



*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

FORWORD SITE VISIT REPORT: A SYNOPSIS

This is a short article on the site visit as documented by the site visitor, Dr. Sitharam. Detailed information can be got from the site visit report. Please contact Dr. Sitharam at sitharam AT cise DOT ufl DOT edu for more information.

I visited 7 village night schools (3 clusters) in the Mathuranthakam group on 13th. It was exhausting but totally worth it.

All the night schools are essential and are doing as best as they can. The govt school standards in atleast 2 of the clusters appeared surprisingly good (lower grades knew about ABL and liked it), the village community seemed involved in actively observing what the schools do and in holding them to account the best they could -- nevertheless the teacher/student ratio was bad and the teacher quality appeared to be transient, patchy and unreliable.

The villagers are almost all essentially landless laborers and their livelihood is on the brink because the land they work may any day be sold for huge prices (Chennai land costs more than NY today). So often, they choose to find alternative employment as construction workers, or even sex workers. The small patta that they might own, they sell off to start building a pukka house, for instance, and are unable to finish the construction often. The farmers they work for are also under pressure because they are not super rich and cannot afford to pay wages that compete with what construction or other outside work pays. So the land owning farmers have a high incentive to sell the land and leave. NREGA is under effect, but completely corrupted (unlike in Perambalur where I made 2 more site visits).

The upper middle class and rich in Chennai are flush with cash, and yet anxious about the overall economic situation. With inflation at 12.44% (highest in 20 years) the stock market very low and long-term interest rates not that high either, people are stuffing their money into land. Even remote and relatively undeveloped places like Kolli hills are swarming with Chennai buyers. So you can imagine how it is in the farmland close to Chennai.

Although there are many downright illegal and many unethical-loophole practices going on related to land sale, just the plain economic pressure caused by high land prices puts these communities on the brink, even if all transactions were in fact above board. Tough and complex situation all round with many interdependent factors to be considered.

But in the middle of this bleakness, there was frantic preparation at the night schools for the Aug 15 show, two 8th grade girls at one night school performed a traditional



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Karagam folk dance for me, which was surprising amid the tyranny of Kollywood hip-hop; One of the night school teachers is a BA in Tamil lit and one of the kids had written a surprisingly good Tamil poem; the Koothu festivals of the Tamil month of Adi were in full swing; and in one of the villages, catchy "Parai" drumming announced that a girl had attained puberty. So the vitality and self-esteem of these villages hasn't been snuffed out.

More in my official site visit report.