

Vidya News

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Vidya is a U.K. registered charity (number 1084436) which raises funds for the education and training of children from disadvantaged communities in India. We currently support projects at two charities: Aseema in Mumbai (Bombay) and NAWA in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu. For more information on Vidya's work, please e-mail ramesh@vidya.org.uk or visit www.vidya.org.uk.

New Rural Education Projects in Conjunction with Aseema

As many of you will know, Aseema has been providing education for children from the streets and slums of Mumbai and campaigning for children's rights for the past ten years. Its Centre for Street Children is still going from strength to strength: the Montessori centre continues to work with pre-primary children, while two new classes were established last year to prepare slightly older children for entry into formal schools. Its more recent adoption of the Pali-Chimbai Municipal School has also been highly successful: enrolment has almost doubled from 127 to 244 in the space of just four years, partly thanks to the work of the Vidya supported educational social worker. In addition, the toilets and entire drainage system have been repaired, and some of the buildings are now in the process of being improved. Aseema's 2004-2005 Activities Report, which is available on Vidya's website, contains further details about their recent work.



Children at Aseema

Aseema now wishes to expand its work further by establishing a rural education project in Igatpuri, Maharashtra. Schooling provision is currently very limited in this area and many children are unable to attend due to the distances involved. Moreover, a recent survey conducted by Aseema found that parents feel that the two schools which do exist are not functioning effectively due to poor teaching. In addition to these problems, many young people in the villages are unemployed or underemployed and can only obtain farming work during the monsoon season and occasional construction work at other times.

The long term goal of Aseema is to establish a residential-cum-day rural education centre in Igatpuri. However, in the short term, it would like to fund an individual to train the existing teachers in the Anganwadis (rural schools) to provide better and more consistent education. In addition, it would like to run vocational training courses (possibly related to agriculture or animal rearing) for young people in the villages to improve their employment prospects. Together, these projects will help to

Vidya Fundraising Dinner

To celebrate Diwali and the Indian New Year, we will be holding our second annual fundraising dinner from 7.30pm on **Thursday 10 November**. As last year, this will be at Rasa, a Keralan (Indian) restaurant just off Oxford Street in Central London. A range of mouthwatering dishes will be on offer and our patron, Edward Davey, MP, will be attending. Donations of £20+ are requested for the dinner and places are limited, so please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk) as soon as possible if you would like to attend.

empower these impoverished communities, providing young children with a better education, and enabling young individuals who have unfortunately missed out on a full school education to have the possibility of obtaining better and more secure employment.

Vidya would like to support these exciting new projects and has set an initial target of raising £6,000 to contribute towards the costs. Approximately half of this sum is intended to fund the short-term projects; the remainder is intended to partially fund the establishment of the proposed rural education centre (Aseema is also raising funds for this centre from other donors). Thanks to generous donations from the Madeline Mabey Trust and Balliol College, Oxford University, we have already raised £2,500, thus enabling Aseema to start work on the short-term projects in the near future. We hope to raise the remainder by the end of 2006 and most of the funds raised from this year's annual fundraising dinner will be channelled in this direction.

Apart from providing funding, Vidya will monitor progress via regular reports to be sent at three month intervals. In the longer term, once the rural education centre is fully established, there will probably also be a visit (combined with a visit to the Centre in Mumbai) to evaluate the work and offer support and suggestions for improvement.

Visit to VAMS: February 2005

It was fun riding the train from Bangalore to Coimbatore, and then driving up the *ghat* roads to Kotagiri. It was nicer to walk down the steep slope towards the VAM School nestled into a picturesque wooded hillside. The cool clean air, and the lush green surroundings would be the envy of city schools. The landscape and the old fashioned cottages housing the school lent themselves to creating a safe and inviting environment for the young learners.

Shri Shanmugam, the Head of the School, escorted me around his domain, justifiably

proud of his school and enthusiastic about his plans for expanding to other areas. The 37 boys and 33 girls seemed lively, well behaved and friendly. It was especially heartening for me to see that they were enjoying themselves because most of the children enrolled here are from Tribal (*Adivasi*) families that are often left out of the formal learning system we call schools. It also brought home to me the importance of this little nook in the hills where the dreams of one woman were being realised. In making an investment in this school, her friends and others who support The Vidya Trust are providing an education to children who would otherwise have had no school to go to.

Visiting the cosy classrooms with the Head was doubly gratifying as these first generation learners seemed eager to show us what they had learnt. They spoke to us in their native tongues, numbering over six dialects and languages in this tiny school, attesting to the diversity that is India. One wished that the teachers did not always insist that the kids speak only in English. But perhaps speaking just one common language may be a better way to build bonds within this diverse student body.



Children at VAMS

The students' enthusiasm for showing us what they had learnt contrasted with the behaviour of 'obedient' children I had seen elsewhere. The teachers seemed interested in their work and willing to learn, but they often seemed to ignore local knowledge, traditions and stories in favour of textbook information. They also seemed to ignore, like many peoples all over

the world, the uniqueness and beauty of their own natural environment. This is certainly not an Adivasi trait.

When school finished for the day, I noticed a spanking new minivan and a not so smart jeep, literally bursting with little faces, setting off to their homes in remote hamlets and villages. Without sounding like an apologist for government indifference and ineptitude, one can see how it may be difficult for even a well intentioned government to deliver on its promise of free and compulsory primary education for all children. While a lower primary school should be provided within one kilometre of every habitation, the low population densities in some areas do not allow this to happen in practice. So, even though transportation costs comprise almost 40 percent of the total running costs of the school, one cannot advocate removing this provision: by providing transportation to its students, this school is fulfilling an important need of the most marginalised children in India.

It seems that one cannot bid goodbye to a school in India without it becoming an 'event'. The teachers at VAMS did not disappoint – they organised a smart drill and some full throated singing for my afternoon session with them.

Overall, despite all of the issues faced by the Board, things on the ground generally seem to be going well. The clearest indication to me of this was when I met a couple of non-Adivasi fee-paying parents who seemed to think very highly of the quality of education that their children were getting. After this good start, it is very important that these standards are maintained and improved upon further. It is hard to tell what the future will hold for the school, but between the Board and Shri Vijayakumar, the Project Manager of NAWA, it will hopefully go from strength to strength.

Cavery Bopaiah

Update on Projects at Aseema

Vidya continues to support an educational social worker at Aseema. We are also using some of the proceeds from last year's fundraising events to provide nutritious lunchtime meals (which include fruit) for all of the children during the 2005-2006 academic year, which began in June. In addition, we are currently in the process of establishing the Prashant H. Fadia library, which will initially consist primarily of maths and art books.

Aseema Exhibition at The Harmony Show, Mumbai



Art by a Child at Aseema's Centre

Aseema was again one of the main charities supported by the Harmony show, a prestigious art exhibition run by Tina Ambani and held at the World Trade Centre in Mumbai. It was a glamorous affair, opening on Friday 1 April, with many famous Indian personalities attending, including Amitabh Bachchan and Jaya Bhaduri. Many famous Indian artists were exhibiting and there was also a display of artwork by children from Aseema's Centre.

Support Committee for Vidya

Are you interested in helping Vidya with its work? If you would like to join a support committee to help with our activities, please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk).

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