

Vidya News

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Vidya is a registered charity which is raising funds for the education and training of children and students from disadvantaged communities in India. We are currently supporting projects at two charities: Aseema in Mumbai and NAWA in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu. For more information on Vidya's work, please e-mail ramesh@vidya.org.uk or visit our website at www.vidya.org.uk.

Two Days at VAMS: 19/20 February 2004

First on tarmac, then on cart tracks, we drove, with tea plantations gradually giving way to increasingly dense forest. It was the second day of our visit and we were travelling towards the villages where some of the VAMS children come from.

That morning we had piled into a four wheel drive with one of the NAWA field doctors, three student social workers on placement from the Madras School of Social Work and a driver. We drove from Kotagiri, where the school sits on the hillside overlooking a tea plantation, up and up and round and round the Nilgiri hills to visit the Bromley Hospital and crèche in Arayure, and then on to the Dr. Narasimhan Hospital and crèche in Kolikarai, the village beyond.

Vidya Fundraising Dinner

To celebrate Diwali and the Indian New Year, we will be hosting a fundraising dinner from 7.30pm on **Tuesday 16 November** at Rasa, a Keralan (Indian) restaurant in Central London. A range of mouthwatering dishes will be on offer and our patron, Edward Davey, MP, will also be attending. The dinner costs £20 and places are limited, so please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk) as soon as possible if you would like to come.

To reach the village, we parked the car and climbed up a hillside to the single street lined on either side with ten or so concrete block two-roomed government-supplied houses. The children's parents were all away working in the plantations and the only one there to greet us shyly was a grandmother holding a baby. She showed us into her house, where the furnishing consisted of a pile of cooking pots and some rolled mats.

It was hard to believe that some of the children whom we had seen the previous day, smart in their monogrammed T-shirts and ties and looking much as though they had come from comfortable semis in a leafy suburban neighbourhood, had in fact climbed down the hill from the little village, packed tight into the four-wheel drive and swerved round bends for over an hour to reach the school. (The driver told me that on one such drive a tiger had come out of the trees – but, luckily, had just crossed to the other side of the track!) Some children are collected from villages even further away – and returned there at the end of the day.



Children in Standard II at VAMS

On the first day, we were given a royal welcome, with gymnastics on the sandy playground, a dancing display with paper flower garlands and speeches by two children

from the top class. In the crowded classrooms the children sit in rows and either respond to questions from the teacher standing at the blackboard, or work at their numerous, but old-fashioned workbooks. Their English is learned by rote, and even the oldest children found difficulty in holding simple conversations with us. They desperately wanted to talk - and so did we! They crowded round at us at every opportunity and we all tried hard to communicate.

They are lively but well behaved. The daily routines of assembly in the playground, lining up to be given cups of milk at break time, and washing of hands before they eat lunch from their tiffin boxes, have all been well established. But it would be good to see them doing more practical work, using mathematical apparatus, making conversation, painting and modelling, and, especially the youngest ones, playing outside with large apparatus – learning by doing and *enjoying* themselves!

Given the backgrounds of the children and the resources available, the school has started fairly well. However, the children need playground equipment; they need materials for art and craft work; they need mathematical apparatus; and they need better workbooks more relevant to their lives and to where they live. With additional funds to buy some of these things, the quality of their education could definitely be improved.

Carol Donoghue

Visit to Aseema: March 2004

Aseema continues to go from strength to strength. After starting with just 18 children seven years ago, its Centre for Street Children now supports about 90 street and slum children. In addition, since Aseema ‘adopted’ the Pali-Chimbai municipal school two years ago, attendance there has increased from 110 to 190. Moreover, lunch is now provided for all of these children and their weight has improved as a result.

We spent a day visiting both the school and Aseema’s Montessori Centre, which is located on the same site. In the school, Aseema provides three of the five teachers and also volunteer art and yoga teachers. The best work was seen in the Montessori Centre where pupils were working collaboratively using construction materials or on activities such as memory games and jigsaws. This led to a calm and productive atmosphere. The class in Standard III was small and able to perform various activities such as reciting poems and nursery rhymes or chanting tables. Often it was the same children involved with a few just watching; however, two of the weaker boys were asked to recite the 2-times table (and were able to do so!). The (Aseema) teacher, who had retired from teaching in a private school, seemed aware of the range of ability in the class and noted that about half had made good progress over the year, a few had made reasonable progress, whilst about a quarter had made limited progress. From our visits to the other classes with Aseema teachers, it seems likely that this pattern is repeated throughout the school.



Children at Aseema’s Montessori Centre

During the day, we also met the BMC (municipal) educational officer, teachers and volunteers, as well as the social worker. The educational officer noted that there was a shortage of teachers in the school and was very pleased at Aseema's support. He felt that standards had improved since Aseema became involved, with a particular improvement in the pupils’ ability to communicate in English.

The (Vidya funded) social worker has produced detailed case studies of all the pupils at the school and the Centre for Street Children. These follow a consistent format and include a range of useful details: name and age; parents' background, education and occupation; family income; number of years in house; type of house and whether it has access to water and electricity; language spoken; religion; and, importantly, attendance rate. This is followed by specific observations about the child and his or her health, attitudes and demeanour. These case studies give a very useful background on each child and provide helpful information for the teachers. Indeed, all of the teachers spoke positively about the work of the social worker, feeling that both the attendance and behaviour of pupils had improved as a result of her work.

We also met two external social workers from Muskaan who had been asked by Aseema to undertake a study of the pupils and make suggestions for improvement. The study found that the difficult home backgrounds of the pupils made it more difficult to teach them, particularly when unforeseen events happened at home – it was observed that this can sometimes result in aggressive behaviour which the teachers cannot always cope with. The social workers ran open counselling sessions and felt that such sessions should be offered on a weekly basis. In addition, they suggested that a residential camp would be beneficial to help pupils acquire social and life skills. The need for physical and sporting activities was also highlighted. The report from

Muskaan also commented on the valuable role played by the internal social worker, making the following observations: 'strong rapport established with some of the children... not the stereotype of a teacher.... bridged gap between Aseema and parents....'.

It was extremely pleasing to see that everyone we spoke to was very positive about the social worker. On the basis of this, Vidya has decided to support the post for at least another year. We were also very excited to hear from Dilbur Parakh, chair of Aseema, that the organisation is currently developing a business plan with Wharton Business School and the S.P. Jain Institute of Management so that its educational activities can be supported from the sale of products based on the artwork of the children. Those of you who have purchased Aseema greetings cards from Vidya will know that this work is fantastic – it is a pity that shipping costs make it difficult for us to sell the full range of products (which include coasters, trivets, paper weights, mugs, key chains, bookends, trays, and even small tables!). The long-run aim is to make the charity entirely self-sustaining from product sales. If this goal could be attained, it would be a tremendous achievement since Aseema would probably be one of the first self-sustaining NGOs in India.

Ramesh Kapadia and Sujit Kapadia

Visit to NAWA: 23-26 March 2004

I spent a fascinating four days in Kotagiri, visiting the school, talking to children and teachers, and meeting NAWA's committee members. Very good progress is being made in many areas, although much remains to be done.

On the first day, I arrived in the middle of the afternoon and just managed to see the children at the end of school. I stayed in the bungalow owned by Mrs Rosaleen Mulji: she kindly makes the bungalow available to guests of NAWA. It is a lovely bungalow, and I was very well looked after with a plentiful supply of south Indian food!

Aseema Greetings Cards For Sale

Beautiful greetings cards based on the art work of children at Aseema's Centre for Street Children are still available for sale through The Vidya Trust. Ideal for Christmas, these cards cost just £4 for a pack of twelve, with postage and packaging costing an additional 60p per pack. The designs may be viewed on the Vidya website at www.vidya.org.uk/projects/aseema/cards.htm. If you would like to purchase any cards, please e-mail cards@vidya.org.uk.

On the next day, the school had its Annual Day, to which parents are invited to watch their children put on a display. I was honoured to be the Chief Guest and made a short speech. The pupils were able to perform confidently in public during the celebrations. There were many dances and songs, both in English and Tamil. An imaginative play was performed showing life in a village. Many parents attended and enjoyed the show.

The school is making very good use of the house and buildings left to NAWA by Victoria Armstrong. It has 65 children, half of whom are girls, and excluding four children who appear to have left, attendance is very good at over 95%. Apart from the head, the school employs four teachers, three helpers, and two drivers. All the teachers who are appointed have a commitment to Adivasi (tribal) children.

During the visit, I observed all four classes two or three times during the day. Children in all standards study English, Tamil, mathematics, art, and PE, with the older children covering a few additional subjects as well. There is a basic outline of the curriculum for all classes, using Tamil Nadu state government guidelines.

In English, most pupils know the alphabet. In Standard I passages are read out aloud as a class but it often seems as if the children do not really understand what they are saying. In Standard II, pupils are able to read stories more easily but even though they are developing their comprehension of the ideas, this is still generally a weak aspect of their work. Mathematics in most classes involved counting numbers up or down, with 3-digit numbers and subtraction for Standard II. This was the best class, with the newest teacher, who had a more innovative and interactive approach with the children. The youngest class was chanting names for numbers in English. It was also good to see work in science – this was based on a textbook and seemed a little dry. Unfortunately, it was rather more difficult for me to assess the quality of the Tamil lessons!

The behaviour of all the children is exemplary. Pupils are also well dressed, especially given the nature of their background, and very polite.

An exciting element of the trip was to ride on the van donated by Vidya to transport children to the school each day. A picture of the van is shown; it is specially designed to be able to cope with the hilly terrain and can seat up to 35 children. It is a long day for some children - over eight hours including travel. For many children, the road journey takes over an hour; some of these children have a further 30 minute walk home. Yet they still come regularly and their parents recognise the value of education.



I also had productive meetings with the NAWA committee, president, project manager, and treasurer. The Committee formally thanked Vidya for its support, and all of the donors who sponsor children. I discussed a range of issues such as finance, the School Board, transport and staff costs, and the long term viability of the school.

Ramesh Kapadia

Trustees and Support Committee for Vidya

Are you interested in helping Vidya with its work? We are seeking more trustees and would also like to establish a support committee to help with fundraising and other activities. If you are interested, please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk).