

Visit to Shraddha, a school for physically and mentally handicapped children in Sarnath near Varanasi; the organisation is located in a residential area on the outskirts of Sarnath and is funded by the association Shraddha.

On our arrival at Shraddha we were welcomed by Mr Anil Kumar who runs the organisation together with his wife Mrs Arpana Rani. Shraddha occupies some of the rooms on the ground floor of Anil's and Arpana's home. Anil works as an accountant and his wife takes care of the disabled children in the house. In this she is supported by a teacher and a helper. The house is situated on the outskirts of Sarnath, neighbouring a rural area. The children live in the vicinity of Anil's home.

Anil explained the concept of Shraddha and the children's situation to us as follows:

The aim is to convince the parents to bring their disabled children to Shraddha at a preferably young age, so that no time is lost before the developing of their minds and motor functions as far as possible is started. The children are to be enabled to earn their own money up to a certain extent. This certainly is an ambitious goal. Anil told us, however, that also these children were able to develop further up to the age of 18. Anil calls Shraddha a school and the children are his students.



Photo: On the left Arpana, holding a hyperactive boy's hand, on the right Anil.

The Shraddha school is open 4 hours a day and 5 days a week to Anil's students; during the winter from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm and during the summer from 7:00 am to 11:00 am. The big challenge is to persuade the parents to regularly send their disabled children to school. Whenever the children are absent for more than 3 days, Anil will pay their parents a visit. Currently there are unfortunately only 10 children attending school regularly and another 5 children are coming irregularly. In a rural area where not even most healthy children go to school, it is still difficult to convince the parents of schooling their disabled children. Anil told us that there were many more disabled children in the region, but the transport to Shraddha was another obstacle.

The parents of the children are a representative average of the local population. They are tailors, farmers, workers, bank employees, teachers, retailers, etc. 20% of them are Moslems and 80% Hindus. There are drinking problems in most of the families. Anil explained that the families belong to the "other backward classes", situated between the higher castes and the untouchables. Even today, it is a matter of course to speak about the caste issue in India.



Anil introduced us to all students and described their prospects. This boy is mentally disabled. He does not come regularly to Shraddha because he has found an opportunity to help in a shop. He likes working and enjoys earning some money.

The children's task on that day was to paint in pre-drawn shapes. Some of the children were also practicing the writing of Hindi words. The girl on the right in the photo suffered from polio as a small child and cannot move by herself. She is mentally healthy and has learned to write at Shraddha. This year, she will receive her first wheelchair.



These two boys of 18 belong to the students who come regularly. They are of a friendly disposition and enjoyed singing a song for us. The whole atmosphere was very relaxed. Anil, Arpana and their helpers treated the children in a calm and friendly way. Anil's intention for next year is to open up a market stall for these two boys where they will be able to earn some money. This will certainly be an

exciting undertaking.

The two girls in the photo are 15 years old and have a low IQ. We saw them writing, but apparently it is not enough for attending the normal school.



In the meantime, Mr Vallabh who works for Asha-India and lives in Varanasi, had arrived. Asha Redlands in California in cooperation with Asha India and Noon are the supporters of Shraddha. The Asha NGOs (Non Government Organisations) are individual units of the large global network of Asha. This network is predominantly funded by Indians living abroad.

Vallabh supports Anil in the formal and organisational work of the Shraddha association. At the same time, he supervises Shraddha for Asha-India. We received the list of all transfers to Shraddha from Vallabh and the audited report of 2008 from Anil. More reports are to be handed in until the end of the year.



Vallabh proved to be a competent person for us to talk to about the work of the charitable organisations in India. Asha-India (Ashanet.org) supervises hundreds of projects in India. Vallabh told us that in this area only about 25% of the healthy children went to school. There even is a large professional organisation for disabled children in Varanasi, called Kiran, (a German-Swiss foundation). But Vallabh said that good though it was, the bus fares to Kiran were so expensive that the parents could not pay for them.



By then, the pictures had been painted in and Anil put the names on them and gave them to us. The sheet with the yellow scribbles in Anil's hand (photo) amazed us. Asking about how this had been created, Anil told me that this boy was not handicapped, but did not go to school, and only attended Shraddha to accompany his disabled sister. It seems that this boy of 8 years had held a pen in his hand for the first time.

We did not know exactly how to interact with these children, and what to bring them. After all, they had been behaving like exemplary students during the whole time of our visit. And so finally we got Indian cookies for everyone and, as we could see, they really did appreciate them.

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