

" Visits to Sewa Projects by Well Wishers"

My family and I have been vacationing in India for the past few weeks. Last week, we went to Vrindavan, and there, we had the opportunity to visit a Sewa project- Vatsalya Gram. Vatsalya Gram (Village of Motherly Love) is a unique project that was taken up by Didi Ma Sadhvi Ritambhara.

Namaste,

In Bharat, orphans and widows are both in very miserable conditions. Didi Ma's idea is to combine these two groups and create a family. By doing this, the orphans, who are deprived of family and love, will get a mother's lap. And widows and neglected women, who have no one in the world, will get children to love and take care of. About 10 years ago, Didi Ma led the efforts to construct an ashram where these "Vatsalya Parivars" can live. Each family consists of a mother, an aunt, a grandmother, and 6-7 kids. After hearing about Didi Ma last year, I was very interested in seeing Vatsalya Gram.

As soon as we entered the Vatsalya Gram, we knew right away that this place was unique. There was a small road leading to the Main Building, and this road was decorated on both sides with dozens of Bhagwa Dhwaj. In front of us, we could see a huge golden murti of Bharat Mata. The roads were very neat and nicely paved—it was such a contrast to the normal disorganized streets of Vrindavan! As soon as we entered the main building, we were immediately welcomed by the karyakartas there. Kalyani ji, the caretaker, gave us a brief overview of Vatsalya Gram. Then a few karyakartas gave us a tour of the place.

The Vatsalya Gram was huge; it was literally a village in itself. We first saw the section where the houses were located. Surrounding the houses were beautiful gardens, playgrounds, and open areas where all the children played after school. The entire place was extremely organized and clean. There was not a single piece of litter or dirt anywhere. The houses were very nice and spacious; they were complete with bedrooms, a mandir, kitchen, living room, dining room, and courtyard. (My cousin commented that the Vatsalya Gram houses actually seemed better than his own house.) Outside each home, there was a Tulsi plant. The family that we visited was the largest family of the entire Vatsalya Gram. There were 11 kids from the age of two months to thirteen years. Since we were there during the daytime, the older kids were in school, but we got to see the younger ones. The children were adorable and it was so nice talking to them and playing with them. They also learned the same shlokas and sanskars that we learn in Shakha. It felt really satisfying seeing the kids and the women so happy and content. It was so different from orphanages and widow homes; we could literally see the family bonds and motherly love that was present in the home. I could not even perceive them as orphans or widows. It did not seem as though they were deprived of anything.

We then visited the Secondary School. (This school is actually still in construction. For now, all the children are attending the Primary School.) We could really tell how powerful Vatsalya Gram was when even the building contractor talked so lovingly about the project and the children. Outside the school, there was a large murti of Saraswati, so the kids could do Pranam to Saraswati before entering the school each morning. The building was extremely good. There were large classrooms, a library, computer labs, an auditorium, and much more. Outside the school, there was a soccer field, circular track, and various obstacle courses. Just like in Shakha, there is an emphasis on physical as well as mental strength. In addition to the academic subjects, the children also learn horseback riding, martial arts, etc.

The entire experience of visiting the Vatsalya Gram was very inspiring. It was a very powerful feeling knowing that if it were not for this project, the children and women would be suffering miserable lives either on the streets or in orphanages. The children are growing up to be strong Hindus and assets to the society. So far there are about 8-10 families living at Vatsalya Gram, but the project is still very new, and with everyone's help, the number is expected to grow to hundreds.

Aparna Garg
USA

**Chetan is a swayamsevak from Kapila Shakha,
Cupertino and visited Bharat for his summer vacation.
He has sent this report on his visit to Sewa Project in
Bangalore.....**

Namaste,

Hope all you Kishors are having fun during the summer

This email is a quick report on a visit I made to the slums of Bangalore.

I met Mohan Kumar ji, the Bangalore Nagar Karyavaaha, and we planned on seeing the projects of KSS (Keshava Seva Samithi). He explained to me (and my parents) about KSS. KSS is an organization devoted to helping the poor people of the many slums of Bharat. They conduct regular classes for children, teaching them school curriculum, geets, prayers, and more. They have Self-Help Groups for women, teaching them to earn and get their own money. They also have free health checkups and free distribution of eye-glasses to the poor. We watched a 10 minute VCD about their efforts and work. At the end, we decided that TV can't be better than the real thing, so Mohan ji arranged for a trip the next Saturday.

We (my mom, my grandpa, Mohan ji and I) set out in a Tempo Traveler (the auto rickshaw was too small) for a two hour long drive to the other side of the city. When we got there, we stretched our legs and looked around. The "slum" was pretty much a mini city! They had houses, temples, shops, hair salons, all right there! The entrance to the slum was a small gap between two stores. As we walked through the slum, we saw kids running around, people playing carom, mothers washing their kids. Animals of all kinds, dogs, goats, sheep, chickens, cows. One characteristic of this small city was the Christian influence. Every two blocks had a small church with an idol of Mother Mary holding Baby Jesus.

The guide from KSS led us to a temple in the heart of the slum where the children's classes took place. As we entered the temple, the entire group of fifty or so kids welcomed us in unison with "Namaste!". We sat down, and the KSS teacher asked them to begin with a prayer. One thing that caught our attention was their discipline. The kids, ages ranging from 5-9 years, closed their eyes and didn't open them until the end of the prayer. Almost none of them talked while the class was going on. They all listened beautifully to their teacher.

After the prayer, they sang some songs in Kannada. Then, my mom urged me to conduct some games for the children. Nothing works as well with children as games, and they all loved "Krishna Says..." (similar to "Simon Says") and "Pass the Electricity". After a few ear-shattering "Jai Ho! Vijay Ho!"s and Naras, we got up to leave. As we walked out the door, the children waved us goodbye and said "Namaste" together.

We visited four more slums with similar experiences (they all loved the games). We appreciated the hard work being done by KSS. All in all, we had a great time.

Detailed visit report:

First we visited the Samskar Kendras of Vivek Nagar / Austine Town of Bangalore North East Area.

The first Kendra we visited was at Tulakattamma Temple in the slum called Cement Line where children from 2 Kendras had assembled. That was being run by our Sevavratini Smt. Bhuvaneshwari. Then we visited the Kendra in the Slum called Thimmarayappa Garden. The venue was the Muneshwar Temple, where we met the children from 2 Kendras.

Later we went to the Ramamurthy Nagar, which is in Bangalore North area. That area has more than 10,000 huts.

First we visited the Ambedkar colony. We visited 2 Kendras there out of 6 Kendras.

Then we walked a little distance through the slum and visited a Kendra in the

Vijinapura slum (in which 20% of students include Christians and Muslims).

Chetan Surpur, Cupertino

"You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

Rishi Aurobindo says " The country, whose young men are imbued with the *glory of the past, the pain of the present and dreams of the future, always moves on the path of progress.*"