



*Asha for Education*TM

UFlorida Chapter

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

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FORWORD Project Site Visit Report

Date : 17th June 2011
Site Visit Volunteer : Shivashankar Halan
Affiliation : Asha - UFlorida

Site Visit Report

- Compiled by Shivashankar Halan

Photos from the site visit:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/lh/sreid?uname=108873890172794420175&target=ALBUM&id=5716683718608095041&authkey=Gv1sRgCIHsu5mi3-azUw&feat=email>

FORWORD Background

Project FORWORD (FORum for WOMen's Rights and Development) was started in 1991 by Ms. Shiamala Baby to support women and educate them about their rights. Asha for Education has been supporting FORWORD's educational projects since 2001. Asha – UFlorida has been supporting the project since 2007. FORWORD has been running **13 evening centers in Kanchipuram district of Tamilnadu** to help children from the villages in the area improve their academic performance. These centers are in addition to the basic education that the children receive from the schools in the region. The evening centers function everyday between 5-8 pm and also during Saturdays and have the following goals to accomplish:

1. To motivate them to attend to school.
2. Promote nil-absence to regular school and promote continuity to higher education.
3. Ensure healthy children, in the deprived communities.
4. To bring academic efficiency in them.
5. To develop attitudinal change (positive thinking, creative action) and healthy interpersonal relationships.
6. To empower them with rights-based quality education with love for nature, fellow human beings, peaceful living and social justice.
7. To empower them with peoples politics and to develop participatory leadership in them.
8. To enable them to identify human rights violations, name them, challenge them and change them.
9. To sensitize the community on the issues of children and to organize them as child- rights protectors



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Site Visit Background

I have been the steward for project FORWARD since 2009. I have been in constant touch with the project coordinator Ms.Shiamala Baby since 2009 regarding progress with the project. I was visiting India after 3 years to visit friends and family and utilized this opportunity to visit the project in person and learn about its functioning. This visit would also complete the mandatory site visit requirement for the project for 2011.

Ms.Shiamala Baby had been in Trivandrum for the entire month leading up to my site visit since her brother was admitted to a hospital in the city for treatment. She was gracious enough to come back to Chennai on the 17th June morning to meet with me that afternoon and show me around the project.

Report

As part of the site visit I got to visit 6 different locations. The first was the FORWARD head office located in Chennai city at No-117, Suddananda Bharathi Street, East Tambaram, Chennai where I met Ms.Shiamala Baby and all the office bearers of FORWARD. From there we visited 5 different evening centers managed by FORWARD and met the children and teachers from these centers. The rest of this report describes in detail the experiences at these 6 different locations – **FORWARD Head Office, Thandarai, Thandarai Puducheri, Kuudalur, Mathur and Vilankadu.**

FORWARD Head Office at Tambaram

I reached the FORWARD head office in Tambaram around 3pm on 17th February to meet Ms.Shiamala Baby. Ms.Shiamala Baby had just returned from Trivandrum that morning and I had arrived from my hometown of Ooty that morning. The office is a 4-room house that is being used as office space for FORWARD for the past few years. All the administrative work for the project (including financials and book-keeping) is handled from this office. From my understanding, the office area is owned by FORWARD and hence there is no rent overhead for maintaining this office. At this office I met the following staff of FORWARD:

- **Ms.Shiamala Baby – Director** and founder of FORWARD
- **K.Matthews – Coordinator** (Oversees the functioning of the evening centers by visiting them at least once every week. Keeps track of financing, functioning, supplies and logistics for each of the 13 centers. Qualification: Bachelor's degree)
- **S.Mary – Community Organizer** (Hails from the areas being served by FORWARD so has a good rapport with the womenfolk from the area. Is responsible in implementing several of FORWARD's projects in the area and providing encouragement to the people. I think her qualification is high school certificate but her experience and rapport is invaluable for implementation of the projects since she is often seen as "one among us" by the village folk)



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- Accountant of FORWARD
- Driver of FORWARD

In addition to these staff of FORWARD I also met some other interesting people at the head office.

Ms.Vijayalakshmi, is a teacher at the Pudhunemelikuppam center of FORWARD. This is one of the villages that was very badly affected by the Tsunami that ravaged this area in December 2004. FORWARD got involved with relief and rehabilitation activities in this village and then from then on has been involved with several educational, health and holistic community development activities in the region. I spoke with Ms.Vijayalakshmi for about 10 minutes about the functioning of the center. She had finished high school. She told me that there are 25 students in the center. There were 5 students who took the 10+2 board exams offered by the state government. They all passed the exam with scores ranging 800-900. Also one student took the 10th standard board exam and passed successfully. She also mentioned that her husband was physically disabled and she had 3 children and teaching at the FORWARD center was a very valuable and rejuvenating experience for her. She also mentioned that FORWARD was supporting some of her husband's medical expenses through the medical program of FORWARD.



Picture 1 (Left) : FORWARD Director Ms.Shiamala Baby with Ms.Vijayalakshmi, teacher at the Pudhunemelikuppam evening center. Picture 2 (Right) : FORWARD Community Organizer Ms.Mary (center) with Tamilselvi (left) – a child supported by FORWARD and another child.

Tamilselvi, is an orphan girl from a colony immediately next to the FORWARD head office in Tambaram. She was recently orphaned in an accident where she lost her parents.



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FORWORD stepped in and started supporting her education by paying her fees and helped her get uniforms and study material. This is a typical case where the supported child is not from an area covered by a FORWARD center but FORWARD has stepped in on an humanitarian basis to support an under-privileged child's education.

Evening Centers

Style of functioning:

Here are general inferences about the functioning of the centers that is common to all the 5 centers that I visited. I hope this gives a proper insight into the functioning and efficacy of the centers.

- **Attendance:** A very well-enforced concept at each of these evening centers was attendance for the students. Each of these centers had an attendance register that had to be maintained by the instructor at the center and had to be filled out on a daily basis. It had the name of each and every child and everyday they were marked on arrival to the center. The instructor had to initial the attendance register every day and whenever the coordinator or even the director visited they had to initial the register to show that they were present at the center on that day. Flipping the pages at some of these centers I could see how the attendance register was a good way to enforce that all of them – students, instructors at each center, coordinator and director were all doing their job. They also requested me to sign the register at each center. Also I noticed that at least at the centers I visited the attendance was pretty high (~ 80%)
- **Instructor Qualification:** Most of the instructors were high school qualified. Most of them were not college graduates but were definitely passionate towards teaching the children. At the first 4 centers (except Vilankadu) the instructors themselves had school-going children who regularly attended the evening centers along with other children. And in at least 2 of the 5 centers the location for the evening center was the courtyard or space in front of the instructor's house itself. One concern that has been raised before and I find valid is qualification of teachers to teach some of the higher classes. Their qualifications seem to be just right to teach the primary and secondary school students but the task might be cut out when they have to instruct the higher secondary students.
- **Location:** Talking to the Director over the years and also feedback from other projects, getting space for running an initiative is a very big challenge. FORWARD according to my inference is able to be successful because of the acceptance from the villagers based on the understanding of the use of these educational centers. Typically the spaces where the centers are conducted are open spaces (like verandahs) where there is proper lighting available. In most cases FORWARD had pitched in to buy tarpaulin sheets and tube-lights for the centers. Also they had alternate sites to move



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to in case of rain or inclement weather but for a regular class the site was open space. One concern might be that since the spaces are open the students do get distracted at times due to events in the community or village in general. But on the other hand this is advantageous since the students don't feel like they are in another classroom.

- **Resources:** Each center had proper lighting, since their timings extended into the night. Most of the students also had bags and stationary supplied by FORWARD.
- **Organization:** Students from the same standard would sit together in the center. This helps the instructor address issues on a class-by-class basis. The junior students sat up closest to the instructor and the senior most students farther away. The instructor would start from the lowest standard and work her/his way up to the highest standard.
- **Enthusiasm:** Most heart-warming sight was to see how disciplined and enthusiastic the students were. The students were all excited to have a guest visit them. At each center they had prepared to present something to the guests. They either recited poems or stories or gifted me with handicrafts or drawings they had learnt to create at the center. Most of them were eager to talk to me and ask questions (although some of them were shy at the beginning). They were also very confident about themselves when I asked them about what each one of them wanted to become in the future.
- **Discipline:** Just like their enthusiasm quotient, their discipline also awed me. The students were highly disciplined. Every time a student wanted to talk they raised their hand and waited patiently. They were particularly well-mannered. When we were distributing the goodies we had got for the students, they patiently distributed among themselves, coming up one by one and the senior students all waiting patiently till the junior students were all helped. I do realize that the students were possibly on their "best behavior" because they had a guest but some of the traits were things that need to be cultivated and not enforced for a single day. Their activities and behavior strongly highlighted the fact that these students were being groomed and were actually learning good things from the center. Most heartening to see was how at each center the senior students helped the junior students.

Individual Centers :

To make it easier to present the information I have compiled information from the 5 centers I visited in the following table:

No.	Center Name	No. of Students	Location	People I met
1	Thandarai	45	Clearing in the village that was lit using FORWARD purchased tube lights	Instructor and individual students



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2	Thandarai Puducherri	25	Verandah in front of the instructor's house	Instructor, individual students, Ettiyappan a student on Asha scholarship and I also visited his home to see his ailing mother
3	Kuudalur	35	The front of a house that is currently being constructed and that belongs to the instructor	Instructor and students
4	Mathur	20	It was on a cement road inside the village (that is not being used much and that ahs space on the side for vehicles to pass by)	Instructor and students
5	Vilankadu	25	In front of instructor's house	Instructor (Sudha about whom FORWARD literature talks about in detail), students, Sudha's brother and village womenfolk who were part of self-help groups organized by FORWARD

Positives inferred from site visit

- The functioning of the centers was observed to be efficient with high attendance rates.
- There was a hierarchical chain of command: (Director→Coordinator→Instructors) that was present to enforce proper working.
- The students were very well-mannered and disciplined.
- I questioned Ms.Shiamala Baby specifically about any religious preaching/conversion that could possibly happen through the educational centers and projects of FORWARD. Reason for asking this question is that Ms.Shiamala Baby is known to have connections with churches in India and outside as well so we just wanted to clarify this issue. She assured me that the students are never taught any religious material through the educational centers. She highlighted how even the prayer that the students recite does not have anything religious in it. It is something she herself wrote and it just thanks nature for all the gifts it has provided.
- Community buy-in: Most of the villagers were really motivated to support the centers. I wanted to visit one of the centers handed over to the community and run by the village folks but that didn't materialize because of time issues and distance that needed to be travelled. Yet, the villagers I met were all very supportive of the centers and their functioning. Many sad that as a common unsaid rule, if any adult saw a



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child from their village roaming around the streets between 5pm and 8 pm they would personally make sure they were brought back to the center because they thought it was imperative for them to attend these centers.

Possible Concerns

- Qualification of teachers: The teachers might not be qualified enough to teach some of the senior students. There is still a lot of benefit from attending the centers for these students since they end up discussing homework and academics and exposes them to a positive atmosphere.
- Distance between centers and distance to the main city: The centers were almost 150 kms from the city of Chennai where the director and other staff members resided. This makes it (a) extremely difficult for them to supervise the functioning daily (b) Expensive in terms of travel cost for the director or coordinator to visit the centers often. The staff are actually doing a wonderful job since the coordinator still visits these centers at least 4 times a month but this is definitely a concern.

Personal Experience

Although I have been involved with the project for a long time now and have learnt and heard a lot about the project, nothing could ready me for the actual experience of visiting the project first-hand and interacting with the children and instructors. It was a really transforming and educating experience. It was very motivational too. It taught me a lot of things about grass-root level social service and highlighted several issues that we take for granted while working with these projects.

It was a highly emotional experience at several occasions so I might not be entirely objective throughout this report. I have tried to report functioning, positives and negatives as accurately as possible but the visit itself was an extremely subjective experience so I might be a little biased. Especially meeting people, talking to them and seeing their motivation does force you to talk on their behalf when compiling such a report and I understand and acknowledge that.

I started off at around 3 pm and by the time I returned back to my relative's home in Chennai city it was 3 am in the morning. I say this to highlight that the coordinator and director might have to undergo the same schedule several times a month to enforce proper functioning of the project. At the chapter level we have often commented on how a big part of the budget was transport and asked several questions about them. But it is not possible to understand that even though they might have a vehicle and funding to travel, it still takes them significant effort and time to accomplish supervision of the project. It is not possible to do so without motivation and an inner belief in the cause.

I had an extremely fulfilling, educational and transforming trip. Especially when I visited Vilankadu, the time was after 11 pm at night and some of the students had literally woken up from their sleep to come back to the center to meet me. They were still so excited and happy to see me and wanted to sing and dance and show me their creativity.



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Also hearing experiences from villagers and instructors and observing how thankful they were for Asha for Education's work was really motivating.

Photos of the 5 centers:

(1) Thandarai Center





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(2) Thandarai Puducherri



1



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(3) Kuudaloor





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(4) Mathur Center





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(5) Vilankadu Center





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