

Vidya News

www.vidya.org.uk

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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.

Chairman's Update on Progress

Welcome to the annual newsletter, where there is much to report. Vidya, which was only founded five years ago, has recently been awarded two large grants to further its work. Projects with Aseema and NAWA are now well established, with reports and first-hand experience indicating that progress over the past year has been good.

At the end of 2005, Vidya made a donation to Aseema to establish an art and mathematics library for street and slum children in Bandra, Mumbai. This was given in memory of a man from the area who tragically died the previous summer. Through Aseema, we also supported a new project to provide better teaching aids and train teachers in rural schools near Igatpuri. Meanwhile, we continue to fund an educational social worker and provide lunchtime meals for all of the children supported by Aseema.

We also continue to send funding to NAWA for the Victoria Armstrong Memorial School (VAMS) for Adivasis (tribal children). The school now serves over 100 pupils and it has recently purchased additional land so that it can build more classrooms and other facilities.

Over the year, Vidya has supported two evaluation visits. Carol Donoghue spent a week with Aseema finding out more about existing work and giving advice relating to their proposed rural education centre at Igatpuri. An Indian educationalist, Professor Sudhakar Agarkar, who works at the world-renowned Tata Institute for Fundamental Research, assessed the progress of VAMS. Both their reports highlighted the good quality

work being done, and provided valuable advice and suggestions for improvement.



Children at VAMS

As a result of the first visit, Vidya applied to the Wingate Foundation for a grant to support Aseema's celebrated art work and establish a Balvikas – a class to help prepare street children for school. The requested amount for these three year projects was given in full – over £12,000, which will clearly make a tremendous difference to Aseema's work. Earlier in the year, Vidya also received generous financial support from the Bank of England through a £3,000 Court Award – again, this will go a long way towards supporting both ongoing and new projects.

A sincere note of thanks is due to all our supporters who have enabled us to help with the education of so many children from disadvantaged communities in India. We plan to continue expanding our work, but at a gradual pace to ensure that we can continue to monitor progress carefully.

Ramesh Kapadia

Aseema's Children

Vidya has been supporting Aseema's work with street and slum children in Mumbai for several years. But what sort of community do these children really come from? To find out, I spent an afternoon of my week at Aseema visiting some of their homes with the Vidya funded social worker, Ashok Pawar. We went to an area of land reclaimed from the sea and lying under the flyover of a newly built motorway.

Stretching for about half a mile in densely packed rows were lean-tos made from any available materials – wood, plastic sheeting, bamboo, corrugated iron, and sometimes, to my horror, asbestos. None of them was bigger than ten by ten feet. Some of them had doors at the entrance, but others no more than a flap of sacking. Between the rows were narrow mud paths, paved here and there with a scattering of flat stones. In the monsoon, these paths must turn into rivulets, with water running through into the lean-tos. Dotted here and there were ramshackle shops selling bottles of highly coloured fizzy drinks, beer and sweetmeats. At the back of one row on the edge of the 'community' was a sluggish stream, full of discarded rubbish.



Mumbai Slums

Most of these homes pay for water from a common tap at the end of a row. Washing of clothes and people is done inside with buckets of water drawn from the tap. There is electricity, which has to be paid for, but it is cut off if the payments are not kept up. The Bombay Municipal Corporation authorises

some of the 'buildings', but not many. After a fire two years ago which burnt down 'unauthorised' homes, several families have had to resort to living in the open under tents made of plastic sheeting.

Running happily along the paths and playing on the black earth at the edge of the shanty town were the children whom I had met in the school. Some of them had changed out of their school uniforms, but some were still dressed incongruously in these surroundings in their tunics or smart shirts and ties. They greeted us delightedly and followed us around as we visited their homes.



Aseema's Children in their 'Community'

Ashok goes to the community two or three times per week. He checks up on absentee and sick children, follows up on non-payment of the minute monetary contributions required of parents, and makes sure that family situations have not changed since his last visit. He acts as a vital link between the school and the parents.

He certainly knew his way, directing me from one home to the next, around the maze of paths. He knocked or called through the sacking to the families inside. The father or mother peered out to see who the caller was, and we were immediately invited in, sometimes to see a father hastily dressing himself or a mother tidying things away. Our presence filled the space uncomfortably. There was almost no furniture – perhaps a bed or a table. Occasionally, there was an electric fan, which did little to lower the temperature. Sometimes there were mats on the mud floor. Food safes were hung from the roof, as were small hammocks for tiny babies.

I remember being invited to sit on a bed which a father jumped up from when we entered as it was the only place to sit down; a beautiful ten year old girl dressed in the Aseema uniform peering at herself in a broken mirror and trying to arrange her long hair while her mother talked to Ashok and helped her daughter at the same time; mothers holding babies in their arms, looking thin, drawn and exhausted.

Ashok and an Australian student, who had come as a volunteer to work at the school, have written case studies on each of the Aseema families. They convey the living conditions in the 'community' much more powerfully than I can.

There is, for instance, the case of Child A, five years old, with a brother who is six and another who is one and a half. Their mother is 24 and their father is 27. The father earns Rs. 3000 (approximately £35) per month as a company driver. I quote: "Three months ago the family's home was demolished by the BMC [Bombay Municipal Corporation]. Since then they have lived with their relatives in the same area. The house where they are staying is built from plastic and bamboo and the floor is mud. The house is unauthorised. There is a light and a fan and a TV in the house. There is a bed and a cupboard. The electricity had been disconnected...at the time of the visit the house was untidy. One plastic wall was open to the outside. The outside area is dirty...Child A is a little shy. His concentration level is low. At first he was active and wanted to do all the activities and was keen to finish them. But now

he takes quite long to complete work. He is not much interested in singing and dancing."

Child B is six years old. She has three sisters and a brother. Her grandmother lives with the family in a 'chawl' that measures 5 by 10 feet. "The roof is constructed from asbestos sheets, the walls are brick and the floor is coba. [There is] a fan in the house...their water [for which they pay about Rs. 400 per month] comes from a common tap...they have a ration card...they have no saving habit...The house is clean and neatly kept but the outside area is dirty...The father works as an auto driver and earns Rs. 4000 per month...the mother is at home and does household work. The house is rented for Rs. 500 per month."



Lunchtime at Aseema's Centre

Child C is two and a half years old. He has a brother who is three months old. His mother is 20 and his father is 25. "[The family] have no ration card. They have no election card. They have no saving habit. Child C does not converse much with his teachers and peers and his speech is not clear."

There are, of course, families where the father has not found work and spends his time, it seems, inside the home. There are cases where the husband drinks or takes drugs and beats his wife and children. Ashok reports that one wife admits that, when he has not been drinking, her husband "is kind to the children".

To return to the cheerful, well-ordered atmosphere of the school and to watch the children from these families sitting cross-

*****Vidya Fundraising Dinner*****

To celebrate Diwali and the Indian New Year, we will be holding our third annual fundraising dinner from 7.30pm on **Tuesday 7 November**. This will be held at Joy, an Indian restaurant in Surbiton. 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. Please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk) as soon as possible if you would like to attend.

legged on mats to eat their midday meal, or waving their hands in the air to answer a teacher's question in class, was a great relief. It was difficult to believe that they spent the rest of their day in the surroundings which I had just visited. Aseema provides them with stability, with loving care and with an education which will hopefully allow them to escape eventually from the extreme poverty which their parents are suffering.

Carol Donoughue

Observations from VAMS

Extracts from the report on the Victoria Armstrong Memorial School by Professor Sudhakar Agarkar

My first interaction with the children was during school assembly. The assembly included prayers and exercises and students did both the things well. All the students were well dressed in the school uniform supplied by the school.

I then tried to interact with the students in their respective classrooms. Most of the students have good handwriting. Their knowledge of plants and animals is good. Students of grade 2 had an excursion to Coimbatore zoo a few days ago and, when asked, they could tell the names of animals they had seen. They could even spell the names of the different animals kept in the zoo. There was enthusiasm among the students to come forward and write on the blackboard.

I tried to test the problem solving ability of the students by giving them mathematical problems. They could usually solve the problems without much difficulty. I noticed that some students were strong in mental calculations but found it difficult to solve problems formally. The problem posed in class

4 was: if I can walk 900 metres in 15 minutes, what is my average speed? Students had some difficulty in understanding the meaning of average. Once explained, the answer came eventually as 60 (without units), though they had difficulty in dividing 900 by 15 as they did not know the multiplication table of 15.



55 - 41 = ??: Maths at VAMS

Students in the school are bold. They are not afraid of strangers in the classroom. They came forward to tell whatever they knew and also presented a group song. Notably, many students can communicate in English and, in general, they spoke well. Overall, the school has now taken a good shape.

Stop Press!

Vidya was one of the official charities supported by Oxford University Student Union RAG during the 2005-6 academic year. We have just received a cheque for £1,666 from them to further our work.

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).

The Vidya Trust, c/o Ramesh Kapadia HMI, Alexandra House, 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6SE.

Trustees: Ramesh Kapadia, HMI; Carol Donoughue; Sujit Kapadia.

E-mail: ramesh@vidya.org.uk. Website: www.vidya.org.uk. Newsletter Editor: Sujit Kapadia (sujit@vidya.org.uk).