



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: India

Bangalore, India: Echoing compassion again and again

I came to India for two reasons; to examine tsunami affected areas and visit projects. Some we had funded last year. Many were newly submitted grant proposals to Ananda Foundation. Philanthropy and constructive grant making is an interesting field. Sometimes I feel that once you enter the web of humanity, you begin to find other threads that you didn't know existed before.

The bustling computer technology center of South India is Bangalore, in Karnataka state. Within the boundaries of a nouveau riche big city, there are many pockets of poverty - - and inspiration. The Vagdevi Center, a special school for communication- impaired children.

Mrs. Shanta Radhakrishna, a speech and language pathologist is the headmistress of the school. A tough, no-nonsense woman who has been working with the deaf for more than thirty years, Shanta has created a revolutionary program; many of the students –even those with multiple disabilities, are taught simultaneously with their parents. Using a holistic approach, their parents were being taught how to understand their children's needs and communicate with them. The boys and girls were studying in two languages; their mother tongue, Kannada, and also in English.

It was a joy to visit these children. Each child had been fitted with a hearing aid. They sat in rows reciting their lessons with the head teacher. It took a long time to speak. They worked hard at stretching their mouths to make themselves understood. As they slowly sounded out each guttural word, the head teacher scrutinized their performance. She would not allow them to give up. She encouraged them to speak with their hands and to keep sounding things out.

As a visitor, I was asked such questions as “Where are you from? Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are you married? What is your name? The children were filled with glee that I was able to understand them!

Then it was my turn. I asked the children: What is your favorite color? What is your favorite animal? What is your favorite school subject? What do you want to be when you grow up? I had brought Haripriya, one of my best friends in Bangalore. Behind her smile—I could tell she was as moved as was..

We toured the U-shaped facility with its tall ceilings, white washed walls, and open space. I felt thankful for people in this world like Shanta Radhakrishnan. She is a stern woman but echoes with compassion. She did not want society to feel pity for the children that were considered “slow.” She was determined to have them prove to themselves and rest of the world that they were just as capable as any other child and that their learning took time and a creative learning method.

I walked around the facility. There was a room with microphones in which the children’s sounds could be amplified. There was a sound proof room for conducting hearing tests. There was another special room equipped with a mirror to enable the children to visually see themselves talking and making sounds. I sat there and watched as Mrs. Radhakrishna asked an autistic boy to arrange some mathematic cards on a table. She had a conversation with him while he was performing the task. Mrs. Radhakrishna’s concern was that the children would get left behind in society. She is dedicated to giving them a chance.