

Why it was important to be at the field?

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn”

-Benjamin Franklin

The famous quote above is quite useful and relative of why a field visit is important and you never come back empty but with a scope of learning new things and how the process of change begins at ground.

My name is Naba Kishor and I started working with ABMSS this June. Two weeks ago, I got my first chance to participate on a two-day field visit to Hoskote area, a suburb of Bangalore district, to search for cleft patients. I would like to share some of my impressions with you. I believe, you will find it interesting to learn how ABMSS conduct Search and Awareness camps as a part of its comprehensive cleft care programme in India.

We started off early on a Monday morning with two motorcycles. I was accompanied by our Field Project Manager Revanna Swamy who took me to the villages and showed how the search for cleft children is being carried out. Heavy rains made the whole trip a bit difficult. It took us half an hour to get to the first village where I met Darshan, a shy 14-year-old boy who was born with a cleft lip. In the expression of his eyes you could clearly see that he had gone through a lot of hardship.

Darshan’s family consists of four members, headed by his mother Ms. Laxmibai, one younger brother and his maternal grandfather. It was disheartening to listen to Ms. Laxmibai’s accounts: “My husband passed away in a time when our children were very young. He had left nothing with us as he was a daily wage labourer. In that bad time, my in-laws also denied any support. I was all alone in a rented single room house with no definite source of income. I don’t even want to recall the memory”, she said.

When I asked her how she overcame such a huge challenge, she said “Since, we had no land or any source of income, I decided to work as a maid in some houses and do the same even now. It was difficult to look after my kids at the same time. So, I brought my father to stay with us and watch them. But then, my father was suffering from diabetes and in the meantime, both his legs had to be amputated due to the severe diabetes. So, I had to bear another responsibility to take care of my father. As if this wasn’t enough our neighbours keep avoiding my Son Darshan because of his facial deformity. Even in school, his classmates don’t like to play with him and often tease him”.

Darshan’s cleft lip had been operated on 3 years ago by at a nearby hospital but as you can see in the photo they did not do a very good job. What he required urgently was a corrective surgery. Besides his looks that trouble him, he still faces difficulties with eating and articulating properly. We could convince Darshan’s mother to agree to a corrective surgery in our Bangalore Cleft Care Centre. She thanked us for everything that we were doing for her son.

Due to heavy rains, we had to pause for a while. Revanna used this break to explain to me how he has

been successfully conducting the search and awareness camps till now. He said, “when we do search and awareness camps in the villages, the best way to get cleft related information is to ask any elderly persons of that village, visit school and meet Anganwadi workers (who oversee a government funded Early childhood and care centre, available in each village)”.

When the rain subsided, we kept on moving. Our next stop was a village called Sulibele which was more of a market place than a usual rural set up. We kept our motor cycle near a barber’s shop and decided to walk. That way we came across a Government Higher Primary school on the roadside. Students and teachers were all assembled there for scheduled prayer. We went inside the school campus and introduced ourselves with the teachers. We requested them to allow us to hold a short presentation which they gladly accepted. Revanna showed brochures to children and teachers and explained to them about Cleft.

Given the facial expressions of the children, which were looking at the photos with a mixture of empathy and disgust, we assumed they had never seen another cleft child. It is very important to do this kind of awareness work to educate children as well as teachers about cleft. This way we also tend to find cleft children by asking the students if they have a cleft case in their village or neighbourhood.

