



# *Asha for Education*<sup>TM</sup>

*UFlorida Chapter*

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

[www.ashanet.org/uflorida](http://www.ashanet.org/uflorida)

*This is a draft and is subject to revision.*

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Folks,

Please excuse the possibly unreasonable length of this site visit report.

I try to write site visit reports giving significant emphasis to the overall situation of the community where our project partner operates. Especially, the various internal and external pressures that the community is currently facing. This indirectly but strongly affects not only the goals of our project and modus operandi, but also the daily lives of our partner NGO members.

If you are uninterested in all of this, you can skip directly to the "FORWORD and Asha" section and just scan through the earlier paragraphs, if there are any backward references from that point on.

Thank you,  
Meera Sitharam, Asha-Uflorida, Oct 5, 2008.  
sitharamAT cise DOT ufl DOT edu

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Background:

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On Aug 13, 2008, I visited 7 village night tutoring schools in 3 clusters in the Mathuranthakam area run by FORWORD with Asha funding.

We started out around 4pm. Ms. Shiamalababy, the founder and head of the FORWORD team was with me, as was her general assistant and chauffeur Mr. ???. For part of the time, including the drive back to Chennai, the schools coordinator Mr. ?? was also with us.

The entire visit took about 9 hours including travel back to South-Chennai. I was on the way to Chennai with my family from Trichy on my way back to the US. We rendezvoused around 4pm with Ms. Shiamalababy at the Melmaruvathur temple on the main Chennai-Trichy highway. (More on this temple trust in a later section.)

The Mathuranthakam area is about 1:45hrs drive south of Chennai, just north of Thindivanam. There is a huge natural lake there, possibly the drainage from the Thiruvannamali/Javadi hills - the area has a couple of such lakes, also in Chengulpet and Vengampakkam, for example.



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We rode in FORWARD's offroad vehicle, which is used by them for visiting the villages (all connected by road, but narrow dirt roads). FORWARD is unable to purchase even a tiny office property which would help them to visit these villages easily. The land prices are exorbitant (you will see this refrain several times in this site visit report).

At this point, the night school coordinator travels several hours by public transport everyday, Ms. Shiamalababy travels every week, and one of her assistants from the Tambaram office travels on her own once a week, I think also by public transport. Ms. Shiamalababy says that they usually do not get back at night, so they stay in the villages overnight.

FORWARD's (small) main office is in Tambaram. There is a good train connection as far as Chengulpet, which is probably about 45 min north of Mathuranthakam area. But after that, it has to be by bus. Public transport in TN is probably the most efficient and used among all the states in India, certainly among the 4 southern states. That said, the bus/minibus connections to these villages is much less frequent and reliable than what I see in other districts in Tamil Nadu (Namakkal, Perambalur, Tiruchi). Same goes for electricity and other public works.

The Chennai Outskirt Effect:

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I had commented on this already in my last year's site visit report. The closer a rural area is to Chennai, the worse off it seems to be. This is probably a combination of historic poverty (they are close to the driest parts of Tamil Nadu) and the ``sucking'' effect has Chennai has on its environs.

The exorbitant price of land enters everything. It is higher than NYC, caused partly by IT/BPO cash held by individuals who find standard equity/debt instruments, currencies and commodities to be too risky in the face of global volatility and locally roaring inflation and low long term interest rates. Also, acquiring land is among the easier ways to launder black money (although it is thankfully getting harder). Many Panchayat heads seem to be in cahoots with land developers, the EB, and other civil service officials and also with the police and party officials. And of course the rural-to-urban migration is at its worst there. In general, if anyone with any capital has any interest in these villages, then they usually want to buy out the villagers as cheaply as they can, get clear title and ``plot-up'' the place.

Now ``plotting-up'' a place increases its value 10 fold. This means it has been zoned as residential as opposed to agricultural land (note that this particular zoning change is way more difficult in India than in the US). It also means it has EB and other publicworks ``approval'' whatever that means. Only big developers seem to be able consolidate



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enough plots and pay enough to overcome these hurdles.

A poor family with a Patta for agricultural land does not reap much from this land price inflation. Nor even does a small land owner owning say 5-10 acres of agricultural land. Such a guy is struggling to make ends meet because he cannot pay enough wages to compete with general commodity price inflation or to compete with what construction pays (lots of infrastructure projects and private construction all over TamilNadu), so he is under pressure to sell the land to a consolidator-developer and take whatever profit he gets -- he doesn't have the energy to wait it out or fight the officials and have it plotted up himself. And he is unable to convince his laborers to stay even if he treats them well, because they see that livelihood as an uncertain and fast-disappearing one, and rightly so. See below.

Is the Government helping?

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It is all a familiar vicious circle that has happened many many times before all over the world as a result of concentrated and extremely fast growth in urban areas. And no one really seems to know how to help.

By and large, the local people, including the small agricultural land owners and small businesspeople seem to have practically no control of their land or economy. The poor are mostly landless laborers, but maybe 1/2 own a small Patta. Being close to Chennai, they are alternately mollycoddled with completely random gifts that they did not request (recently, for example a gift of TV's was made under some state scheme) and alternately have hurdle after hurdle thrown in the way of any honest or intelligent entrepreneurship, not only by corrupt government officials wanting their cut, not only by more powerful business interests from Chennai, but also insidious undercutting by way of various capricious and usually not very long-lived district, state, and central government ``schemes" some enlightened higher-up cooked up as a way to ``help."

You see the effect of the latter type of scheme all over Tamil Nadu, and it is worth spending a paragraph on them. Gram Sadak Yojana (big, Central) and Anaithu Grama Marumalarchi Thittam (small, State), are two of may be 5 currently operating schemes of a similar type to improve village infrastructure and revitalize villages and reduce rural-->urban migration (I am not including NREGA and NABARD, which are somewhat different). These schemes are not necessarily all rotten, many have the seeds of good ideas, but they are not thoroughly thought out especially in their socio-economics or politics nor in the logistics of their execution. Especially they have practically no checks and balances, oversight, nor any built-in ability to self-correct and change course, buying in grassroots input and support. So they end up often re-entrenching the status quo that they tried to shake up. In particular, they repeatedly take control away from the hands



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of small entrepreneurs, and foster a kind of passive dependency, instead of giving them control and a leg up, perhaps mildly influencing their direction with slightly biased incentives.

## FORWORD Recap:

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FORWORD started as a women's empowerment organization, targeting disenfranchised women in poverty, mostly in the marginal communities in Kanchipuram district on the outskirts of Chennai, starting in the Tambaram area, which I visited last time (see my 2007 site visit report for FORWORD - that was much closer to Chennai than the Mathurantham area that I visited this time), and the coastal areas of Kanchipuram district.

Ms. Shiamalababy is herself a battered woman and a single mother. She comes from Kanyakumari district, but her organization has deep and broad roots in Kanchipuram district and she knows it like the back of her hand. FORWORD has at least a decade of experience with everything involved in empowering disenfranchised women.

## Empowering women involves:

- (a) giving them a social support structure that helps them escape crippling tyrannies at home, including battery and sexual exploitation by the family's males. However, such support includes not just support from other women, but supportive men and any other well-wishers.
- (b) providing a relatively safe and stable home (it can be a hovel, but it should be dependably there) with manageable access to breathable air and drinkable water
- (c) providing access to basic healthcare service and advice for them and all their dependents
- (d) helping them get up and stand on their own two feet (both livelihood training)
- (e) above all: supporting the care and education of their children

In my opinion, FORWORD's team of about 10 full-time social workers mostly drawn from a network of 40 (could be more) self-help groups in various villages are doing an admirable job of ALL of this. They reach deep into these communities, and know these villagers and their families individually.

Due to the land issues mentioned earlier, in order to do anything about issue (b) above, FORWORD had to get into property rights issues and also is supported by Chethana ([www.chethana.org](http://www.chethana.org)).

## FORWORD's operating philosophy:

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FORWORD sees itself as operating in a very marginal and rapidly travelling ``frontier



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wave of destruction" radiating out from Chennai. The currently still rural and agricultural communities that FORWARD works with will soon be drowned into the wave of the Chennai residential suburbs. The price of everything will go up, their current livelihoods will disappear and their lives will change radically. It is sink or swim with the current. That is simply the bleak reality.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, it is VERY unlikely that any of these communities will see even a paisa of the profit from the sale of the land that they are now occupying, although big-time consolidated land developers and sundry officials will make a killing.

Let us say FORWARD manages to mobilize these communities, from the poorest to the panchayat officials, to the small shop owners to the middlemen to the small land owning class (mostly from the telugu-speaking Reddiar community) to organize themselves, dig in, maintain solidarity and demand a share of the profit of the land sales from the community. Even after such mobilization, FORWARD and the community would face a tremendous uphill battle in dealing with all the vested interests: land sharks, outside officials, police etc.

And don't forget that none of them has any interest in this land without the Demand: and that Demand is from the middle class family in Chennai who wants to put its money in a ``bit of pleasant green plot on the outskirts" and doesn't really want to know about the dirty details of how that bit of green space was ``freed up and plotted up."

The apathy of the middleclass is in fact the source-energy of the wave radiating out from Chennai and drowning these communities. No one can point ones finger at it, though. Dharnas, getting the press interested, going to the courts etc. takes a lot of effort and usually cannot be sustained for the years or even decades that it takes to actually win this kind of a battle for equitable remuneration from the land sale. People need to get on with their lives and usually these ``movements" lose their grassroots character and are left with only a few professional mobilizer types, at which point they lose authenticity and political traction.

Given this situation, except for a few activist stances and confrontations in Vengambakkam and else were, FORWARD's position is largely pragmatic: simply offer support to these communities, help them build solidarity with each other, show that someone cares for and understands their plight, and most importantly helps them, particularly the women and --especially the children-- adapt to the massive changes ahead.

FORWARD and Asha

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Asha funds FORWARD's involvement with issue (e) above. We fund 13 night schools of between 25-40 children each from grades 1-10, paying an average of about Rs 30,000 per school which pays: (i) teacher salary (ii) some snacks and materials for the kids (iii) a coordinator salary (iv) a couple of scholarships to children who need support, especially to study further.

The night schools achieve so many things at the same time:

- (1) The obvious one is helping kids with their academics outside school and providing a home environment conducive to learning.
- (2) They develop a peer group of children from the same neighborhood that meets outside school regularly: it improves self-esteem greatly, focuses their energy on learning and strengthens the conviction that education is their way to adapt to the fast changes that are happening around them, shakes the defeatist poverty mindset that many of their parents may have and fuels their ambition to use education for fast social mobility.
- (3) They get the parents mobilized to hold the government schools and teachers accountable - I was pleasantly surprised to see reasonably quality teaching using the ABL method for the lower grades, and a facility with English in the higher grades. Although the teacher-student ratio, teacher quality and availability of interns etc. is capricious.
- (4) They get the women's self-help groups (from which the teachers are drawn) meshing well with the rest of the community because everyone is interested in the welfare of the children.
- (5) The daily (completely sober) evening meetings provide both solidarity and a forward-thinking vitality to the community. The teachers, being from the community, and moving ahead, are great examples and role models for the kids.
- (6) They offer a respite for the moms who work all day and need some peace in the evening (while cooking for the family).
- (7) Last but not least, control entirely rests with the community; they make relevant modifications that they see fit; and the school offers a temporary livelihood and gives a leg up to the teacher.

Specifics of the 7 schools I visited:

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Each of these schools has between 25 and 40 children. Some of the schools only had kids



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up to 8th grade, but many had 9th and 10th graders as well.

All kinds of children attend the night schools, from the somewhat well off families in the village down to the poorest. In one school, a deaf child was there and her mother was making sure that Ms Shiamalababy would understand why her daughter would not attend the Aug 15 show since she could not be trusted to take care of herself, but that she should nevertheless be allowed to continue attending the night school.

The kids are all bright and chirpy. Most of the older kids wanted to chatter with me and performed various things which they had prepared for the Aug 15 show that all the FORWORD schools were jointly participating in. I can recall several poems, several songs and several dances including hip hop and Karagam. We had to cut them short to carry on; they did not want to stop. At every school the teachers and the kids told me in their own words why they really appreciated the night schools and the effect it was having on their communities. They clearly had a lot of affection for Ms. Shiamalababy and liked to ride her jeep. They also seemed to trust the coordinator (although it was clear that they thought of him as the "school inspector.")

People tell me I should carry a video camera, but I am afraid that this would have killed the spontaneity that I saw. Perhaps the video could have captured the appearance of the villages and the kind of places the school met at (usually on the main street, under street lights, or in the main "square," or at the verandah or open upstairs of some pukka house.)

At some point during the visit, the coordinator (who was on the previous conference call) joined us and I got a chance to chat with him as well during part of the ride back to Chennai. He travels everyday by train and bus to visit the schools and help the teachers with various tutoring methods.

Here are the details of the villages and the teachers we are supporting. Each village has probably about 75 families, some smaller, some bigger.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: !!!!!** These details have to be doublechecked with Ms. Shimalababy for accuracy before the final version is uploaded!!!!

Ramavaram cluster:

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(1) Velamur; the teacher is Vennila who has just completed a +2 education and is studying nursing with a scholarship. Enterprising young woman. ???  
Need to check if this scholarship is from Asha or elsewhere. ????



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Kudalur cluster:

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(2) Indiranagar; the teacher here is Priya who has a BBA and is studying to become an accountant a bright and enthusiastic and confident young woman. Wonderful to see such social mobility. Again a great example for the kids in the community.

(3) Aykoottam; the teacher there is Chitra who has a +2 education and runs the Balwadi there -- She has her own small children to take care of as well.

(4) Another village name forgotten ???; teacher Vijayalakshmi -- 10th standard education; works at a book-binders during the day. There was some disappointing issue concerning her further education which I cannot decipher from my notes ??? The Panchayat head came to talk to me at this village -- he is very supportive of the night school and talked to me about the government school there.

Thandarai cluster

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(5)Thandalur; teacher Sadalakshmi, 10th standard, somewhat older lady, left husband and returned to her childhood home, very supportive father.

(6)Marapakkam; teacher Yuvarani, 12th grade education, has kids who attend the school. Seems to have very strong community support.

(7)Puducheri; teacher Maheswari, BA in Tamil literature, very intelligent and strong personality and committed to teaching; some of her students had written very good quality verse in Tamil.

Acharapaakkam cluster schools I was supposed to visit but did not have the time to

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(8) Vilangadu; teacher Deepa with a 10th grade education

(9)Raputhanallur: teacher Sushila, who has an MA and is involved in FORWARD's other activities --  
?????

Main Request from All schools:

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-- Not to stop Asha's involvment

-- For days when it rains, some money to build a simple shelter where the school can



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continue to meet (made of coconut thatch + tarp).

Can the FORWARD night schools ever support themselves?

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The number of night schools supported has remained constant at 13, but the actual night schools supported have been changing. I think of those schools supported in the past, atleast 50% are running themselves now, by support from the community and by members of FORWARD's self-help group in that community. But some of the old schools may now be defunct. At this point, for example, many of the coastal night schools appear to be running themselves, Asha is only providing scholarships. Similarly several of the Tambaram area schools that I visited last year appear to be running themselves. I do not know if FORWARD has ever been in the situation of going back to support a school that at some point supported itself, but then ran into trouble.

In general, FORWARD goes into a community in which they have developed a presence through the self-help group, shows proof of concept for running a night school, and then tries to get the community to keep it going.

Other than this, can FORWARD mobilize support from local charitable sources?

I think this will be extremely difficult. Mainly because anyone with an interest in the community is eyeing the land and would like it freed of these pesky communities, rather than helping them thrive.

The Melmaruvathur temple trust, for example, would be one of the ``big businesses" with an interest in the area, that Ms. Shiamalababy could potentially approach for financial help. I asked her about it.

It is relevant to spend a paragraph on this temple. This temple is run by a guy ``the melmaruvathur swami" who has millions of devotees of all social classes - those of you from Chennai might have heard of the devotees who dress completely in red. The temple - unlike most south indian temples that inherit the traditional caste based hierarchies and the strictly divided functions of their communities – appears refreshingly free of such divisions. Moreover, there appear to be no special favors given to any visitors over any other.

The Swami collects a lot of donations and has set up an apparently transparent trust at the temple. I do not know if the trust opens its books to the public, but it supposedly runs at least 1 school and a hospital to help the underprivileged. From all accounts of the devotees, the temple trust operation is above-board. All this sounds very encouraging and



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promising.

But what I hear from other sources is that the temple is the Swami's side business. His main business is as a land shark, buying off rural land and plotting it up at 10 times the price for Chennai buyers. I also hear that under the guise of improving tribal communities, the temple trust extracts slave level construction labor from them.

Although I was not told this, I would not be surprised if the temple operation is a watertight way to launder black money into legitimate land titles. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out how to do this. The legal loopholes here are: (a) money given to charity is not taxed and uninspected at the source (b) there is a huge difference between the market value of land and the regulated value of land upon which property and other taxes are assessed. I will let you figure out the rest of the scheme.

Recommendation:

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(0) It will be difficult to find as committed a partner who is as knowledgeable about these communities and their marginal status as FORWARD is, and which empowers the children and women of these communities as much as FORWARD does. The money is being extremely well utilized and has both deep and diverse impact. There is simply no rationale at all to stop funding.

(I) My previous site visit report suggests getting volunteers from local colleges or interns with masters in social work to help with the teaching or the coordinating. They would find it attractive, especially with Asha's name attached to it.

I still think this is a good idea, but I no longer think it is an easy thing to do, especially given the transportation that it entails. For example, FORWARD manages to get 2 Teach-India scholars through a Times of India competition, but one of them had dropped out by the time of my site visit. I also no longer think these volunteers can replace the paid teacher who is a woman of that specific village and understands the situation there way better than anyone from the outside can. They can be her helpers, or help the coordinator to coordinate the various schools. BUT most importantly, they can bring exposure to what FORWARD is doing.

(II) Another thing FORWARD should do continually, is have a conduit to the press, the collector's office, and through them, various offices in Chennai. FORWARD can try to use Asha as leverage to acquire such contacts. I have seen the positive effects of this in Perambalur district, where a cooperative collector has helped secure tremendous CSR (corporate social responsibility) funding for 2 of our projects (HUT and Payir).



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This requires a supportive collector who arm-twists local stakeholders for CSR's, but this is possible only if the stakeholders do not see direct opposition to their interests.. Both of these are much more difficult in Chennai's outskirts for reasons mentioned earlier. But it is still a must-do.

(IV) FORWARD should also partner with other NGOs whose missions would be relevant to these communities for various reasons. I think FORWARD is already doing that, but it would be good to get the details from them.