

A Role Model Partnership to Uplift Underprivileged Students in Rural Tamil Nadu

Dr. M. Subramanian, Former President, Michigan Tamil Sangam and Chairperson, Tamil Nadu Foundation – Michigan Chapter

Dr. Somalay Somasundaram, Vice President, Tamil Nadu Foundation

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ங்கோர் ஏழைக்கு எழுத்தறிவித்தல்’

In general, most of us who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s were educated in government schools in Tamil Nadu and many who came to the U.S. since the 1980s studied at private schools in Tamil Nadu. The mushrooming of private schools and English convents that was once limited to the cities has now reached the villages of Tamil Nadu resulting in a trend towards more enrollments in private schools. Despite this growth of privatized school education which is largely commercial, more than 10 million children are getting free education through 36,000 government schools in 30,000 villages across Tamil Nadu.

Illustrious leaders like Dr. Abdul Kalam and many successful NRI Tamils in the U.S. studied at government schools. Today, vast majority of the children attending government schools are economically underprivileged, many are first-generation students to attend a school and their parents are not educated. Inspired by Poet Bharathiar’s vision to educate the underprivileged: “ஆங்கோர் ஏழைக்கு எழுத்தறிவித்தல்”, Michigan Tamil Sangam partnered with Tamil Nadu Foundation’s Michigan Chapter to adopt six government schools in Namakkal district under Tamil Nadu Foundation’s TNF-ABC initiative which was piloted in Sivagangai district in 2011 and subsequently expanded to Vellore and Cuddalore districts.

MTS and TNF Adopt Government Schools in Namakkal District

On December 14, 2014, MTS and TNF organized a charity event to raise funds for the TNF-ABC project in Namakkal district. About 400 members of the Michigan Tamil community enjoyed the hilarious drama “Panchathandiram” by Dr. Venkatesan and talented Michigan Tamil artists. Funds collected at this event and donations from people from Michigan as well as other parts of the country totaled approximately \$45,000. This amount will be used to uplift tribal and rural students studying in government schools in Namakkal district. More than 250 families donated to the worthy cause and of particular importance was the interest shown by MTS’s Tamil schools in Troy, Canton and Farmington Hills.

The children, parents and teachers showed keen interest in helping to educate the needy students in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil school in Troy pooled some families together and has sponsored two of the six schools in Namakkal district.

TNF’s Michigan Chapter with help from TNF Chennai office and Namakkal District’s Chief Education Officer Mr. Gopidass and his team did a field study and selected the following six schools:

1. Valvil Ori Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary School, Vazhavandhi Nadu, Kolli Hills
2. Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary School, Sengarai, Kolli Hills
3. Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary School (Boys), Mullukkuruchi, Kolli Hills
4. Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary School (Girls), Mullukkuruchi, Kolli Hills
5. Government Higher Secondary School (Boys), Erumaipatti
6. Government Higher Secondary School, Kalappanayakanpatti

Four of these schools are in the Kolli Hills area and are dedicated to uplifting tribal children from that area. 3,155 students from the six adopted



schools will benefit from the TNF-ABC model. The project was officially inaugurated by Mr. Gopidass on February 6, 2015 in the presence of Dr. Subramanian of MTS and TNF and several other educationalists from the area. Dr. Subramanian also visited all six school, interacted with the students, headmasters and teachers of these schools.

Key Components of the TNF-ABC Model:

A - Achieving Grade Level Proficiency

Three hundred and twenty students from the six adopted schools have been identified by their class teachers as academically challenged and in need of additional focused help to attain proficiency at their current grade level. Government of India's "Education of All" scheme enables a student to reach up to 9th grade even if he/she failed in all subjects in prior grades. This compulsory pass system has resulted in 30 to 50% of students in government schools in Tamil Nadu unable to write/read at their grade level. Accountability on the teacher to focus on completing the syllabus, teacher vacancies in rural areas and most teachers not living in villages has resulted in a lack of adequate resources to help these students.

With funds raised from the Michigan Tamil community and other generous donors in the U.S., we have hired college educated locals as teachers to provide individual attention to these students and provide the needed coaching at the school campus with the aim of uplifting them to their grade level. TNF has experienced significant progress with this approach in Sivagangai, Vellore and Cuddalore districts. Our intent is to share the progress by Namakkal students with the MTS community at least once a year.

B - Boosting the Morale

TNF-ABC model focuses on boosting the morale of students at government schools as they feel inferior to their peers studying in private schools. Economic status, lack of resources at schools, and inadequate academic involvement by parents are some of the many factors that contribute this low morale.

As a first step in boosting the morale of students in our adopted schools in Namakkal district, 220 tenth-grade students were enriched with softskills (self-confidence, communication, time management, motivation, memory capacity, goal setting, human relations, hard work and smart work) through a two-day training program offered by a reputed educational non-profit consulting group. At the end of the training session, Mr. C. Kamaraj, Head Master at the Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary School in Mullukkuruchi, commented that the training will better prepare the students for public exams and wanted the training to



be offered each year in the beginning of the school year.

C - Championing for Higher Aspirations

The goal of TNF-ABC model is to take each student (irrespective of what level they currently are – below average, average, above average) to the next level and be a champion for their higher aspirations. Despite the challenges faced in rural and government school environments, the vast majority of these students have a huge thirst for higher education. During 2015-16 school year, the project will arrange for these students to visit polytechnics and colleges in the area (similar to information sessions and tours arranged by U.S. universities) and help the students with career guidance, mentoring, internships and scholarships so that they become role models for other students in their villages.

A Unique Link for Michigan Tamil Children with their Heritage

MTS and TNF, by initiating this project, have opened new doors for Michigan-born Tamil youth. Our youth have the unique opportunity to learn about their heritage and culture and at the same time hone their leadership, team-building and service skills by volunteering during the summer at the MTS-TNF adopted schools in Namakkal, through TNF Service and Education Summer Internships. Michigan Tamil families can also consider volunteering as a family and visiting the schools during their trips to Tamil Nadu as this will bring immense satisfaction and the joy of helping to educate the underprivileged. To volunteer or learn more about the project please contact Dr. Subramanian at msubrama1@yahoo.com or (248) 737-5708.

அன்னசத்திரம் ஆயிரம் வைத்தல்
ஆலயம் பதினாயிரம் நாட்டல்
பின்னருள்ள தருமங்கள் யாவும்
பெயர் விளங்கியொளிர் நிறுத்தல்
அன்னயாவினும் புண்ணியம் கோடி
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-மகாகவி பாரதியார்