

PROJECT SHAKTI



Women's empowerment through
learning and working together

JANUARY 2020

On a bright winter day a group of women from Project Shakti enjoy a boat ride as they explore some of the local sites. As unremarkable as this may seem, most of them had never been on a field trip. The traditional role of Indian women is one of dedication to family and the opportunities for enrichment are rare.



The goal of “empowerment” for traditional Indian women doesn’t seek to take them out of the household but rather strengthen their position in it by affirming their sense of self. They experience being with women who have similar interests and learn skills that allow them to stay close to home while earning. Women return to mentor or give back to the program.



Women come to Project Shakti at Bal Ashram to learn but slowly while doing so begin to embrace a sense of community and the culture of Ashram life. Their presence provides a nurturing energy to Bal Ashram and they really enjoy their time there.



Workshops teaching women of all ages to become seamstresses give them a means for livelihood. They work together on projects, kurtas, saris, blankets, pillows, etc learning and sharing information about materials and techniques. Seamstress skills are in high demand because of lavish wedding traditions and many other celebrations.





Mindy Harvey (seated to the right by the window) was visiting from Sonoma and was impressed by the spirit and industry of the Project Shakti women. Before she knew it she was recalling her background, which has a little retail experience, and started working on labels and tags while dreaming up ideas for things the women could make that could be sold.





Though making and selling modern folk craft is still more dream than reality, some very fine handbags, shopping bags, and clutch bags were sewn from Mindy's idea sketches and brought back to the gift shop in Sonoma. A small outlet near tourist shopping in Asi Ghat, Varanasi is hoped for.



Younger women attend workshops to learn traditional Indian self care, grooming, beauty techniques and applications. Again, there is opportunity because of the traditionally lavish weddings and celebrations.



MariCruz, is a professional stylist from Napa (white blouse below right) and has been coming to Varanasi every February since 2015, to teach make-up and haircutting at our affiliate home for girls, Shanti Niketan.



This year her program has been extended to Project Shakti because there is so much interest in western style makeup and hair styles, offering further opportunity. The programs are ongoing and materials for both are provided by MariCruz and her team members.





A class is done for the day and gladly assembles for a photo. Instructors and participants gather on the lawn to spend time together before going home. Sheela, (pictured above in both frames, second from the left top frame, extreme left back bottom frame) is always at the center of the 60-70 participants that attend ongoing daily workshops. She provides an open gate for women young and old to enter and participate with purpose and enthusiasm. They sing, join in celebrations and participate with charity. To have a place to gather, a creative environment, and the opportunity to work towards making their life a little better is the gift of empowerment.

It was a cold January



Hot steaming kichari is welcomed by migrants at their encampment in Samne Ghat. Aghor Narayan Seva, has been ongoing weekly thanks to individual sponsors among the devoted following at Bal Ashram. Volunteers work tirelessly to prepare and deliver fresh cooked hot food to the homeless gathering.



Suraj, Gurugopal, Deepak, Surendra, and Indra (bottom frame L. to R.) regularly help with the feedings. Indra (on the R.) has been inspired and with help gathers fire wood for distribution to the encampment.

In the morning teachers and students, from Anjali School escape the cold damp from the Ganga River by gathering around a warm fire before starting classes.



.....but not before a nice morning stretch!



Across the Ganga at Amrit Sagar Eco Park, 140 patients received free checkups and eye screenings, part of the Aghor Arogya Seva run by Vision Varanasi. Most received free blankets and medicine as well.

CELEBRATIONS



Women of Project Shakti, clad in yellow for the occasion, celebrated Vasant Panchami and performed Puja to the goddess Saraswati



Saraswati Puja



Vasant Panchami is a festival that marks the beginning of preparations for Spring. Vasant Panchami also marks the start of preparation for Holi which occurs forty days later. It is the festival dedicated to **Saraswati** who is the goddess of knowledge, language, music and all arts. She symbolizes creative energy and power in all its form. The season and festival also celebrate the agricultural fields' ripening with yellow flowers of mustard crop, which are associated with Saraswati's favorite color.

Students and staff at Anjali School performed Saraswati Puja in the school courtyard and later shared yellow-colored snacks and sweets.



26TH OF JANUARY 2020

71st Republic Day of India

Colorful Indian attire prevailed as Bal Ashram and its extended family celebrated **Republic Day** in the courtyard of Anjali School. Republic Day is a national holiday in [India](#). It honours the date on which the [Constitution of India](#) came into effect on 26 January 1950.





CHAMPION!



Bharat Shivam won gold, silver and bronze medals in each of 3 martial arts competitions!

Bharat won a gold at the Inter School Karate Championship in Benares, later a silver at the 4th annual All India SSKDA Karate Championship in Kanpur, and finally just recently, a bronze in the 5th SSK National Karate Championship. Bharat is a dedicated student of mixed martial arts who resides and trains at Bal Ashram. He aspires to continue training and competing at a high level, but hopes one day to teach and have his own studio.

A proud moment for both, Babaji gave Bharat a blessing and honored him among a small gathering of “his boys”, residents and staff. Bharat is among a small group of boys who have been raised by Babaji in the environment of Bal Ashram since its inception. Each boy has been given guidance, support, and the freedom to pursue his true interests. Collectively this is a happy and confident group of brothers and one family.

From the beginning, the boys have been the heart and soul of Babaji’s ashram. From this first love has sprung a village that extends itself to the underserved communities surrounding Bal Ashram in the form of Anjali School, Amrit Sagar, Project Shakti, Vision Varanasi and most recently, the Aghor Narayan Seva Project. **Om Jay Aógara Dānī....**

