



Providing Pure Drinking Water to the Villagers of Ghana

By Dada Vishvodbhasananda

One day in early 1988, Baba (Ananda Marga's Guru, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti) said that the African villagers in the rural areas suffer terribly from unclean drinking water. He said it was the duty of Ananda Marga to provide clean drinking water to them. On another occasion, Baba asked Sridhar, a Margii from Accra, Ghana, "Don't you know that so many people are suffering from guinea worm? What is AMURT (Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team) going to do about this?"

Guinea worm is a microscopic parasite common in the coastal savannah areas of West Africa. Tiny water-borne fleas eat the worm. If a human being drinks impure water with one of these fleas inside, the worm will be released in the stomach and start to grow. Eventually it will bore a hole through the walls of the stomach or intestines and gradually eat its way down to the foot. Nine months to a year later when the very thin worm finally emerges, it can be up to a meter in length and is excruciatingly painful. Poor peasant farmers become incapacitated with this disease. I knew one village leader who had to be hospitalized when 17 guinea worms were coming out from different parts of his body. Non-government relief organizations (NGO's) working in West Africa educate the people to boil their drinking water and filter it through a clean cloth.

In 1989, after heavy rains and flooding, I helped organize AMURT medical teams in the North Tongo District of Ghana, about 150 kilometres from Accra. With a volunteer doctor and nurses from the ministry of health, we held medical camps and distributed free medicines in the rural villages. At the same time, five Margiis formed a creative drama group to educate the villagers about how to prevent guinea worm in the local Ewe language.

We found that between 45-90% of the people of each village in that area were suffering from guinea worm. These figures dropped to 10-20% after our work. The reason that we could not eliminate the problem is that the villagers had to trek up to 5-10 kilometres through the bush to collect firewood to boil water, and they needed that wood for cooking, too. Boiling is tedious, and it is too easy for some villagers to return to their old habit of just drinking the water. Thus the problem of guinea worm remained, for the only thing that can truly eliminate it is to provide pure drinking water to the villagers.

As I researched the problem, I learned that neither hand dug wells nor deep boreholes work in this area. Several European NGO's tried drilling boreholes, a very expensive operation, but each one reached water that was salty and full of iron and other minerals, so the villagers refused to drink it. Then I found Kolly Dorcoo, a Ghanaian engineer from that district, who had developed a slow sand filtration system to purify water from reservoirs that could then be piped to distant villages. I met him and learned about his work, but as we were penniless at that time, I continued researching about this on my own. In 1991 I wrote a project proposal to construct a dam and a slow sand filtration plant at Mafi Dekpoe. I passed it to Dada Vishvarupananda, the Global AMURT Coordinator, who edited it and submitted it to various donors. At the end of the following year a US foundation approved a grant of US\$38,000 to construct this project.

Thus the Asiimananda Memorial Project to provide pure drinking water to the villagers began. We signed a contract with the villages to provide volunteer labour and we would supply the construction materials and pay the skilled labourers. We started work in April 1993, and one of the reasons for our success in this and the subsequent projects was the indomitable Bholanath, our local AMURT

representative. We faced a lot of opposition and tribal politics. For example, one village leader said to Bholanath, "Both you and I belong to the Ewe Tribe. Both of us can benefit from this project if we see to it that not everything that happens is known by the white man." Bholanath listened diplomatically, and then informed me. We both laughed, because I am Filipino and not white! When the work began, this tribal leader soon discovered that Bholanath was not going to help him siphon off money for his own pocket. Then he tried everything he could to sabotage the project, by confusing the illiterate peasants who were doing communal labour and trying to turn them against us.

One day in another village I was suddenly called to a meeting with all the elders. There I suddenly found myself being interrogated as to how I got the funding, how much was given and how it was being spent. They clearly wanted some of it. I promised to report to them soon and I excused myself.

I then went to visit Mr. U. S. Clark, the District Secretary. He was very sympathetic to us because of our relief work after the flooding. He immediately went with me to the village and called another meeting. In both Ewe and English he told them, "AMURT came to this area to help us in our suffering. They came on their own without any help from the government. You people pleaded with them to construct a water treatment plant for you so that you can avoid guinea worm. Now after several years, AMURT has finally started the construction of the water treatment plant that you asked for. Under normal circumstances, you people should be grateful that one NGO has taken all the trouble and undergone so much hardship just to give you clean drinking water. Instead, you harass and interrogate their representative. If AMURT suddenly decides to abandon this project, there is nothing that you or the government can do to stop them from packing up and leaving, because they are under no obligation to anybody. If I hear reports again of a similar incident, I will personally come and arrest those who are responsible!"

That harassment stopped, but tribal politics continued in a more covert manner. Jealous village leaders intentionally misinformed the communal volunteers and the skilled labourers as to the dates of construction, which caused us to lose many workdays. Instead of taking six months as planned, it was three years before we finished. Bags of cement and wood were spoiled, forcing us to buy them again.

When the village leaders saw that we were very determined to finish the project, some stealing began. A sympathetic woman reported this to Bholanath. Later her own relatives beat her up, and she had to go to the hospital, and later leave the village. The "culture of silence" is very strong in that region, meaning if someone from the same clan commits a crime, no one dares to reveal it. So it was very difficult to pinpoint the culprits. Still they were eventually exposed, because some of the people they were trying to influence eventually turned against them. We later learned that because of these difficulties, every NGO who had attempted to launch social service projects in that district had lost a lot of money and finally given up. By the time the dam and water filtration plant was finally finished and producing pure water, everyone in the area was sympathetic to us.

The Atkinson Foundation in the US gave AMURT US\$10,000 for reforestation. We built a nursery near the dam to grow tree seedlings that we distributed freely to the villagers, and we also cultivated a model agro-forestry wood lot of more than five hectares that is now fully grown. The villagers are allowed to go there and harvest the branches for firewood without cutting down the trees. This saves the people the drudgery of hiking through the bush every day searching for firewood and deforesting the land.

When the dam was finished in 1996, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) entered into a partnership with AMURT to enlarge the water tank capacity of the treatment plant and construct a piping network to ten villages located between 5 to 10 kilometres distant in different directions. DANIDA subcontracted the work to a Ghanaian construction company who agreed to do this in six months, but it took them two years. The water started flowing to these villages in August 1998, and later the first lady of Ghana later officially inaugurated the project.

After starting that project, I discovered another area about 30 kilometres away that was also suffering from a severe water crisis. Though there are some ponds in that area, they all dry up during the dry season. Then the people are forced every day to trek up to 15 kilometres through the bush to the nearest dam. The people begged us to construct a dam for them to end this needless suffering. So I presented a project proposal to construct a second dam at Mafi Zongo to the African 2000 Network, a funding program of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). They approved a small grant of US\$27,000.

Usually dams of this size cost at least US\$100,000. In 1994, with just one bulldozer, we constructed an earthen dike that was 665 meters long. When the reservoir filled up, 40 hectares were covered by water from two to five meters deep. The volume of water was approximately 665,000 cubic meters.

During heavy rains in 1995, the dam was breached. With the cooperation and volunteer communal labour of the villagers, we filled that breach with stones and cement and constructed a new, stronger spillway that increased the water storage capacity.

International Organization granted a further \$55,000 to construct a second water treatment plant three times larger for the Mafi Zongo dam. We had to overcome similar harassment from jealous village leaders but successfully completed the work in 2000.

To obtain land to develop a model Master Unit (rural development project), we approached a big landowner of the Ewe Tribe. He was sympathetic, and after many meetings, he signed a deed of donation to Ananda Marga for 489 acres in front of the Mafi Zongo dam. As it was adjacent to the new dam, we could immediately begin to irrigate. Later we negotiated another donation of 109 acres of adjacent land on which the villagers could do cooperative farming. We also received a 99-year lease of another 350 hectares including the reservoir and the catchments area around it. Recently the Africa 2000 Network of UNDP agreed to fund a demonstration farm and further forestation projects there.

In order to make a plan and get funding to pipe the water from the Mafi Zongo filtration plant to the 30 target villages, our engineer explained that we had to measure the exact distances from the plant to each village. Normally this work is done by a professional surveying team and costs a lot of money, which we didn't have. Instead Bholanath and I spent about six weeks measuring the distances with a 10-meter measuring tape. We had to plead with people from each village to work with us, slashing a path through the tall savannah grass. Every day we had to hike an average of two hours before dawn to the various sites where we worked until sunset, then hiked back home. The villagers often had to slash through an area several times in order to straighten the paths that we were marking with stakes. The total network was more than 100 kilometres. We also did surveys in each village to confirm the total number of inhabitants and calculated the total water consumption for each village. With the data that we

submitted, Kolly Dorcoo wrote the proposal that came to a total of more than US\$300,000.

By this time, the DANIDA engineers had studied our projects carefully and calculated that AMURT's system of constructing small dams, slow sand filtration plants and piping the water to the adjacent villages was the most effective and cost efficient technique, far superior to drilling expensive boreholes. So they agreed to fund the construction of our water pipes to the 30 villages. Today nearly 20,000 people living in remote villages of southern Ghana are free from guinea worm and drinking pure water in their own villages, fulfilling Baba's initial desire.

Finally I would like to share a mystical experience that personally kept me inspired during the long years of this tough work. I used to live as the villagers do in a mud hut with a thatch roof in the bush. One night at the beginning, while sleeping under my mosquito net, I dreamed that I was alone in a huge mansion. A gigantic hall had a raised coffin in the middle with a crystal glass cover. I understood that Baba's body was lying there.

I stood in the entrance and didn't want to show myself because I used to hear from other workers that it was best to meet Baba with a good work done report, which I felt I didn't have. Still I wanted to see Him, so I decided to peep stealthily, as I used to do in Calcutta. So I crawled across the floor on my hands and knees and eventually made it to the base of the coffin. I slowly raised myself upwards. When I could see Baba lying in state, He suddenly reached out through the crystal glass and grabbed my hand. I was very afraid. He sat up, oozing out through the glass, and asked me, "Do you really want to serve humanity?"

I didn't know what to answer. He continued, as if in response to His own question: "Raise their level of consciousness." Abruptly I awoke and found myself back in the mud hut, yet sensing a blissful, mystical vibration all around me.

From that experience, I realized that the whole idea behind social service is not so much to provide the material necessities to the poor and downtrodden, as to raise their consciousness. Through their constant interaction with Ananda Marga volunteers, the minds of the villagers gradually became more subtle. They developed an awareness of environmental issues, basic hygiene and the need to work together for the common good and to overcome poverty.