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# Visit to GRAMA Villages, Chitradurga

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## A Study Report

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CSA- Volunteers

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On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, The Centre for Social Action went for a rural exposure camp to Chitradurga under the institution of Grama, an organization that has been promoting change in the area for the last fifteen years. The point was to be exposed to the running of schools, the self-help groups for women in the area as well as to be oriented towards Organic Farming practices and problems.

After leaving campus in the morning, they went directly to a school in Gopannahalli. There was an orientation program in which a performance by the children of that school was set up and afterwards members of Grama as well as two panchayat members came up to address the volunteers. One of the main discussions raised was the difference between cities and villages and the fact that most of us who are from the villages really have no true understanding of how a village functions.

The group of volunteers were then split up into two groups. The first set up activities for the children of the school which would promote holistic learning and tried to explain to them the importance of education so that they wouldn't drop out in the higher classes, a prominent problem in the area.

The second group focused on a base line survey which was to be administered to the residents of the village. The same survey had been taken a year beforehand and was supposed to focus on sanitation. The point of taking it a year later was to see if any difference had been made. The length of the essay as well as the unfamiliarity of the volunteers with the local language made administration of it difficult and limited to a select few. The rest however spent the time interacting with the villagers, regardless of learning about them and helping them with their work.

After the completion of the base line survey, the volunteers started a procession towards the center of the village with the final destination being in front of the Panchayat house. Everyone was called out of their houses to view a street play which was to be performed by the members of 'Drishti' among the volunteers. It was also to highlight the role of sanitation and the use of toilets. It also promoted interaction upon the idea of the villagers with the members of Drishti.

On returning to base camp, the members of Grama initiated an interaction with each volunteer, an effort that was appreciated because it involved personal communication about the home-town of each volunteer and its specialty.

The next day, the 20<sup>th</sup>, the volunteers headed to a nearby village for an interaction with farmers who specialize in organic farming. The discussion was based on the fact that organic farming, though healthier and promoting a better lifestyle did not have the market that normal vegetables and goods had because it was more expensive and it was also smaller and less brilliant in terms of its looks in comparison because artificial fertilizers had not been used.

This was followed by a tour of an organic farming where certain facts became far clearer. First is that following the Bengal Famines, the people of India had decided that no man should ever die of starvation again. In order to follow up with this, the Green revolution followed in which

artificial fertilizers and pesticides were used to make the soil better and to increase production but at the cost of sustainability. The soil would eventually become depleted and would not be of any use.

This soil, if it had to be replenished for Organic farming, required three years of special care after which growing crops would be of practically no cost since even the natural fertilizers and pesticides would be naturally produced. However, these three years usually bankrupt a farmer. Grama, is working on a model of farming which will allow the farmer to earn money while they are preparing the soil and if it succeeds, organic farming will gain a boost.

Moreover, in order to practice Organic Farming, one needs a certificate from the government without which it is a criminal offence to practice farming. Thus Organic farms are the so called marginalized farms. Furthermore, even one row of tomatoes can be grown through drip irrigation using a small mug of water. Through aerobic decomposition of farm waste and cow manure, natural fertilizers are produced at absolutely no cost.

However, the problem lies with the fact that often middle-men who deal with the selling of these vegetables offer a very low selling price which does not cover the cost price. It is because of this that Organic farmers are in a great deal of trouble as far as sustainable farming goes.

Later in the day, the volunteers were involved in an interaction with a self – help group, a set of some of the most empowered women in the villages. The concept of the self-help group worked on the principle that by paying a regular small sum of money, one could save it up. Moreover, if one needed a larger amount of money, one could borrow from the group's account and pay it back at nominal rates of interest.

This prevented them from going to moneylenders for money and also empowered them by allowing them to have monetary power. The members of the self-help group discussed the workings of their organization and sang a song that they have created, one about a girl inside her mother's womb asking her mother to let her live. These songs have been created to spread awareness and prevent female infanticide. These groups also have an ASHA worker, a medical helper in for those women who are pregnant and newborn children. She visits village to village providing required immunization and health check-ups.

The next activity of the volunteers was to have a glimpse at the income generation activities of these women. Some have opened up stalls, others have opened up a small market for crocheting goods. These produce a small income, enough for them to save up to pay their regular dues.

A final interaction with the head of Grama proved to be fruitful. The origin of Grama, itself was discussed, in the sense that it was originally an effort made by his mother which he has institutionalized. The importance of institutions was discussed. The women in the self-help groups were brought into the folds of an institution, they were given a purpose: to save money, and a regular time at which to do it. Such a simple thing eventually grew into an action of women empowerment. These women have now been trained in stitching leather, and in the process, school bags too. The requirement is that of a market for such goods as well as the identification of other goods which can be produced by these women. A workforce is available

but the markets for this workforce are yet to be found. The idea was to collaborate with the students of Christ University in promoting such a market as well as allowing direct and clean transfer of ideas from the volunteer's side to that of the Grama workers.

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