactly did I witness in the time I spent in Gagillapur?***

One of the primary challenges faced by Gagillapur is the structure of the community itself. It is comprised of five distinct areas. There are not many people in Church Gagillapur who were actually born and raised there. Many of the residents are migrant farmers as well as factory workers and many of them are illiterate. I believe the biggest challenge facing the community is improving the literacy level of its citizens. Without communication skills, the capacity for the community to move forward is very limited.

The heart of any small place is its schools.

Education is a basic right. In Canada, all children are afforded the opportunity to a good quality education, regardless of race, religion or socio economic status. Public education is funded by all levels of government through to grade 12 (12<sup>th</sup> level). There are also private paying schools which is the responsibility of parents. Children attend schools that have highly skilled educators and all of the modern conveniences, including the latest in technological advances.

The Mandal Parishad Primary School does not possess some of the very basic facilities that one would expect in a school. While improvements have been made, accessing water for cleaning

and toilets along with drinking water is a constant challenge, according to Principal M.L. Naidu. On one of the two visits, there was no running water. Water was being piped in from neighbouring households on this occasion. Upon questioning, Mr. Naidu suggested that the water problems were not strictly a matter of finances but rather political will. Water is the primary responsibility of the Gram Panchayat. There appears to be a lack of coordination between those who would complete the work and the authorities who authorize the expenditure.

In order for meaningful change to come to the school and the community at large, it must begin with the people who live there. The school has a 16 member Management Committee but because they are poorly educated, they do not have the required skills to make demands of various levels of government.

The Primary school has 143 students. In order for a school with these numbers to meet the minimum required standards of education, there should be four full time teachers and a full time principal. In fact, the school has two full time teachers while Mr. Naidu splits his time as a classroom teacher and as principal.

MAS has worked hard to help improve the student – teacher ratio by providing an Education Volunteer in the school. MAS also spearheaded a Children’s day where they conducted games and spoke to the children about the importance of taking up higher education. They also facilitated in the levelling of the playground to prevent flooding along with the installation of gates to prevent local youth from using the school premises after hours for the consumption of alcohol.

One bright spot for the staff and the students is the school’s partnership with St. Francis College. Students from the college come to the community every year as part of a “stay camp. “ These students engage with the children for a full week as part of the “campus to community” initiative. A representative of the college, Manjiri Prashant feels that this program is very valuable for her students to see the world in a broader context, especially when it comes to the plight of the poor.

So what has MAS done to improve conditions at the school? Mr. Naidu expressed his appreciation to MAS. He feels that MAS is playing a critical role in trying to improve the quality of education for his students. In addition to some infrastructure upgrades, MAS has also assisted with improvements to the library and the kitchen garden initiative. There is a proposal to the State to provide funds to construct a proper dining hall. Other items on the “wish list” are tables, furniture and a sound system with a microphone. Most importantly, he feels that the MAS team is listening and doing their best to assist him with the rather large task in front of him.

The “Mission Gagillapur” is primarily funded by Hörmann KG, Germany, one of whose factory outlets is located in Gagillapur.

Mr. Naidu acknowledges and appreciates the contribution of Shakti Hörmann who has provided school bags, shoes and socks for the children at the school. Aurobindo Pharma will be providing benches as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility activities, with facilitation by MAS.

The reverse osmosis water plant was built in 2013 but became defunct for a number of reasons. Recently, the plant has been operating at a deficit because raw water was being purchased but with structural improvements, better management and a favourable monsoon season, there is cause for optimism. At current usage, the water plant expects to clear off its accumulated debts early in 2017 and become profitable. This may lead to an expansion of the water program.

The Sarpanch of Gagillapur, Srinivas, is also pleased with the progress being made in the community through the efforts and interventions of MAS. He noted that he could see positive changes occurring in the village due to the support of MAS. He points out that the most important project so far has been the resurrection of the water filtration plant (RO Plant). There are approximately 250 families who now access clean drinking water on a regular basis at a nominal cost of 20 litres for 5 INR. He says that treating solid waste is the next big priority for the village.

MAS is also involved in local anganwadis. These are government sponsored child care and mother care centers. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of a program to combat child hunger and malnutrition. Housed in very modest structures, there is an amazing variety of programming. In addition to its primary role to help prepare younger children for school, it also serves as a resource centre for pregnant and lactating mothers along with adolescent female hygiene education. The hope is that MAS will be able to assist the village with preparing resolutions to government so that a second preschool can be built closer to the primary school in order to serve the poorest region close to Church Gagillapur.

## FACES IN THE CROWD - BORN TO LEAD

“My greatest wish is that we can give our children the skills to better their lives.”

### Meet Balaraju.

The youngest of three siblings born to Narsamma and Veeraiah in Gagillapur, India, hard work has been the hallmark of Balaraju's life, starting at a very early age. His parents weren't all that interested in educating their children. Chores around the family home took precedence. A teacher by the name of Rachael encouraged him to enrol and through his own initiative, he began his educational journey. In the eleventh and twelfth levels, his focus was mainly on sciences: biology, physics and chemistry but deep down, he knew that this wasn't the direction he wanted to go. He was profoundly affected during his eighth level by the Mandal president at the time, GnaneswarMudiraj. He was enthralled by his speeches and his community activism. Balaraju even volunteered to assist the president for a number of years. He entered the Bachelor of Arts program at Osmania University as he now had his sights clearly set on community development and local politics. Regrettably, he had to drop out of the program in the 13<sup>th</sup> level due to family problems and a lack of money.



For six years he worked as a milk vendor getting up at 3:00 in the morning to go area farms to pick up milk and deliver it to the depot. The hours were long and the work was hard. In 1996, he married Pushpa and the couple have two children: a son, Pavan and a daughter, Sowmya.

Even though the milk business provided a steady income for the family, politics was in his blood so it was no surprise that he decided to run for the office of village president in 2006. Despite being outspent by a margin of three to one in the election campaign, Balaraju came out on top.

He realized that his community needed a lot of help to raise the standard of living. He knocked on a lot of doors of companies doing business in the area. He managed to secure money for a water storage sump. He also realized that these same companies were also contributing something else that was far less desirable: pollution. He made his case, stood his ground and extracted commitments from these companies to improve air and water quality.

He recognized that a healthy community contributes to a prosperous community and so he worked very hard to improve health standards. This required a great deal of public education. His bold, dynamic personality and strong work ethic made him a well respected leader in the village.

When his term of office expired, he stayed involved in the community and remains so until this day. He is quick to point out that in order for the village to continue to move forward, that interventions from organizations like MAS are crucial. “Our people need to be empowered to speak up for themselves and MAS is giving us the necessary tools to do this,” he commented. “MAS has helped in so many ways including oversight on infrastructure projects and working closely with groups in the community to build capacities. At the end of the day, we must become masters of our own destiny.”

Balaraju is a social worker at heart and continues to fight for basic amenities that many places take for granted. “My big dream is to see the day when we have a modern sewage treatment plant,” he said. Don't be fooled by his warmth, his firm handshake and his easy smile. Behind that veil is a man consumed with passion to make his community the best it can be.

MAS field staff find the work in Gagillapur both stimulating and very challenging. Mobilizing a community like this is very difficult. Like people in most small towns and villages, change never comes easily. Some of the village counsellors still see MAS as a threat but with each new improvement, the task becomes marginally easier.

There is one thing that leaves me conflicted. After spending considerable time discussing the basic necessities of life in the village, I discovered a brand new Catholic Church on a property very close to the primary school and adjacent to the MAS field office. It is not my place to make judgment calls on whether religious institutions build modern, well appointed facilities. But it seems rather ironic that a facility that serves a small number of congregants is feet away from an institution of learning that has no running water.

In my opinion, MAS is playing a crucial role in helping to alleviate poverty in Gagillapur. Besides all of the tangible evidence that supports this claim, there is one intangible which is every bit as important. MAS is giving people hope which is undeniably crucial to help the community move forward.

***Len MacDonald***

Volunteer with MAS from Canada

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