

## Asha Build

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### **Report from N.N.Prasad- Project Steward Asha Chennai**

The education centers for the brick kiln children have opened on and have been functioning for the past few weeks. We started the project with the aim of reaching **100** children through **five** centers of each 20 located at five different kilns. Now, after the opening of just **three** centers, we have crossed the target and around **135** students are attending the centers. Also, we are reaching children from **seven** different kilns through these three centers.

Opening these centers wasn't very smooth, it all worked because of the determined effort by the team and through application of occasional pressure during those instances when the progress was slow. We faced the expected problem of resistance from the owners and the owners did not give the decision of not allowing the centers in the kilns till the last minute. Our alternate plan was to run the centers in rented premises near the kilns. Another back-up plan of working with local Panchayats, who promised us land, also did not work out as they also withdrew their promise in the end. Our last resort was to hire places from private houses close to the kilns. Finally, Mrs. Lakshmi's meeting with Murthy during mid Jan acted as a catalyst. We succeeded in opening **Center - Tamarai** on 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan. We opened the subsequent two, center - rose and center - Chemburthi, on 29<sup>th</sup> Jan and 5<sup>th</sup> Feb respectively.

Center Tamarai was path breaking in many respects. We finalized the location on Jan 18th, it is a open courtyard in front of a house and not all the yard was even cemented! The thatched roof was ready by 22<sup>nd</sup>, flooring was complete and the center was ready to receive the children by 8am! Everything worked thanks to the excellent teamwork of Pasumai team, Shekar's presence at site, Jeba's organizing things in the city and Mrs.Lakshmi's coordination. Apart from the construction of the center, opening the center is very similar to moving to a new house. List of items needed is varied, for example, each center needs buckets, mugs, foot-mats, water filter, cleaning equipment etc to the all-important learning material for the children. We visited the local book exhibition, Mrs. Lakshmi got books from CBT and one animator with Jeba purchased other learning material like slates, crayons, note books etc and we moved all the items to the center on the designated day. In the process we learnt how to load every square inch of space in a car and Shekar learnt where groundnuts come from and life in villages!

Center Tamarai: Is located in Kannadapaliyam near to brick kilns - Shekar, Sarguna and Balamuralikrishna. This center started with 30 children, but the current number is over 50. Two animators- Dhanalakshmi and Panchali are with this center. Although our initial estimate was that the children will be mostly first timers, what we noticed was that many have attended the school to various levels but did not proceed further because of migration between the two places. To address the issue of children at different levels, Mrs. Lakshmi purchased text books of different classes and now the children of respective levels can follow those books. Because this center is off-site, all the children were given a Tiffin box to bring their lunch. During our most recent visit with Mr. S. Murthy, we saw the center in full flow - groups of children at similar stage working with animators, enjoying and learning.

Center Rose: This is the only center of the three that is located inside a brick kiln (Madras brick kiln). Each center comes with its own set of problems and the issues here are related to convincing the owner about our intentions and another difference is that most children being first-time students. This center started with around 20 children and now has around 25. There are some older children also who are keen on learning and they are also taking help from the animators. Although, we started with the plan of one animator for 20 children, Mrs. Lakshmi is emphasizing that this center needs another animator in addition to Arogya Mary to provide quality education. Our plan is to use the sixth animator at this location. The need of this additional animator was observed during our recent visit when children were learning things with out understanding. Another option to augment resources here is to use Jaya (daughter of the house owner of Tamarai center, 12th standard pass) who is living very close to Rose. It was very heartening to hear Arogya Mary asking for the help of Pechiamma (one of the residents at the kiln) to help teaching and maintaining hygiene of the children; a certain result of the two-week animator training and due to the process of identifying the suitable candidates.

Center Chembarthi: This is the last center to be opened and is again located outside the brick kilns. Here, the local Panchayat leader offered his sandy land to build the center. This is the biggest of the three with around 65 children and the second Dhanalakshmi and Parimala are the animators here. Sixth one, Pockisam, will fill any absentees and if there are no absentees she will goto Rose. This center is similar in composition to Tamarai. Because it was the last to open, the infrastructure is still not fully ready. We are working on providing suitable floor to the children as the owner is reluctant to cement the floor. Also, another problem that we are facing here is the large number of children and overcrowding. To address this issue we are trying to hire a place from a house adjoining this center. There is a need to augment the resource and we think we found a person from the same house.

Nutrition: All the children receive either milk and a fruit or sundal . For Rose and Tamarai, preparation is done by the house-owners of the Tamarai center. For Chembarthi, neighbors prepare and give the food. Kanji (nutritious porridge) will be part of the menu shortly. There is regular review of all the aspects, for example, two minor issues related to nutrition were that 1) children's tiffin boxes were getting mixed and to address it their names will be printed on the boxes. 2) Some times the food they bring from home seems to be getting spoilt, as it is eaten later in the day. The suggestion is to ask the children to eat at 11am in the morning and provide the nutrition late in the day!

We are trying to visit the centers once every fortnight. This level of interaction will be difficult to sustain in the long run, although close monitoring is now essential (in the first few months of the project). During our recent trip, we all agreed that the sustainable way would be through helping to create a system of self-monitoring by the Build group from within itself. It is something that we need to develop.