

Dear Friends of Sonoma Ashram and Bal Ashram,

This has been a week of festivities at Bal Ashram, Babaji's ashram in Benares, India. Wednesday was Shivaratri and yesterday was Foundation Day. A photographic report appears below.

Namaste,

Richard Sclove (Richard@Sclove.org)

Bal Ashram, 5 March Feb. 2011



Passing the flame at the conclusion of morning *puja* (worship) on Bal Ashram Foundation Day.

This year Shivaratri took place in Benares and across the Hindu world on March 2. Shivaratri celebrates the marriage of Lord Shiva and his female consort Parvati.



Left: Babaji explaining that Shivaratri represents the union of two primordial aspects of existence: Shiva (pure consciousness) with Shakti (the active energy that creates and animates the cosmos).

Below: Babaji making offerings in the Bal Ashram temple *dhuni* (ritual fire pit) during Shivaratri. Behind him are members of the Aghor Foundation's Indian, Italian and American *sanghas* (spiritual communities).





Bal Ashram co-director Loknath performing an elaborate *Rudra Abhishek* (ritual bathing of a Shiva lingam in milk, yogurt, Ganges water, honey and clarified butter). The ritual honors and awakens Lord Shiva within the stone. Here Loknath pours milk over the lingam, under the approving gaze of five cheerful cobras.



Offerings along the *dhuni* edge: a clarified butter lamp and a small coconut that Babaji split against a rock as a symbol of surrendering the ego to the larger divine Self.

On March 4th, just two days after Shivaratri, Bal Ashram celebrated Foundation Day, the 11th anniversary of the ashram's founding.



Foundation Day began with morning meditation, followed by Babaji leading another temple fire ritual. Bal Ashram co-director Kamala sits in front; Sonoma Ashram board chair Marilyn Knight-Mendelson is at the far left. Note the powder-and-flower decorations all along the *dhuni* edge.



During Foundation Day the entire ashram was – as usual – beautiful overall. But it was also beautiful in countless small particulars. Here flowers decorate a temple column. In Aghor Yoga, beautifying our surroundings is an important form of worship.

Following the morning temple ritual, the day unfolded in a rich array of planned and unplanned activities.



For several hours during Foundation Day, some two dozen women gathered spontaneously in the Bal Ashram temple, where they clapped, sang *bhajans* (joyously devotional songs), and danced.



Visitors eagerly examined and purchased fabric and food products hand-crafted by Project Shakti, Bal Ashram's program of vocational training for women in financial need.



Left: How do you feed 500 hungry guests? You start by frying up delicious batches of puri breads in a giant wok.

Below: Next sit folks down in shifts of 200 and send volunteers scooting down the lines with tubs of fresh hot food.





Visitors paying respects to Babaji upon arriving at the Ashram.



Flower and rice offerings to the guru's feet inside the Bal Ashram temple.

The Foundation Day afternoon was dedicated to costumed dance performances by children from Bal Ashram's Anjali School and nearby sister-organization, Little Stars School.



Left: The performances were great, but the washed-out light filtering through the canopy above the stage proved challenging for photography. So after snapping a few shots of the dancing, I turned my attention to the audience and backstage scene.

Below: To say the crowd was appreciative might be an understatement.





Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha.



A lady-in-waiting steadies the pink princess as she prepares for her entrance.





Left: Five-year-old Vidya watching the Foundation Day dance performances. Right: Ashram resident Mishraji holding Vidya's three-year-old brother, Indra, earlier in the day.

Many readers already know the story of how these two children came to Bal Ashram: When their parents died two years ago in quick succession, Vidya - at the time just three herself - became her baby brother's keeper. When a rickshaw wallah (driver) brought them to Bal Ashram, both were severely diseased and malnourished. Now they are thriving . . . with Vidya continuing to maintain a close protective watch over Indra.

Within the ashram community, Mishraji has stepped forward to become a surrogate parent to Indra and Vidya. When people credit him for saving their lives, he demurs, explaining, "No, they saved mine."

Foundation Day concluded with speeches thanking ashram staff and volunteers, and with tributes to Bal Ashram's many accomplishments.



Above: Babaji preparing to address the crowd of ashram visitors. Below: To the right side, a group of Bal Ashram boys stands and sings. (Photos on this page by Ramesh Shah, one of the ashram's older boys.)





Left: Loknath and Kamala steal a rare moment of relaxed tranquility to watch Foundation Day from the ashram second floor.

Below: Guru Gita Baba, a beloved Bal Ashram elder.

