



*Asha for Education*TM

UFlorida Chapter

Gators for Asha, 300-9 J W Reitz Union, P.O Box 118505, Gainesville, FL 32601

www.ashanet.org/uflorida

Conference Call with FORWARD on March 27th 2010

From FORWARD: Ms.Mathuram Shaimala Baby

Asha- UFlorida : Sanketh, Ajoy, Shubhendu, Loki and Shiva

Introduction to FORWARD:

The conference call started of with a general introduction to the FORWARD project. Ms.Shiamala Baby briefed us about why FORWARD came into existence and what does it work for.

The work that FORWARD does can be broadly classified into two categories - Work with the womenfolk and the work with the children. FORWARD is based in villages on the outskirts of Chennai and mainly works with villagers. It tries to resolve issues faced by the villagers because of the growing city, land-grabbing real estate agents and also helped them overcome the effects of the Tsunami that happened in 2005.

The work of FORWARD with respect to children has been focused on educating the children of these villages. This additional education addresses two main needs of the children:

- i) Need for academic support - motivate and help students achieve academic achievement.
- ii) Sensitizing the children to "life issues" that include educating them about their basic rights and duties and making them aware of how to encounter the problems in their villages.

Number of children that FORWARD reaches out to: 350-400 children

Mode of education: Through Evening learning centers that is situated currently in 13 villages and where the students come during evenings and weekends to get helped with their academics and also are instilled awareness about social issues.

5 days in a week they undergo remedial and supportive teaching

1 day in the week (mostly Saturday) they perform activities related to Social Awareness.

Current progress: The children are currently performing really well and the FORWARD evening centers have helped the students achieve academic progress satisfactorily. The children are at present getting ready for their annual examinations.

Attendance: Attendance has generally improved. And this is true with both the evening centers and also the government schools that these children attend during the daytime.



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Ms. Shiamala Baby also mentioned a couple of students by their names and specifically mentioned how they were progressing with their academics. She also had a couple of points to add about the children and this was interestingly in line with the observations made by Palani bhai during his site visit report.

"The children have a lot of talent and have skills comparable to city-born kids but it is the lack of a platform that stands in the way of success for these children. This is exactly what FORWARD tries to solve by providing them a platform for them to showcase their talents."

Are there any individual anecdotes about how the awareness raising part of FORWARD has paid off?

The children at the Elapakkam Center conducted a demonstration about child labor and child marriage a few weeks ago and took to the streets to raise awareness amongst the villagers about the problems associated with these social evils.

What is your comment about the RTE act?

Ms. Shaimala Baby personally feels that the RTE act is a big blessing to children especially the rural children and she believes that the FORWARD children will benefit from this.

How big of a problem is Child marriage?

"Child marriage has always been a big problem in Tamilnadu. It has reduced over the years but we can still here news about child marriages happening here and there. It is also a big problem in the regions that FORWARD works in. I will try sending you a few specific stories about girls who were married off too early. They are mostly married off within the family to their maternal uncle. Our programs have been successful in reducing child marriage problem in our area."

What about Child Labour?

"Child labor is also a serious issue and more of a peril than child marriage because the city is nearby and the children get pulled in to work in places on the outskirts of the city. We try to raise as much awareness as possible against child labor and specifically we try to take these cases of child labor and child marriage on a case by case basis and try to talk to the parents and relatives and educate them about the ill effects about these problems."

What is your take on GM seeds and BT Brinjal?

We are very much opposed to the GM seeds initiative. We have organized protests against BT Brinjal and also we are currently on a drive to collect neem seeds, original paddy seeds etc and preserve them from getting lost. We are trying to empower FORWARD women to oppose BT Brinjal and also try supporting Organic farming as much as we can.



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What about the villagers themselves adopting the learning centres? Is that happening very often?

It has happened in the past where a couple of villages have themselves taken up the running of the learning centers. This has been possible through a couple of governmental schemes that are present to support these kind of initiatives. The money comes from these government schemes and the villagers take upon themselves to administrate the evening center.

What about expanding to newer villages as older ones are taken up by villages?

We have been approached by three more villages to start evening centers in their respective villages to aid academic and social progress of children. Especially people of Madampakkam village have been requesting us repeatedly over the past year to start a center at their village. Not all villages are capable of taking up the working of the evening centres in their villages and it has happened only twice before. But we are thinking about expanding to atleast one more village and will keep you informed of our decision.