



Special Update from Varanasi, India

Dear Friends,

The mantra of “self sufficiency” that Babaji echoed throughout last winter’s three month stay in Varanasi, India, has brought an unprecedented wave of inspiration in the life of the children and the Bal Ashram community. The reports coming almost daily from Bal Ashram are so heartwarming — it is a joy to witness this grass roots evolution of the trend for a futuristic lifestyle for mankind.

The hot season is in full swing and the children are on their summer break from school. Each morning, they wake with excitement to finish their morning chores and run across the pontoon bridge to Amrit Sagar, our newly developed environmental center. We have six cows that are giving fresh milk, and have already started a hefty organic garden for vegetables.

Through the mini dairy and vegetable garden, children are already learning entrepreneurial skills by availing milk and organic vegetables to the neighbors. It will be hard to balance this newfound playful endeavor with study when school opens. Most of all, everyone is thrilled to be drinking pure milk and eating chemical-free vegetables.



Finished Gowshala (cow shelter)



Cows roaming freely in the cool evenings



Suraj and Bhanu nourishing a Sahjan tree with homemade compost



Organic vegetables harvested from Amrit Sagar

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Amrit Sagar's bee population continues to grow. Honey is very expensive in Varanasi, and until now, the children would have it only when taking medicine. It is quite treat for them to have fresh, organic honey in their diets.



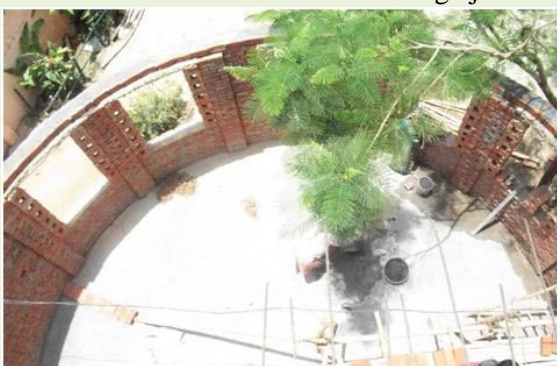
*Bathing the cows inside the gowshala*



*Samyak lending a hand*

## Anjali School

Anticipating the new school session starting in June, we needed to add a classroom to Anjali School to accommodate the fourth grade class. This room will be unlike the typical classroom – it will be round with many windows. With Anjali school's increasing popularity, this year Kamla and Loknath will have the tough job of turning down some applicants.



**NEW!**

## Computer Education

SITA (Sonoma Info Tech Awareness) is the name for our new computer program. Classes held at Bal Ashram are educating 20 students for a nominal fee. This initiative is a labor of love of a few local volunteers and a good use of the computer lab at Bal Ashram.

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## Project Shakti

Project Shakti is inspiring and uplifting an ever-growing number of underprivileged women in Varanasi. Operating in the Bal Ashram compound, Project Shakti teaches vocational skills to women in need and offers vocational training micro loans to young women whose families cannot afford further education.

**Vocational Training Classes:** Since Project Shakti's inception a year ago, the vocational training program has already surpassed our expectations. Currently 60 women of all ages are enrolled in a variety of classes: stitching and tailoring, small food item preparation (e.g. marketable pickles and dry breads) and the art of home decoration. The classes are equipping women with the necessary skills to find suitable jobs and earn livelihoods. Some women have already begun to augment their family income through their services and by selling their goods in the local community.



**Micro Loans:** Project Shakti offers small loans to young women who, after graduating high school, are unable to further their education due to lack of family funds. We have already made computer training loans, and in the future, will offer loans for nursing and other vocational training programs. After securing a job, the women will return the borrowed money so it could be given out to others. A selection committee reviews applications, performs interviews, and accepts applicants based on need and availability of funds.



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