

Beginning anew

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Rebuilding the high school at Arcot Thurai, destroyed by the tsunami, offered the stakeholders a chance to go beyond conventional ways of looking at education and teaching.

Photo: S.R. Raghunathan



Learning as an enjoyable experience: The rebuilt school building.

JUST at land's end where the white-brown sandy beaches of Nagapattinam, in Tamil Nadu, meet the Bay of Bengal at Vedaranyam, a trip to the local government high school is like a pilgrimage.

If you are lucky, one of the village leaders will escort you to the school that was rebuilt after the tsunami, giving you a running commentary right through the short trip on a narrow mud-road in Arcot Thurai.

"This is our school," P.S. Sethupathy, our guide, says, throwing his right arm out in a flourish, as if he were brandishing a trophy. For a man who is unused to smiling, the Arcot Thurai Government High School is an exception: he begins to grin rather spontaneously even as the building bumps into view from the rough track. Further, as he leads you into the school, his feeling of pride is unmistakable in his upraised head and in his expression of belonging.

You can easily see why.

Unique architecture

Built after the tsunami, the high school is different, not only in the way it has been constructed, but also in the way its form conforms to content. Open architecture twinned with a policy of joyful learning makes the school unique in a land where school buildings often resemble matchboxes stacked on top of each other and teaching focuses on inculcating rote learning in children.

The whole structure opens out like a giant flower in full bloom and in the classrooms, glass roofing allows indirect diffused sunlight to light up the whole area. The breeze from the sea whistles through the palms and enters the rooms gently. Again, a marked difference from most schools.

A theory that Children's Lovecastle Trust India (CLT), the Bangalore-based organisation that was commissioned for the project by Intel, believes in. The funds came from Intel's resource mobilisation within the organisation (Rs. 25 lakhs), matched by a grant from the Intel Foundation. "When we expressed a desire to work in the tsunami-hit areas, the then Nagapattinam Collector, J. Radhakrishnan said the town was already receiving a lot of assistance from different organisations, but help would be welcome in Arcot Thurai, about 45 km from the Nagapattinam," says Sindhu Cauveriappa, Manager, Community Relations, Intel.

From the community's point of view, building a new high school was a priority as the old one was completely damaged during the tsunami. Intel decided to help out with this, and sought the help of Bhagya Rangachar, founder and managing trustee of CLT to implement the programme. "We zeroed in on CLT because they have rich experience working with schools and children in Karnataka," Sindhu explained.

Local needs

CLT got into the job with a baseline survey of the needs and assessments of the village, home to over 3,000 people. In addition, the sandy soil of the area, the frequent storms and strong winds had to be factored into the construction. Eventually, the blueprint provided for an eco-friendly, earthquake resistant structure that would not only be well lit but also functional and most importantly, cost effective.

"Just a building was not enough for us. Anything we did had to be from that angle," says Bhagya. CLT works closely with the community of children, in their education and training. There had to be a shift in the way of looking at teaching and the community had to be interested in the project right from the start. "When children drop out from school, often the reason is not affordability. With parents and children, it sometimes does not have priority. Therefore, unless there is a buy-in from the parents and community it will be difficult to sustain it."

All of which happened at Arcot Thurai. It was the community, led by Pasupathy, that helped identify and source the land for the project. Local labourers were involved and local techniques were used for the construction, which was completed June last. UNICEF sponsored brand new desks and school bags for the students, all of whom were affected in some way by the tsunami. "Although it is just physical space, if you can make it attractive and if you've managed to break the mindset, then the school beckons children, automatically," explains Bhagya.

And then there was the challenge of training the teachers, used to following the notes of lessons closely and scarcely acquainted with innovation. They had to be trained to take the diversion from conventional pedagogy and infuse joyful teaching learning techniques in the school. R. Kannan, the headmaster who has taken over last year, admits it is a little difficult to break away from the conventional methods of teaching, but he's willing to give it a shot, if it will help the students.

Links to the community

A well-stocked library and a computer room, actually equipped with computers, complete the picture. Or, not quite. The school is closely integrated with the community by providing within it a community resource centre where groups of self-help women conduct their activities.

"The best part is that this model is cost-effective and can be easily replicated," says Bhagya. It took a tsunami to raise the phoenix of education from the ruins of an old rundown government school in Arcot Thurai, but now the model's up and functioning, perhaps other children in the State can feel good about going to school. Just as Arcot Thurai's high school students feel now.