

Site Visit Report¹
Sharaddha Special School
Omnagar Colony, Lane 1, Akhta,
Sarnath, Varanasi.
Date: December 17th 2006

On December 17th 2006 we did a site visit for Shradddha Special School, Omnagar Colony, Lane 1, Akhta, Sarnath, Varanasi. My mother, my infant daughter and I left Allahabad about 9 am to drive to Varanasi (About 3 hours from Allahabad) where we were scheduled to meet Vallabh bhai who would take us to Shradddha.

By the time we reached the school it was about 2:15. There were 25 students, 3 teachers- Arpanarani, Anjali, Vijaya Singh. I could not meet Anil Kumarji (Arpana's husband who manages the financial logistics and assists in running the school) and two other teachers, Shamburam and Shivcharan who were away to the other facility in Konia also being run by Arpanaji and her husband.

The children study from about 9 am to 3 pm each day. Since the children are of a special kind, the school does not have regular holidays, etc. They are open almost all year 5 days a week and now some parents have requested that they have school on Saturday too. 10-12 children come on Saturday from 10 in the morning to 12 noon. There were 40 students previously but since the funding from the Canadian NPO was discontinued, the auto rickshaw that picked up children who stayed far away had to be stopped. So now there are only 25 children. I had the ratio of girls to boys but no longer since it was in the bag that got stolen. But I do recall the ratio as being almost equal.

The children either come to school on their own, or they are picked up and dropped off by the rickshaw. I even met the person who drives that rickshaw. He comes in the morning with the children and stays all day. He helps out in the chores to keep the children clean, helps to change their soiled clothes, wash the soiled clothes, etc. if some children soil themselves, he does random activities like wiping their noses, cleaning their faces, etc. The teachers also told me that he has to wait patiently for each child to come out of the house on time each morning. In some homes there is no discipline for the children so the driver has to go in the house, personally wash and change the child and bring the child to school. There is a child in the school with multiple personality disorder, so he has to wait each morning to convince her to come to school.

The children are divided into four kinds based on their mental state, mild, moderate, and severe and profound. There are 9 mild children, 8 moderate children, 7 severe children and one profound child. The first three kinds come to school and are divided into two

¹ This report is in addition to that of Kusum Kanwar. Please treat it as a part of Kusum's report. I had photographs and notes of the project but all these were in my bag that got stolen at New Delhi Station. This is from my memory.

classes, the mild and moderate being together and the severe in another section. The profound child is attended to at his home by Arpanarani. She goes there regularly and works with that child.

Arpanarani looks after the administration and overall running of the school. There are four more teachers apart from her, all trained in working with special children, who take turns working in one of the two sections. Arpanarani also is a trained clinical psychologist and physiotherapist and she assists the children on a regular basis since all of them benefit with regular physiotherapy sessions. There were two physiotherapists who were coming twice a week to work with the children but once the funding for them stopped they no longer come. One interesting note, one of the teachers, Vijaya Singh, has her son coming to Shradha and she was saying he has shown considerable improvement since he joined the school in terms of speech and behavior.

When we reached the school all the children were in their respective classes. The school is run in a two storied (ground and first floor) a small plot. The building is owned by Arpanarani and her husband Anil ji. They were staying in one of the small rooms downstairs till recently and have now moved to a two room facility on the first floor. There are two empty plots across from the school that are used for play activities for the children. There are two small but clean bathrooms for the children. The entrance to the school is through the first classroom. There are four sets of benches and tables on the right side of the class, a chart of all the children with their names and photos, a chart of alphabets, a chart of fruits and vegetable and numbers and English and Hindi alphabets and a black board. The children were doing coloring when we reached and they all greeted us.

The second section is next to a small courtyard and I did not think it appropriate to go into that section since the children there are more easily disturbed and more difficult to control.

I chatted with Arpanarani in the courtyard while my mother was with my infant daughter, Tanvee and participating in the session with the first set of children. She said they were able to identify colors, shapes, fruits and vegetable, and in some cases numbers.

I enquired about the daily routine of the children. They come in by about 9-9.30. They have a prayer session where they recite a few chants and some fixed phrases that the teachers make them repeat like "I will be a good person", "I will come to school each day", "I will wear clean clothes each day", "I will greet each one", and a few such phrases. I heard them repeat all these since they do so at the end of the day also.

Then there is a revision session where they revise the work they had done the previous day. This basically assists in maintaining a continuity with them. Then they have a play session, a small break and then teaching begins for that day which is reading, reciting words and writing for children who are able to do so. Then they have a small break and

are given homework. At the close of the day they recite Gayatri Mantra and the phrases again. For the prayer session all the children are together.

I was also told that depending on the skills and training that can be given to each of them, some of the children have been trained in singing, dancing and athletics. Arpanaraniiji maintains constant contact with activities in their area for special children and takes the children to participate in those activities. On January 2nd they were going for a inter school festival for special schools and one of their students is a star dancer who wins trophies at most such events.

When the school was about to close for the day I had chance to meet all the children, some were totally shy and did not want to look me in the eye while some were overly affectionate. They all seemed from a very rural and economically backward section of that area but their faces showed innocence of the kind that I could not face. One girl kept hugging me, and one of them was constantly saying namaste. I asked them if they like to come to school, what they like about school, etc. but it is not easy to converse with the children.

Most children walked out to the rickshaw and sat in there, I could not force them to stay. One of the girls was to show me her dance but she did not feel like and I could not make her show me.

I had a chance to talk to the teachers once the children left, they were all very open about the fact that they do this work for their satisfaction but that having our support encourages them. They also told me that the auto rickshaw not going to get the students was a huge problem since most of the children in the school were such that their families would not care about sending them if the school did not make the effort to get them there.

Anjali, one of the teachers, was teaching elsewhere before she joined Shraddha because it is closer to her home. She was mentioning that the quality of the children at Shraddha was very good since their training and their curriculum was designed appropriately. They are being given a quality of education that suits their needs and capabilities. Also Arpanaraniiji said that she tries to identify if some child can be given vocational training to make him/her independent, since that is the ultimate goal. They recently got a hand rickshaw for one of their students who go polio early in life and the hand rickshaw puller in the school is teaching this boy how to ride the rickshaw so he can do small load bearing work and earn some money.

Since it was getting late for the teachers to leave I spoke with Arpanaraniiji about the main items that she felt she needed assistance in. These items and numbers were given as rough estimates and I was told that the exact numbers would be in the funding document being sent later.

a) Teachers Salary: The teachers salary is always and issue since that is one thing that sustains the operation

b) Auto Rickshaw- Rs. 3000 a month

c) Physiotherapist- Rs.300 for once a week and Rs.600 for twice a week.

d) Snacks/Food- another Rs.3000 a month

My comments:

One of the things that I noticed throughout my stay was that the children and the teachers bond like family. The teachers told me that they recognize the fact that these children cannot be graded as other children in terms of the progress they are making in school, but by giving them an opportunity to come to a school designed specially for them they are able to bring out their hidden potentials. The teachers told me that they use every opportunity they get to take these children to participate in events and activities with other schools of such kinds and are always on the look out for opportunities for their students to move to facilities that can better help them, if there are any such available. The children were all very affectionate and welcoming towards us. A few of them took my one year old infant to the playground and played with her once school was over. Their innocence and the dedication of the teachers and the founder, Arpanaji, is indescribable. I cannot even begin to say how overwhelmed I was with what they are doing in that small village, changing and bettering lives of those whom no one wants and cares for.

The truth is that people want to fund and support projects and activities where they can measure progress in real terms, in quantifiable terms, and can see progress for themselves. They are not satisfied if a child shows minimum progress, like that of Vijaya Singh, who would not talk or interact with anyone before he joined Sharaddha. So projects like Shradddha have to run pillar to post to sustain themselves, while neighbors in the colony assume and talk about the “lucrative business that Arpana and Anil are doing”.

I strongly feel that we should do more to get Shradddha committed and generous donors.

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