



SRI SARVESHWARI SAMOOH, USA
SonoMa Ashram

News from Bal Ashram

Varanasi, 11 January 2009

Dear Friends,

Several weeks ago, Babaji and I arrived to our Bal Ashram safe home for children in the holy city of Varanasi, India, for a three month stay. All the children, staff and friends were thoroughly overjoyed that Babaji had returned for his annual visit.



Children gathered around Babaji in the Darshan Hut, the place where Babaji spends most of his time each day with the many who come to pay their respects and seek his blessings.

Green grass, plants, trees and vibrant flowers create an atmosphere of natural beauty. For the first time since the beginning of Bal Ashram, no major construction project is going on, and we can lend attention and care to the facility's aesthetics. In addition to new landscaping, volunteers from abroad have painted colorful murals, and the children have decorated pathways, flowerpots and trash bins. We all continue to beautify and clean areas throughout the compound and along the banks of Holy River Gangaji.

The children have gotten taller and more mature. Watching them and sharing in their daily activities – education, play, music, seva – is a true joy. The older boys are in 10th & 11th grades and nearing the end of their high school study. The younger ones have been attending a nearby English-medium school, but little by little, we are moving them in to Bal Ashram's new Anjali School, running inside the compound.



A view of the facility and the beginnings of a new color for the buildings.



Shiva



Darshan with Babaji

Shiva, Deepak, Samyak and Santosh painting flowerpots and trash cans.



*Santosh, Ravi and
Bhanu planting
flowers along the
main walkway.*



*A little project
given by Babaji to
Bhanu, Amit,
Santosh and Ravi
– removing the
leaves from the
tree cuttings for
composting.*

*The children like to
engage with the workers in
their various projects, and
while doing so, have an
opportunity to learn a little
about the trade.*

*Here is Sohum, delighted
to lend a hand to the
woodworker.*



Christmas Day was a special day for eye-sight at Bal Ashram. Dr. Ivor, British ophthalmologist, began a free eye clinic last year and returned this year for another visit. News of the Christmas eye clinic spread quickly – before sunrise, a large crowd of people had already gathered, filling the road leading to the Ashram gates. Dr. Ivor and his Varanasi colleagues were able to see 500 people that day and fit them with new eye glasses.



Gathering around noon time. Upon arrival, each person was given a number; here they are waiting for their number to be called.



Line of people waiting to see Dr. Ivor.

Dr. Ivor and his colleagues worked from dawn to well after dark to see as many people as possible. After giving out numbers up to 500, the many others who came were invited to come for check-ups the following week.



We started **Anjali School** last July to replace Bal Ashram's informal day-care/school program. Anjali School is based on the alternative teaching method of "Alice Project" – a successful school in Saranath founded by an Italian man. Presently nursery, K and 1st grades, we are planning to add two more classes for next year's session. The transformation in the children after only six months is astounding – they come to school clean, nicely dressed in their simple uniform and inspired to learn.

Anjali school teacher Sudhakar teaching his first grade class the names of different flowers.



Anjali School teacher Raju with his Kindergarten class just outside of the classrooms.

Welcoming friends from abroad to Bal Ashram and together sharing in this special environment is a highlight of every visit.



ABOVE: Phyllis (from Massachusetts) showing Santosh and Amit how to use her camera.



UPPER RIGHT: Mahadev (aka Dr. Greg from Maine) giving out Prasad (blessed food) after a ceremony with Babaji.



RIGHT: Christina (from Belgium) engaging in a creative activity with the children.

Babaji's family home is in a village about 1 hour from the city. One day, Babaji took a group of us to visit his family home and farm.



Babaji in the family home, giving Prasad to a young boy.

While walking to the farm from the village, we met a poor family looking for grains of rice. The crops had already been harvested by their respective owners, but families like this one come afterwards. Sifting for hours amongst the sand and straw, they are able to gather a small amount of grain to feed their family for the day.



Babaji (and Guru Gita Baba – eldest in the family) at the family farm.

Seva Project Ram Nagar: there is a government-run children's facility just across the river from Bal Ashram. We had only heard about the very bad living conditions of the place, but decided to go for ourselves, along with three of the Bal Ashram children (Ravi, Santosh and Suraj), to meet the staff and residents, and discuss ways we could be of service. Not only were the conditions more awful than we thought, but more than half of the 67 children outwardly displayed signs of various unaddressed health problems. We proposed a well-received idea of visiting every Sunday afternoon for a couple hours and together enjoying an uplifting activity like soccer, cricket, arts and crafts, gardening, etc.

Yesterday, a group of Bal Ashram staff and children went for the first visit. Half the group played soccer, and half did some drawing and coloring. Later in the evening during our nightly meeting, the children shared about their experience of doing some selfless service.

While we are not able to influence the bureaucratic issues that cause the conditions to be what they are at Ram Nagar, we can hope to bring a little sunshine into the children's lives, give them a kind of love that is non-existent in their daily life, and maybe just maybe it will begin to inspire their caretakers (I would have included some photos of our visit, but unfortunately photography was not allowed).



Kashi

It is a great privilege for all involved to be able to participate in this meaningful work, and it is only because of the tireless generosity of so many friends of the Ashram that it is all possible. I'll stay connected with you via email throughout the winter months, and would love to hear from you as your time permits.

Babaji sends his love and blessings to you.

Namasté,
shivani



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