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Site visit report of 2 NonFormal Education (night schools for school going children) run by FORWARD in Kanchipuram district on July 30 2007 by Meera Sitharam.

Background.

While I had been exposed to discussion about FORWARD at the Asha meetings in Gainesville, I had not actively participated in decision making and I am not currently the steward for the project, (although I am now on the project team after the site visit).

However, since I happened to be in Chennai, I volunteered to make a FORWARD site visit. Due to some miscommunication, Ms. Shiamalababy was out of town on the day of my visit, however, she graciously requested the FORWARD staff member Miss Shantha - who is a new recruit to FORWARD and has a Masters degree in Social work and who was in charge in her absence -to show me around. Since my visit was in some sense unexpected, they had to no time to "prepare," which, in my view, was an advantage.

I am grateful for transportation (car and driver) provided to me by Bharatidasan university for this site visit. I had given 6 hours of lectures to their computer science graduate students back in Trichy and as honorarium, they had graciously volunteered to take care of my transportation in Chennai during my short 1 day stay there before I flew back to the States.

Accompanying me during my visit were my 2 kids, 7 and 4 years old. Accompanying me also was Mr. Kumar, a family friend, who grew up in a village near Trichy.

East Tambaram office of FORWARD (Forum for Womens' Rights and Development):
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At around 4:30 pm, we first went to FORWARD's 2-room office in East Tambaram where over a cup of tea and biscuits, we heard about FORWARD's various activities from Miss Shantha mentioned above. Another staff member Miss Selvi was also present, who is the technician who apparently takes care of the computer and communications for FORWARD.

A quick summary of their activities: FORWARD began around 1990, I believe, by Ms. Mathuram Shiamalababy, for helping women who have been mistreated. The initial push came from Ms. Shiamalababy's own experiences. From this they moved on to being a generally dalit (mostly rural, but not entirely) womens' empowerment organization, offering them employment training, health service support, advice for starting self-help groups, and just sisterhood among other things. Their East Tambaram office directly serves the local community in this respect and it also serves as the remote office for all other FORWARD activities at other Kanchipuram village communities (see next Para).

FORWARD have further diversified to other related activities such as: holding these NFE's (specifically night schools for children at 12 villages); helping Dalit people with land and property rights; relief work after the Tsunami (since many of the villages where

they operate are coastal villages), and health services. They have a network of social workers (all women, from what I could see), who are in close contact with the communities they serve, since they are often recruited from those communities. Their constituents essentially hear about them and approach them via word-of-mouth. These were all very positive and encouraging signs.

FORWORD's various activities appear to be supported from other funding sources as well. They have a number of staff steadily in FORWORD's own employ (10 women, I believe correct number?), in addition to various other helpers, teachers etc. who may be temporarily paid on a project-by-project basis. For example, they are prominent project partners of Chethana www.chethana.org, an organization under the umbrella of the Presbyterian Hunger Program's <http://www.pcusa.org/hunger/> Global solidarity network <http://www.sacpresby.org/jhah/part-india.html>. Chetana's direct sister organization in the US is the Sacramento Presbytery family of churches. However, Chethana's own partner composition consists not only of Christian religious organizations, but also secular, grassroots organizations such as FORWORD.

Accompanied by Miss Selvi we first drove to Madambakkam village and then to Kuthanoor village in the cluster of villages about 20 km away from the East Tambaram office.

Madambakkam Village Night school.

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We arrived there around 5:30pm, I believe. The schools only start functioning around then. One social worker Miss Selvi who appeared to be on FORWORD's regular staff (not sure?) – and seemed to coordinate several of FORWORD's night schools in that cluster of villages was waiting for us along with 2 teachers and the children, ofcourse. There were about 25-30 children up to 8th grade. The school is held on the front (paved) verandah of a pukka building.

There were 3 more older kids who were in 11th/12th grades who had just come to visit and who made requests for scholarships. See below.

The children were cheerful and I could immediately see that the regular, daily meeting of this community of peers and teachers would reinforce and support the kids' studies and would do a great deal towards keeping the kids in school, beyond any difficult circumstances at home. We enjoyed a savory snack, very successfully made by a women's self-help group near Perambalur, which I had brought along. These snacks had "made their name" for their consistent taste and quality and were now in high demand, being distributed at all kinds of retail outlets in Tiruchi and Perambalur.

I asked the children what their favorite subjects in school were and nearly 2/3 answered "Tamil." A few said "Science," and some of those wanted to become astronauts (obviously). One kid said "Math," so we posed two recreational math problems that

had appeared in the Children's section of the Hindu newspaper sometime that week. My 7 year old, who had spent about 1 hr solving one of them, was proud to present the solution, but the second problem was left unanswered (the little girl, 4th grader, I believe, said she would email me when she found the answer).

Special Weekend education rotation program

The teachers told me additionally about the special program that they are running on weekends. In rotation, each weekend is devoted to various subjects such as "nature and environment" "civics" "children's parliament" etc. This appeared to me to be a progressive idea in order to get the children use their intellect not just towards unmotivated, somewhat meaningless "rote" learning as is commonly done in Indian schools today, but rather towards keen observation and questioning of their own daily lives and circumstances and surroundings; resourcefully addressing their own immediate social and environmental issues, learning to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Requests and questions

The 3 children (Ezhilarasi, R. Prabhu, XXXX) in 11th/12th grade wished to know if they could receive scholarship support, also if they decided to go to college.

Apparently Miss Geetha, the local teacher, owns the building whose verandah is used for the school. They apparently pay a nominal amount for maintenance, electricity etc.

Kuthanoor Village Night school.

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It was just about a 10 minute drive away from Madambakkam village. We got there around 6:30 and it was already quite dark. The street lights were not working and since it was just dusk, the mosquito swarms were vicious (I did hear Dengue and Chikkan Guniya mentioned by a couple of kids there). We parked directly on the road between 2 rows of thatched huts. The school was being conducted by a 40 watt light coming from one of these huts. I was told that the street lights were always a problem, so FORWARD had purchased a flash light to be connected to pukka houses in the village (I saw only 3-4), and they would take turns providing electricity for the school. But apparently the scheme was not working.

This bleak picture was considerably lightened by the smiles and bright-eyed enthusiasm and cheer of the children and their teacher Miss Megala and another social worker Miss Bavani who also appears to be on the FORWARD staff. These children were in general older than those at Madambakkam village. Many were in 9th and 10th grades. They were also bolder and more outgoing. I could again see how this type of daily meeting of peers and supporting teachers would help instill confidence in these kids, help them stay in school despite potentially difficult circumstances at home.

These kids were also highly engaged by the "special weekend program" mentioned above. They told me about saplings that they had planted as part of

the environmental component of the program. We also talked about organic farming (they knew about cows and manure since there were many cows in the village). We also talked about biodegradable and nonbiodegradable garbage and came down to the usage of plastic wrapping material. They asked me what I did with it, at which time we went into a discussion about buying locally grown food, sold in bulk, or at a farmers market, with minimal need for packaging. One of the children was eager to show me how well he could dance (all the other children and teacher were all praise for his dancing and acting skills), but since we did not have the required cassette, we had to forgo a performance, which was a pity.

Requests:

The kids wanted funding to have an occasional picnic to the beach or other fun places. They also wanted funding for sports/exercise material (like balls/bats/nets etc.) and whether they could use the night-school meeting time one day a week for playing games.

We then had to leave, and all 3 social workers Misses Shantha, Selvi and Bavani all squeezed into the car with us and were dropped off on the way at around 8pm.

Concern:

I think the lack of street lights in Kuthanoor village are a prime candidate for an RTI application. If FORWARD agrees to it, we can and should make the application from here. It is not clear if the EB or the panchayat is to blame in this case. I am not sure how activist FORWARD is in dealing with government departments and panchayats.