

Vidya News

www.vidya.org.uk

Issue 7

Spring 2009

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 work in three areas: the Victoria Armstrong Memorial School (VAMS) for tribal children in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu (in conjunction with NAWA); projects in conjunction with Aseema's Education Centres for Street and Underprivileged Children in Mumbai (Bombay); and a project to teach English to deprived children in Gujarat. For more information on Vidya's work, please e-mail ramesh@vidya.org.uk or visit www.vidya.org.uk.

New Project in Gujarat

Vidya has recently launched a new project to teach English to deprived girls in Gujarat in conjunction with Ahmedabad Jilla Samaj Kalyan Sangh (AJSKS). AJSKS has been working for over 50 years to give women and children social and financial security and provide them with greater opportunities. As part of their activities, they run a secondary school (M. M. Kanyavidyalay) in a village near to Ahmedabad, with 165 deprived girls from rural areas currently enrolled.

As India develops, good knowledge of English is becoming increasingly important in improving employment prospects after school – indeed, Vidya's projects with Aseema and NAWA both adopt English medium education primarily for this reason. But the girls graduating from M. M. Kanyavidyalay School have been held back until now by their inability to speak English.

To help address this issue, Vidya has started a small project to sponsor a teacher at the school to teach both spoken and written English. The English classes will supplement the normal curriculum, with each girl having three hours of lessons per week. Vidya is also supplying relevant materials, including textbooks and dictionaries. And, as with all of our projects, we will be monitoring the quality of education that the children receive to ensure that our support is making a genuine difference.

Sujit Kapadia

Educating Slumdog's Children

Many of you will have seen the wonderful performance of the young child stars in the Oscar-winning hit, *Slumdog Millionaire*. For two of those children though, the squalor of Mumbai's slums depicted in the film is their daily reality. But there is good news for Rubina and Azharuddin – the producers of the film have recently enrolled them in Aseema's school. Together with the hundreds of other slum children that Aseema educates, this should help ensure them a brighter future, even if they do not all go on to win "Who Wants to be a Millionaire"!

Sujit Kapadia

VAMS Opens New School Building

In October 2008, I spent five days at VAMS. On this, my second visit to the school, I could see that Victoria Armstrong's house (the main



The New School Building at VAMS

school building) was in great need of refurbishment and redecoration. Two years ago, when I was first there, the classrooms had been just about adequate for the numbers and ages of the children who came by bus each morning from tribal villages as far as 90 minutes away. But now there are 50 children in the lower kindergarten class and 30 in the upper kindergarten.

Because of the influx of pupils in the lower year groups, there was severe overcrowding, with little three and four year olds sitting crammed up against each other on long wooden benches. Meanwhile, the older children were seated in small, poorly lit classrooms where any display on the walls was curling up at the edges because of the damp.

Because it rained almost every day I was there, I could appreciate how impossible it was for the teachers to allow the children time to run and exercise outside in the playground in bad weather. When I was last there, I watched as they sat outside on the ground to eat their mid-day meal. But, this time, they crowded together in the classrooms, with the electricity failing intermittently, leaving the children in near darkness.

But there is good news! At one end of the playground there is an almost completed two-storey building! It has four large classrooms on each floor and a covered verandah which will be wide enough for the entire school to stand for an assembly in the open but out of the rain or sun. Vidya, with the help of your donations, has contributed to the cost of this much-needed development.

With the new building, it should be possible to divide up the lower kindergarten class into two groups of 25 and to give them better furniture and more resources. The upper kindergarten and Standards 1 to 4 will move into their new classrooms. The staff will have a staffroom, with their room also being used as a library. And the oldest children – in Standard 5 – who for the last few months have been sitting in a damp and dark outhouse at some distance from the bungalow, will move back into a

redesigned classroom in the old building. With time, it should hopefully also be possible to convert one or two of the small classrooms in the old building into practical rooms for science and cookery.

In another pleasing development which points towards the increasing success of the school, almost half of the youngest children are now not tribal; they come from families living in the outskirts of Kotagiri and are fee-paying. As well as helping to encourage integration between tribal and non-tribal communities, this provides a very useful income source for the school to support the tribal children – in the long-term, Vidya's vision is still for VAMS to be largely self-sustaining, with fee income from non-tribal children covering much of the costs of educating the tribal children.

All in all, there is the promise in this year, not only of a much more acceptable environment for these needy children, but also of a more exciting and stimulating approach to teaching and learning which the new space will encourage.

Carol Donoghue



Learning the Alphabet at VAMS

Report on Aseema's Balvikas

I visited Aseema in spring 2008 to evaluate the Balvikas for the Wingate Foundation which has generously supported the work. The Balvikas is a preparatory class for children before Standard I. It was established by Aseema to give a third year of pre-primary education to children who need it. The children are aged between the ages of 5½ and 7½, and work mostly on writing and language skills.

In 2007-8, the Balvikas had a roll of 29 children, most of whom had been through two years of Balwadi (kindergarten) with Aseema. Informal discussions with the teachers revealed the varied reasons for a third year of education, such as poor attendance or issues over family circumstances. Throughout the year, attendance was consistently high at about 85%. And during the visit, attendance was almost 93%.

Children have participated enthusiastically and made significant progress in the course of the year. At the end of the year, in a very positive outcome, 25 of the children were promoted for the subsequent year to the first standard of Aseema's 'adopted' Pali-Chimbai Municipal School.



Children at Aseema

The Balvikas mainly concentrates on preparing children for traditional primary education. The Montessori Method is used in combination with the traditional approach and emphasis is placed on writing and phonic skills. To help the children adjust to a traditional classroom,

there is also group work. The children are helped to relate ideas to the environment around them. Art, music, sports and judo, often with a specialist teacher, are also included as part of the curriculum to assist with their all round development.

The children come from a background where English is a foreign language and much effort is therefore made to familiarise them with it. English is used as the medium of instruction, though Hindi or Marathi are used to explain concepts that the child does not understand. The children make reasonable effort to converse and ask their basic questions in English.

The work done throughout the year is classified into four main categories – language, arithmetic, environmental studies, and celebrations and festivals. Each of these is introduced creatively and made interesting for the children.

As prescribed in the Montessori method, children are taught language using phonics instead of the traditional alphabets; in practice both are needed. The children first make words which are phonetically spelt and then words with variations (orthographic sounds). They are then introduced to puzzle words and gradually helped to read basic sentences.

Basic arithmetical concepts and numbers are introduced to the children with Number Rods (Montessori material). The teachers introduce the child to the quantity first and the symbols later. Finally, both are put together so that the children learn to associate them without confusion. Some children can count up to a hundred and write up to fifty. Basic addition is taught to children who are ready for it.

In environmental studies a concept, shape, colour and theme are planned for every month. The teachers then co-ordinate art activities and the group work around these. Field trips, such as a visit to the fruit vendor, are also organised to help the children's understanding. When there is a festival, it is incorporated into the classroom activities. For example, the children

made lanterns and painted diyas for Diwali, whilst for Christmas they made bells and coloured Christmas trees in their books.

The Balvikas also has various outings and celebrations for festivals and special events. For Independence Day, the colours of the national flag were reinforced through an art activity in their drawing books and the children made collages of different places of worship, the people of India and the clothes they wear.

And the children also participate in an Annual Sports Day. Last year, they took part in judo and floor gymnastic exercises. They had two races: "Phonic Fun" and "Tidying Up". All children were given small gifts for participating and they and their parents thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Overall, the Balvikas seems to be flourishing. They provide a much-needed stepping stone for some children which eases their transition into normal school. Vidya is pleased to be able to continue supporting this project and is grateful to the Wingate Foundation for its funding.

Ramesh Kapadia

Fundraising for Vidya!

Are you interested in helping with Vidya's fundraising work? *Slumdog Millionaire* has created plenty of interest in charities supporting slum children in India and there are many ways you could help us to capitalise on this, from helping to organise a fundraising event to doing a sponsored activity, encouraging friends to make donations, or simply advising us about potential grant-making bodies which we could apply to.

If you would like to help in any way or have any ideas, please e-mail Ramesh Kapadia (ramesh@vidya.org.uk).

In Brief...

To finish with, some short updates and other pieces of recent news:

- Vidya held its fifth annual **fundraising dinner** in November. We were back in Central London this year, at the Keralan restaurant, Rasa. The dinner was a great success – everyone had a good time, enjoying the excellent food, and we raised just under £1,000.
- **Tom Day** and **Terance Marion** have both raised tremendous amounts for Vidya whilst stretching themselves outdoors! Tom completed the Newbery Triathlon in September, raising almost £2,000, whilst Terance ran the Edinburgh Marathon last May, raising about £500.
- Vidya was recently awarded a **Bank of England Court Award** for £1,000. Sujit Kapadia collected the cheque at a reception hosted by Deputy Governor, Charlie Bean.
- Thanks to all those **VAMS sponsors** who responded to our request about continued funding. Depending on your preference, your future donations will either go directly to the school or to Vidya projects as needed.
- And finally, just as we go to press, we have learnt that the **Slumdog children** attending Aseema's school have excelled in their end-of-year exams! The news was covered in *The Times of India*, which quoted Dilbur Parakh, chair of Aseema. For the full story, see <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Cities/Slumdog-kids-excel-in-exams/articleshow/4497003.cms>.

The Vidya Trust (www.vidya.org.uk)

Trustees: Ramesh Kapadia; Carol Donoughue; Sujit Kapadia; Kamaljit Sood
E-mail: ramesh@vidya.org.uk. Newsletter Editor: Sujit Kapadia (sujit@vidya.org.uk).