



Namasté from Bal Ashram

Varanasi, India
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Dear Friends,

Babaji and I arrived a few weeks ago to Bal Ashram, our safe home for abandoned and orphaned children in Varanasi, India. This winter I'll be writing you from here, keeping you connected with all our projects

which, thanks to your generosity, are thriving. Through these updates I'll also be letting you know where help is needed and how you can continue to participate.

Babaji sends you his love and blessings.

Namasté,

Shivani

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Bal Ashram

Safe home for children

The seventeen children aged two-and-a-half to sixteen living at Bal Ashram all are well and vibrant. All are thrilled to have Babaji residing in their midst again. Right away, we accelerated environmental awareness efforts. A year of successfully managing our own trash, which we separate and give to local scavengers for recycling, inspired us to propagate this model in the community. Starting in our own neighborhood, once a week a group of children, staff and local volunteers, equipped with gloves, masks, large sacks and educational signs, spend an hour gathering paper and plastic strewn along the streets. After a month we'll invite the neighbors to a program at the Ashram and ask them to use sacks, which we'll provide, to separate their household trash, instead of tossing it into the streets. Interest is growing, especially among local youth who we hope to inspire to start similar efforts in their own neighborhoods.



Amrit Sagar

Educational Eco-Center

Cultivation of the Eco-Center, our future model for sustainable living and sound eco-friendly practices, is a priority this winter. We found a fulltime caretaker and started cleaning the plots we have, planting seasonal vegetables and drilling a well for irrigation. While only 1/3 of the land is purchased, we continue negotiating with the farmers who own the remaining plots. Land prices increase each year, but we are hopeful that someday our dream will become a reality and the remaining plots will be secured. Professors and department heads from local university BHU have committed to designing a master plan for the center and involving their students to jointly create the center. Most needed now are funds to purchase the remaining plots (600K).



Project Shakti

Uplifting women in society is at the heart of this project. Sewing classes are running for 30 local underprivileged women who are finding inspiration and gaining valuable skills. You will hear more about our vision and plans for Project Shakti in the next update.

Vision Varanasi

Dr. Ivor is here again this winter running eye clinics for people who can not afford to see a doctor. Our recent Christmas Day clinic was the largest yet. With the help of three local doctors, Dr. Ivor was able to see almost 400 people and provide them with glasses. In his sincere and gentle way, Dr. Ivor would adjust each pair of glasses for a snug fit and then bid every person off with a “Merry Christmas” accompanied by his blessings, “Now go and see the world!”



A SHORT STORY: Christmas on Gangaji

I'm not sure if anyone has seen elves on the banks of the Ganga. On Christmas morning the Bal Ashram children became like little elves. They started their preparations very early. First, they located a tree on the grassy banks of Gangaji. It wasn't the typical Christmas tree, but for them it was perfect. Then they began making all kinds of colorful ornaments out of whatever small items they could lay their hands on. They tied the ornaments to long strings and hung each one with care.



After decorating the tree, the children started making little boxes of different sizes from white sheets of paper. They filled each box with sweets, making sure each box had an equal number, and then made colorful designs on the boxes, tying each with colored yarn, decorating it some more with pencil shavings, glitter glue and stickers. They placed all the boxes on a chair underneath the tree. By lunchtime, their Christmas tree and all the presents were ready.



Party preparations began after lunch. Invitations were sent to all Ashram residents - "Party at 4:30 PM." When the guests arrived, they saw along the banks of Gangaji next to the Christmas tree, blankets laid out on the ground and tables set with neatly placed boxes of biscuits, a pot of chai tea, cups and paper plates.

I walked down to the party, joining the small group already gathered. Samyak invited me to sit down at the table and served me a cup of tea and plate of sweets. Each guest was given the same, some standing and some sitting. There was also a visitor from Italy with a small yellow guitar, and she started leading the children in traditional American Christmas carols. As we sang, more children and guests arrived, and in the end, everyone was bunched closely together, joyfully singing. The atmosphere was light, happy and full of smiles.



One Christmas carol was a prayer for the end of war and peace among all people, rich and poor, black and white, red and yellow. The children liked it so much they asked to sing it four times. Hearing the voices of the children singing these words so wholeheartedly filled my heart. The vibrations emerging from our group gathered on the banks of the holy river Ganges, in one of India's most sacred cities, were palpable.

Then I heard a little voice, "Didi! Didi!" meaning, "Sister! Sister!" I turned around, and it was Vidya, the three-year-old we welcomed to Bal Ashram last February along with her baby brother. I went to collect her, and, rejoining the group, sat with her on my lap and resumed singing. As we sat together, I couldn't help but remember that first day last February when Vidya and Indra arrived. Just one year ago, at this very time, they were sitting alone, dirty, sick and hungry, on the streets, having lost both their parents.



A year ago, they had no one, and now they are part of a large family and are showered daily with love and caring from the smallest child to the eldest staff. Thinking this, tears started welling up in my eyes which thankfully I was able to hide. We kept singing and singing, all together, as the day turned into dusk.

