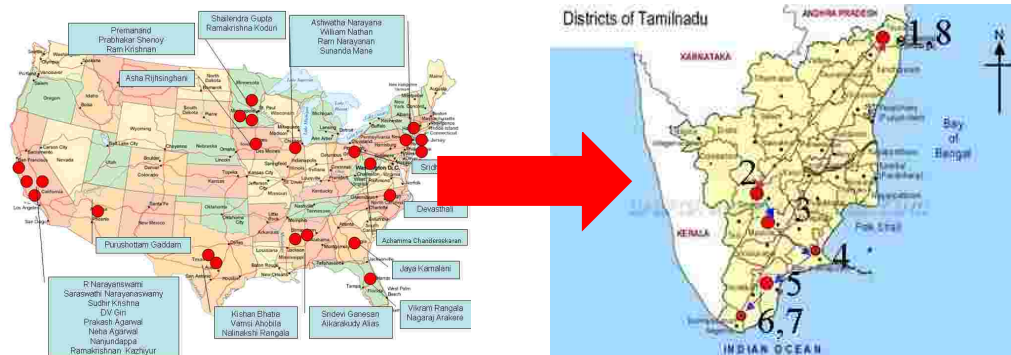


Rural India Learning Journey 2007

The following is a documentation of the *Rural India Learning Journey 2007*. (December 15 – 22). It was a whirlwind tour covering a few villages in rural South India, both in the developing and under – developed sectors. The tour group started from Chennai and went down south to the districts of Dindugal, Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tutucorin and Kanyakumari. There were 28 members in all in this group including 24 Indian-Americans (NRI's) who wanted to see the 'other India'.



The tour members gained a comprehensive perception and knowledge about the current scenario in rural villages. This was possible because of the direct interaction the group had with the villagers and also by listening to talks and lectures from officials and persons working directly in these sectors.

Day 1: December 15, 5 p.m.

The pace for the tour was set on the first day itself. A crisp and brief get - together for group members to meet each other and a brief insight into the rural scenario by professionals working in this sector was the agenda for the first day.

The venue was the meeting hall by the side of the swimming pool at Hotel New Woodlands, Chennai. Most of the RILJ group members were inside and a few late arrivals trickled in and took their seats. Dr D.V. Giri introduced himself and elucidated on the aim behind organizing this rural journey. Another group member, Jaya Kamalini gave the welcome address.

An enthralling round of speeches by invitees namely, **Elango Ramaswamy, Panchayat leader of Kuthambakkam, Tiruvallur district**, kick- started the mood of this tour. We were gently nudged into the rural scenario as he explained the steps taken in his village towards social and economic development. This was followed by an explanation by **Dr. Sekar Raghavan** of what rain harvesting was and why it was so relevant today. **Prof. Ashok Jhunjhunwala, IIT Madras in Chennai** spoke on technology for villages and **Elizabeth Negi, PhD** elucidated briefly on gender issues.



A quick dinner followed the lectures and the 28 group members boarded the waiting buses to catch the train to Dindigul. Our tickets were scattered over three compartments and the group members were just beginning to warm up to their fellow yatriis. We exchanged pleasantries as we settled into our train berths and it seemed as if our heads had just touched the pillow when the coach attendant woke us as we had to detrain at Dindigul.

Day 2: December 16, 4.30 a.m.

We were all so sleepy as we got out of the train compartments. In direct contrast to us was the cheerful and bright-eyed **Dr. S. Narayanasamy, Head of Department, Gandhian thought and Peace Science, Gandhigram Rural Institute** who received us at the railway station. He explained the day's itinerary and guided us to our bus no: 1 and bus no: 2, as we fondly came to call our mode of conveyance for the next six days. We didn't know it then, but this was the start of our hectic routine in the days to come. For now we had to rush to our rooms at the Gandhigram campus to freshen ourselves and grab some tea and pile into our buses, or we would have been left behind!

There was a group of students who came along with us as we went into the villages. They were from the Gandhigram Rural University and were called *Samaaj Shilpis* (Resident Change Agents) and who were a bridge between the university and the villagers. These students were a highly motivated group.

It was only 7a.m but the whole village was up and waiting eagerly as our buses drove into the villages of **Irunaagampatti** and **Thoppampatti**.



This was our first visit to an underdeveloped village and the group members were in for their first shock as they listened to the women narrating about having to use the fields and open spaces to defecate – there was no public sanitation leave alone individual toilet for the houses there.

As for education, there was an elementary school that had classes up to Standard V and then the children had to walk or cycle up to the next village **Chinalampatti** for furthering their education up to class X. The nearest public health centre was also in the village of Chinalampatti and even medical emergencies were taken in bullock carts from

the nearby villages. This was our first exposure to the hardships in an Indian village but it looked like surprises never stopped.

As our group met again for breakfast we were treated to a sumptuous breakfast of **idli, pongal, vada** and coffee. This was served in the community hall. In our first interaction with the villagers after breakfast we learned that the women were all members of various *self help groups*. These groups were formed to enable villagers to form groups and start small savings so that they could come out of the grip of usurers and money lenders. Money collected thus was used for disbursement within the group for starting small enterprises or for domestic loans.

In our interaction with them, we noticed the irony of their situation. These women were looking out for economic self sustainability but not able to market their manufactured products and in the event of a third party buying their products, the self- help group was not getting sufficient profits to stay afloat. In both these villages, we interacted with the women self- help group members. A point we noticed here was that these women preferred to have their daily wages coming in on a regular basis rather than having some entrepreneurial venture going.

Two decades ago, these villages had paddy as their main crop. Now with water getting scarce, they had switched over to cultivation of flowers and grapes as their crop. These yields were sold all over Tamilnadu. To add to the woes of these villagers, there was a railway level crossing, which was closed around 51 times in the course of 24 hours! This meant that the villagers had to travel or walk another 3 km to reach the main village **Chinalampatti** for their needs.

Gandigram Rural University in Dindigul district has evolved a model of rural development. Under PURA (provision of Urban Amenities in rural areas) this university coordinates knowledge connectivity and natural resource management. PURA here covers nine panchayats around Gandhigram and provides employment to 4000 villagers. After our first village interaction we got back to the campus where Prof.G. Palanithurai educated us on the anomalies in the 'development' percentage, how inspiteof a growth rate of 9.5%, the development of villages was not happening. According to him this was because of the developmental institutions being in the hands of the government and because our political system relied more on World Bank than on the people. He was of the opinion that we needed leaders and not rulers.



This was followed by our visit to the Sowbhagya Illam (Children's Home) which houses around 300 orphans. This lunch was sponsored by the tour members. We also visited the Kasturba Gandhi Charitable Hospital that is run by Gandhigram Rural University. At this hospital we had heard of the name of Dr. Kausalya from almost all the staff working here and who was their total inspiration. We had the good fortune to meet this benign and inspiring lady at her residential quarters. A quick visit to the Rural Technology Centre and also another village **Michaelpatti** where we saw some of the UN Millennium Development Goals implemented. In this village, Gandhigram University took on the work of imparting knowledge information through their students who staged cultural programmes woven around the themes of health and sanitation. There was a sanitary complex and public bathroom which had been built by the government and was not being used. After this programme of public education the villagers understood the message and started using these toilets.

It was around 4 p.m. now and the day had whirred past in so much of activity. Around 6p.m we came back to our rooms, packed and were on our way to Madurai. It was a 1 1/2 drive to Madurai. We reached Madurai and checked into our hotel rooms and then went to the restaurant for dinner. Our minds were full of the day's activities even as our eyes drooped and we just crashed for the day.

Day 3: December 17

During our stay at Madurai we got to understand the two main programmes run by **Dhan foundation**, the **Kalanjiam federation** and **Vayalagam federation**. Dhan foundation focuses on engaging high quality human resources to work at grassroot levels and with the panchayats in areas of microfinance, small scale irrigation and dry land agriculture. . This foundation works towards bringing significant changes in the livelihood of the poor. The **Vayalagam Tankfed Agriculture** Development Programme works for the conservation, development and management of tank systems. The **Kalanjiam Community Banking** Programme has gone through various stages of development from project to programme to a movement of the Kalanjiam members.



Our day started at 6.30 a.m with a visit to the famous Meenakshi temple. As we were having our breakfast at 8 a.m we were joined by Ragini Narayanan and Kamalakannan from Dhan Foundation .They took us to the Vaigai Vattaara Kalanjiam at **Appan thirupathi**. We were educated on the role of *micro finance in a rural context*. It has a strength of 4000 members and there are totally around 4 lakh women in the Kalanjiam movement .The word **Kalanjiam** in Tamil refers to the huge urn in which grain is stored in village houses and used when needed. Building on this image, the self help groups form federations and members bring in a monthly contribution, sometimes as low as 10 Rs a month.



We met **Chinnapillai**, the head of Vaigai vattaaram that was started in 1990. She is an illiterate woman in her 60's, just another village woman and yet she exuded tremendous confidence and ability as she spoke on the landmarks of their success story. We visited her tiny village and were constantly amazed at the silent revolution going on in these villages through empowerment of rural women.

Micro enterprises were financed by the self help groups and for basic necessities like getting an electrical connection for houses, the federation would advance the amount of Rs 4000. Loans that are disbursed by these self help groups to members are dependent purely on the individual savings of members. A member is allowed to borrow upto thrice the amount of his savings. Savings of members are grouped into two sections; **primary savings** which are used for basic needs like small domestic loans and **diversified savings** that are used for marriage expenses, education or construction of houses. Social security is provided to members by way of insurance cover for life, house and accidents. This again depends on the policies they opt for. Our group members had an insight into the extreme poverty and hardships in these villages as narrated by the federation members.

Our lunch on that day was served at the women's federation office and we next went to the village of **Sellur** to understand the Kalanjiam model of *microfinance in the urban context*. We were introduced to the work being done by the women working in the slums here, we understood how the slums happen when villagers move to urban areas in search of work and build small hamlets to have a temporary shelter here. There are nine federations with around 3500 members working in the slums.



We learnt the difference between the 'authorized' slums and otherwise. The former are 74 in number and are provided some sort of recognition by the government, i.e., government subsidies and schemes are available to these slums. There are 233 self help groups working in 33 slums here. These federations work along with the corporation/ municipality. Loans are disbursed by these federations for purchase of autos, for setting up mobile ironing shops or small repair

shops for two wheelers and cycles. Money is available as loans for investment in livestock or for getting a lease on agricultural land. Defaulters are very rare and mostly individuals ask for an extension in repayment dates. We realize that whether its an urban or rural milieu, the final decision for growth lies with the individual. If he so chooses, he can grow by even starting tiny savings and then borrowing against that and slowly develop.

The proposed visit into the slums after this was cancelled as we were running short of time and we had to attend a lecture organized by **Aravind Eye Care System** that conducts regular outreach programmes for rural eye health. It was started in 1976 by Dr. **G. Venkataswamy**, ophthalmologist. The social security wing of Aravind Eye Care is called Lions Aravind Institute of Ophthalmology. Depending upon the economic background of villagers, eye care including cataract surgeries are done on a regular basis for around 1/10th the cost or even lesser than the amount charged by private eye hospitals. An integral part of Aravind is its community outreach programmes like screening eye camps, school eye health programme, village volunteer programmes, all of which provide different strategies for taking eye care service to the doorstep of the community.

Eye camps are conducted every day of the week. During the year 2006, a total of 1,793 camps were conducted, at which 2,313,398 patients were examined and 270,444 site restoration surgeries have been performed.

Apart from screening camps, other outreach activities include:

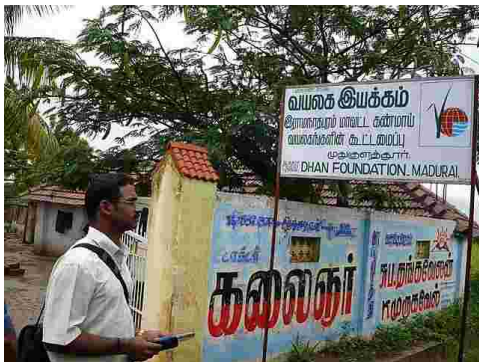
- Community-Based Comprehensive Rehabilitation Programme
- School Children Screening
- Village Volunteers Programme
- Refraction camps

Day 4: December 18

Our second day at Madurai was to understand the concept and working of the *vayalagam federation* of Dhan foundation. We drove to the villages in Ramanathapuram district which was around 2 ½ hours from Madurai. Vayalagam Movement was begun in Madurai on March 7, 2002 by the leaders of Vayalagam and Vayalagam Federations. It began as an offshoot of policy advocacy efforts of tank farmers at various levels. The

aim has been to motivate tank farmers from different States in the country. By joining hands, they could speak out at national and international levels on conservation of small water bodies like tanks, ooranis, and farm ponds. These tanks and ponds were created 200 years ago to harvest rain water and even today they are the only providers of water in these rain – starved villages.

We visited the village of **Mudhukulathur** to study the vayalagam model of watershed management and tankfed agricultural development. We learn about **ooranis** that are ponds that collect water during the brief rains and this being the only source of water for the entire year, they need constant desilting, deepening and protection from stray cattle. Dhan foundation has started the regeneration of local management of these water bodies by organizing the farmers around the tanks.



There was a surprise in that day's itinerary when all the group members offered to pay for the silting and maintenance of one oorani in **Chengottaipatti**. By now the rains which had started two days earlier had intensified and our visits to villages were cancelled as there was no road access and the black clayey soil proved to be a deterrent for the buses to move even.

We had lunch at Mudhukulathur and then moved to the village of **Kadamabkulam** where we saw a model oorani and how it was being used by the villages. Villagers normally make a part contribution towards renovating and deepening of the oorani and the rest of the money has to come from sponsors. We learnt that there were many more ooranis that needed sponsors. Everywhere we were greeted warmly by the villagers who greeted us shyly and wanted to know about the purpose of our visit.

From Kadabamkulam we went to Chengottaipatti and had a look at the oorani that had been sponsored by our group members. We also spoke to various members of the people's association who had gathered to meet us on that day. By now it was around 4 p.m. and we returned to Madurai. As we traveled around the villages in our two buses the group had animated discussions as to how they wanted to help in the rural areas. Asha , one of the members put it this way, *"There is so much more that the heart wants to say but words are difficult to come by, so many ideas rushing into the head, some unrealistic fantasies and some reasonable. A thoughtful process with guidance from the more experienced yatris will be sought, hopefully materialising into action in years to come."*

Day 5: December 19

Without our realizing it we had moved from a totally urban surrounding to a completely rural scenario and the days whirred past with our various interactions with the villagers. It was the same scenario in all the villages, extreme poverty and hardship, lack of drinking water and lack of health facilities and secondary education. Against this bleak backdrop we were able to see the villagers maintain their human dignity because of the emergence of the women's self help groups and the efforts taken by them to promote social and economic development. They had a helping hand in their own midst and were walking slowly towards self-sustenance.



On the fifth day we had left Madurai and reached Vilathikulam after a 2 ½ hour journey. It rained incessantly and it was difficult to believe that it rained only for around nine days in a year in this village. Dark grey skies greeted us as we got out of our buses and moved into the temporary thatched shelter of Bharathiyar Community Centre. This was in the village of Kurlayampatti. This centre has its focus on water, agriculture and renewable energy.



In the first phase of its work, two ponds have been completed for collection of rain water. We see the one acre plot that is going to demonstrate how a farmer's family can earn around Rs 35,000 every year by working in the fields efficiently.

We learnt that chillies and coriander was the main cultivation. Cutting bramble bushes that grew in plenty here and making charcoal out of it was another source of livelihood here and it was tough cutting these thorny bushes. This district is one of the two driest regions of Tamilnadu. Here again we saw how the natives got together to deepen the oorani.

By now the rains were our constant companions and we had no choice but to acquiesce to their demands and sat huddled in the buses as we were unable to go out and meet people waiting for us. We did however go to **Keelvilathikulam** where the villagers were waiting for us at the government primary school in the **Pillayarnatham** village. There were 32 students in the school here. Their woes were the same, lack of a high school in their area, lack of public sanitation toilets. There was however an irony in

those villages where there was public sanitation. The villagers were reluctant to use it because of the lack of awareness and the distance from their homes.

We returned back to the Bharathiyar Community centre to meet members of the **Roja** self help group and also members of **Vidiyel** trust. The self help groups here were functioning at a lesser level than other developed villages. This was because some of the group members went to work as agricultural labourers during the four months when crops were cultivated. Because of this they were not able to develop their income generation programmes initiated by the self help groups, on a continuous basis. Mary who worked with Vidiyel trust gave us details about their groups, there were 20 groups in town panchayat, 40 groups in **Kovilpatti** and 100 groups in **Sankarankovil**. There were 12 groups in the village of **Kathalampatti** that were engaged in brick cutting. We had our lunch with the group members who served us food on banana leaves. This lunch was a first in most of our experiences, the torrential rains all around us, winds blowing around the open community centre; it was a memorable day for us.

After lunch we did however visit the villages of Veludupatti in Ettayapuram taluk and Singlipatti in our buses. The villagers here treated us to a local dance form called the **oyil kummi** at the panchayat office. We then made a quick visit to Mr. Jothimani's house and had a welcome cup of hot tea. After this, once again we were back into our two buses and were off on the 2 hour drive to **Thoothukudi**. We arrived here and got into our usual rushed schedule as we checked into our hotel rooms, freshened up and rushed to the conference room of our Hotel Chitra to meet Mr. **Bharat Kumar, AGM, NABARD**, Thoothukudi district. He explained to us in detail about how out of the 12 blocks in Tutucorin, 7 blocks had severe exploitation of ground water. NABARD is a division of the Reserve Bank of India and it does voluntary work for check dams, field bunks, preventing soil erosion and water retention. By the time his talk was over and dinner served it was 11 p.m. and we were mentally geared to meet the next day's travel plans.

Day 6: December 20

We left for **Kanyakumari** at 8 a.m. it was a four hour journey and enroute we stopped for a brief while at **Panagudi** to see the windmill farms at close quarters.



This stretch in Tamilnadu is known as the wind corridor and the wind energy generated here is converted to thermal energy. One of our group members Sudhir Krishna explained to the group how this conversion took place. It was back to our buses after that and we reached our destination around 12 noon.

Our rooms or rather luxurious cottages had been booked at the **Vivekananda Kendra**. It felt like we were transported into a bygone era of green lawns and spacious cottages at the Vivekananda Kendra where our group members spent two days. There was an aura of peace and calm here as we took a break from the hustle and bustle of our busy travel schedules. The Kendra is run by dedicated volunteers who



look into sustainable development in the field of water management, cost-effective construction technologies, sustainable agriculture, holistic health, renewable sources of energy and inner sustainability.



We were met by the secretary of the Kendra; Mr. Vasudeo. He listed out our two day schedule here and we split after tea for the usual round of checking into our rooms and freshening up. Our first stop at the Kendra was to the **Arise, Awake** exhibition that encompassed pictures of India's rich cultural past, her era of foreign invasions and domination, her society and culture getting lost from her moorings and Vivekananda's vision and mission of restoring India

to her original glory. After this visit, we partook of a lovely lunch served to us at the Vivekananda Kendra lawns. This place was truly rejuvenating after our hectic daily touring and the green lawns and balmy weather seemed to take us back into an era where there was no daily rush to our lives. Our host Vasudeo, the secretary of Vivekananda Kendra was a truly self-effacing, quiet person. He had arranged for Smt.



Saraswathi amma to accompany us to the Vivekananda Rock Memorial where Swami Vivekananda meditated for 3 days and found the mission of his life. We took a ferry that transported us to the island.

By the time we came back to the mainland and the members got together it was time for dinner and then we watched a video on **Genius of India** that was shown in the Vivekananda Kendra auditorium. This depicted the cultural richness and vastness that was India and how old values were to be seen in a new perspective and how it was to be applied to a modern context. There was another video **Samartha Bharat** that was on our schedule but our group was too tired and we pushed it to the next day.

Day 7: December 21

We started the day with some of the group members watching the glorious sunrise. By the time we finished breakfast and assembled for the day's activities, it was around 10 a.m. We met at the auditorium and watched a power point presentation of **Samagra Vikas** that depicted the way to sustainable development as opposed to the parody of the 'welfare state'. It highlighted the drawbacks of the industrial technology that called for very high quantity of inputs, energy intensive and polluted the environment. The holistic

approach made for a society that was tradition based and used the technology of recycling and reusing.



After this video we met the members of Amutha Surabhi self help group. This federation has 100 groups under them and there are 1500 women members. This federation was given technical support by the Kendra for production of herbal medicine. There was a lively interaction between our group and these women as they explained the difference in all aspects of their life after they formed the self help groups, how it gave them confidence in their abilities for generating income, how they were coming forward in domestic decision making. They posed a question to our group which drew forth a round of applause from our group. One woman wanted to know what was it that any member who had settled abroad had achieved or got by going outside our country.

The members divided themselves into three groups after this and visited the **Gramodaya Park for Right Living**. Here various 'Rural Technologies' have been depicted through panels and models. We saw working models on rain water harvesting and housing. We learnt how the building of a house can be an eco yoga that can benefit the entire planet. This was an exhibition where we saw how shelter (sustainable architecture), water management (drip irrigation and traditional water management systems using locals to take decisions on allocation of water and maintenance), sustainable agriculture (conservation of bio- diversity, increased energy efficiency), holistic health (an integrated approach to the human body using ancient system of health) could be practiced today for a reversal of our human crises. We were amazed to see how ancient India had a solution to all the problems that the modern, urban man had created for the planet. It was so simple, yet profound: the message was to live in harmony with nature!

From the exhibition our group walked to the **Green Health Home** where we saw the Amutha Surabhi federation women prepare herbal powders and oils. Our lunch for the day was served at the Kendra's **Technology Resource Centre**. Our group had a unique experience of having their lunch served in banana leaves laid out on the floor and we recited a group prayer that was recited for us by Smt. Saraswathi amma who had earlier taken our group around the medicinal plant garden. At the technology resource centre, voluntary organizations, institutions and individuals are exposed to 'technologies for sustainable development in the fields of shelter, agriculture, health, water, energy and the inner spirit.

We were at the tail end of our journey and learning as we met for the screening of the video, **Shakti Surabhi**. This explained the process of harnessing kitchen and vegetable waste into production of biogas.

After this there was a brief summing up of our trip by one of our team leaders as he explained about the group's various members' plans for travel after reaching Chennai the next morning. We picked up our luggage from our rooms and headed out to the railway station to catch our train.

There was a kind of silence within our group as we pondered on the awesome journey we had just finished. It had been so well planned, well executed. We thanked our team leaders who must have worked for almost the whole year to put the trip through. The inner silence was also because we realized we had a responsibility now. It was our duty to help the marginalized rural people come back into the mainstream through social and economic development. Our group members had mentioned earlier during the course of our bus journeys about wanting to do some work in their respective villages. The place they wanted to carry out the work didn't matter, what did was the new awakening that we could all come together to bring about this change. This was one aspect of our thoughts. The other was the fact we had to mentally bid farewell to our co-travelers and friends with whom we had interacted and shared so much. With promises to meet and mail each other, the group bid adieu at Chennai station the next morning.



As Vedanth Kadambi, one of our tour members said, ***"I believe that I was fortunate enough to have accompanied you all on the tour of villages that we undertook under your leadership. I have learned something that I did not know before - the Indian villages, in spite of all the difficulties they experience (lack of water, lack of power, education, etc.), consist of people who are joyful and trying to do their best under extremely difficult circumstances. They are not looking for a dole out from others. They are trying to lift themselves with their own efforts for the most part and need some assistance and direction at times. It was a pleasure to see them and talk to them. Let us do our best to help them in every way we can. We will have discharged our duty to ourselves and to the rest of world through the support we provide them."***

In this connection, I would like to thank you for all the trouble you have taken. I believe that many of us (including me), would not have known how to begin the process of starting the process of understanding the problems the villagers face, even though we had all heard of some of their difficulties. I had expected to see grinding poverty in the villages with starving children and gloomy faces looking for help from the government and others for everything.

What surprised me more than anything else was the cheerfulness that I saw - something that is not seen in the urbanized communities of the world (India and USA included). It shows that affluence is not by itself the answer to a happy life. I had read earlier in a newspaper that Indians were by and large, the happiest people in the world. I had assumed that the results of the survey that the newspaper cited were completely wrong! It may be that they the survey is right and the reason is probably the state of mind of the people. They are happy with what they have and will try to improve themselves. However, they are hopeful of the future and will do their best. That is the spirit - that which will lead to success fast if the energy is channelized properly.

The old woman at the first village to whom I spoke near Dindigul is right. She has got her children educated even though she has next to no money. One of them is about to earn a bachelor's degree and told me that she wants to go on for a Master's degree thereafter. I do not remember her name, but wish her all success. These are the type of people who will become the leaders of India in the next few years."



There was one more appropriate comment that Viplove Kattaria had said, ***“Being with you at this yatra has been a very satisfying experience. It was a great experience sharing food, fun, travel and above all, useful thoughts.***

Really being there in the villages and talking in person to the village people has been an eye opener. We don't see the extent of the problem until we see it in person.

Also being able to share thoughts with the entities that are already doing a great deal to help solve the problem was encouraging. I could admire the tasks taken over by the Gandhigram University, DHAN foundation and Vivekanand foundation in uplifting the living standards of the villagers

This report was compiled and written by Uma Balakrishnan, one of the tour members. Photo credits : Asha Rijhsinghani and D.V.Giri. This Learning Journey was made possible by Ram Narayanan.