

Visit to CCD, Madurai, Nov 2008

In the first week of November two of our staff (actually the same two who went to Bhuj as well; they have formed a trouble-shooting partnership with common objectives and approaches. Fortunately, they still remain good friends after it all!!), went to visit the Covenant Centre for Development - CCD - in Madurai.

The CCD is one of the most reputed NGOs in southern Tamil Nadu known particularly for their social empowerment programmes. They have sought inspiration from traditional structures of social organisation that worked well in the past and believe these can be revived to work well again now. With this in mind they have created kalasams or groups in rural and semi-urban areas that serve to empower its members socially and economically.

These self-help groups are also called Jothis (lights!) and organise themselves around various village enterprises ranging from agriculture to herbal medicines.

To these they have added, recently, the manufacturing and distribution of fuel pellets (made from agro wastes), the sale of smokeless, efficient wood fired cooking stoves and the distribution of grocery items from a centralised warehouse that procures quality foodstuffs and household needs from wholesalers and manufacturers at bulk discounts, passed on to be enjoyed by end users along with credit and other benefits.

The CCD have been long looking at supplying affordable lighting - devices and systems - to its rural groups who burn kerosene despite living in electrified homes. The reason is that vast parts of the district of Madurai (and many other districts of Tamil Nadu as well) suffer from long power cuts. Many people spend money on cheap battery and solar powered lamps and lanterns made in China to augment lighting needs at home. These are fragile and do not last long. The cost of repairing one of these is almost as much as buying a new product. The CCD would like to stimulate the creation of a LIGHT SHOP that carries a range of lighting products and services with advice on product choice, spares and service. This shop will be run along a novel enterprise line, managed by the Jothis with advice and guidance from CCD and AURE. It will be a hub catering to a number of villages and towns in the zone and geared to meet a great variety of domestic lighting needs. Customisation will be an important feature of this enterprise; offering advice on individual and specific requirements and developing support - devices and systems - to meet these.

The CCD is a far seeing and forward thinking NGO who are re-defining the very nature of grassroots empowerment. From hand holding, they are consciously tipping the balance towards inculcating independence and self reliance in their audiences in keeping with changing times and social dynamics.

