

Prasanna Jyothi

Site Visit Report

Date of Visit: 29 December 2012

Note:

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This is a report of our visit to Prasanna Jyothi, a home for disadvantaged girl children supported by Asha Austin.

During my month-long visit to Bangalore, I was looking for an Asha-supported project to visit and Prasanna Jyothi seemed to be a good fit due to its proximity to where I was staying. Geethapriya, the steward, put me in touch with Mrs. Sundari, the project coordinator for Prasanna Jyothi. The visit was planned for a Saturday since all the girls would be at home. Mrs. Sundari informed me that the kids had practice sessions for their school day celebrations that week.

Bhanu (Bhavani K), Venki (Venkatesh Iyengar), and I visited the school along with a couple of others – Bhanuprasad and Durga, who are based in Hyderabad and not associated with Asha. Bhanu and Venki have been closely involved with Asha SV in various roles.

We reached Prasanna Jyothi around 1pm and stayed there until about 5:30pm. The home is located in Puttenahalli near JP Nagar, a residential neighborhood in the heart of Bangalore. We had little trouble finding our way to the home. It was quite accessible by the reasonably well-paved inner streets of JP Nagar. It is located in a cul-de-sac, flanked by newly developed towering buildings and a few residential houses on one side and a rather large open area of land that seemed like fields on the other side. The open area of land seemed out-of-place in a city where the sprawl of high-rise residential complexes seemed to be the order of the day. From the outside, Prasanna Jyothi seemed like any of the other homes in the neighborhood. The location of this inconspicuous home for homeless children, amidst several newly built high-rises, seemed to aptly symbolize its place in the wider context – a place lost on the sidelines of all the economic development in Bangalore. It seemed to reflect a sad reality of orphans (and children from disturbed families) that exists in plain view and yet is conveniently overlooked amidst the rapid development and fast-pace of life in India.



Prasanna Jyothi has been running for over 20 years now. It is run by Prasanna Trust, managed by Mrs. Sundari with help from Mrs. Rathna and has been supported through funding from Asha Austin. The support staff for the home comprises of a full-time resident lady warden to look after the girls and a cook. The warden also helps sew clothes for the girls and other operational aspects of the home.

As we entered the home premises, we were greeted by the girls who were seated on the steps outside the building entrance in anticipation of the expected visitors, with expressions on their faces ranging from curiosity, excitement and everything in between.

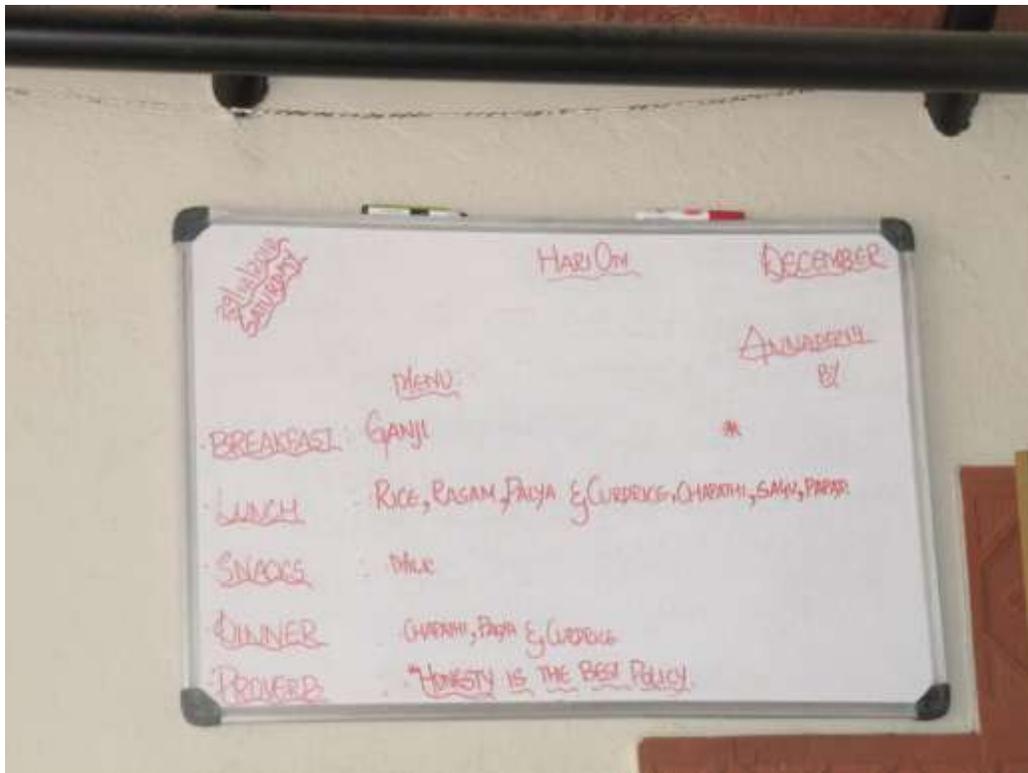
Although our plan was to join the kids for lunch at the home around noon (Mrs. Sundari had graciously invited us to join them for lunch at the home), we called-in to inform Mrs. Sundari that we were running late and didn't want the kids' lunch to be delayed waiting for us. Consequently, they had finished their lunch and a few were ready for their weekend afternoon naps when we arrived at the home.

The girls cheerfully guided us into the house, led by the smallest among them, 4 year old Pushpa and a couple of other girls. Their school had the annual day celebration just a day earlier and most of the girls had participated in the school day activities. The excitement from the school day had clearly carried over into the next day. The kids, who were raring to tell us all about their school day activities, brought a bunch of certificates and trophies and began showing them to us. They showed us certificates from various competitions - fancy dress, singing and dancing, recitation. Pushpa, the LKG kid, was particularly thrilled about her certificate for passing the ball contest. It was wonderful to be able to share in their joy and see them take pride in these accomplishments.



We took a short break for lunch, since we had already kept Mrs. Sundari and Mrs. Rathna waiting. We discussed various aspects of the home over lunch with Mrs. Sundari. Vinutha the eldest of the girls at the home, and a couple of other girls helped with some of the kitchen chores while the smaller girls kept each other company waiting for us to finish lunch. Lunch was a delicious south-Indian fare with a seemingly healthy mix of vegetable, dal and rice, not unlike a typical lunch at any other house around these parts.

The writing on the whiteboard at the entrance to the home said it all about the day's menu:



After lunch, Vinutha showed us around the house enthusiastically escorted by 4-year old Pushpa and a couple of other little girls. They showed us their computer and library room, which had a computer and a small collection of books, although it did seem like the home could use more books, especially pictorial and comic books. The computer did not have an internet connection. The other rooms had closets to keep the girls' clothes. The girls told us they had one set of new clothes each which were used for special occasions. The door that led to the terrace of the 2 story building from inside was kept locked. Vinutha led us on to the terrace and 4-year old Pushpa, who came along, was excited to be there. She said that was her favorite place in the house, although she said she didn't get to go there much, understandably due to safety concerns.

The next couple of hours were spent interacting with the girls and talking to Mrs. Sundari and Mrs. Rathna. The girls took turns in groups to put on a few shows of song and dance performances, which they had practiced and performed during their school dance. We were pleasantly surprised at how well synchronized some of the dances by the elder girls were. When one group of girls was performing, the others sat with us to watch them perform. The sense of caring for one another was evident in little things around the house - when one of the little girls was feeling drowsy and starting to fall asleep, an older girl sitting next to her walked her to the sleep area in the adjacent room without being prompted by anyone, while others were busy watching the song and dance. It was little things like this that seemed to make Prasanna Jyothi as normal as any other family home, in spite of the girls' family circumstances being anything but

normal prior to their arrival here. Yet, there are so many challenges that need to be constantly overcome for Prasanna Jyothi to remain a home away from home for these girls.

The aptness of one of the songs that the kids sang (“Bacchha Bacchha Ram Hai” – meaning “there’s god in every child”) was not lost on us, although most of kids were immersed in singing and enjoying the song, blissfully ignorant of its relevance to the present context. Prasanna Jyothi was one of the few places where the song wasn’t mere tokenism. One could see the words in action.

Education:

The girls ranged in ages from a 2-year old who was the newest member at the home, having come in just a couple of months ago to Vinutha, who was in her late teens. All of the school-age kids attend the same school, Indira Priyadarshini School while Vinutha goes to Capitol Pre-University College. Asha Austin has been supporting the girls’ education expenses. A teacher volunteers over weekends to help the girls with their school curriculum. It did seem that the home could use some more educational toys, books, board games and of course, someone to help them with board games and play with them occasionally. Given the wide range of ages of the girls at the home, any games that they are introduced to would certainly help make the home a more fun and educational place.

One of the girls, Asha, was a special needs child and was attending a special education school, which was significantly more expensive (Rs. 3000) than the schooling expenses of other girls, understandably so and there were concerns about supporting the steep schooling costs of this girl. Mrs. Sundari told she had been making slow progress, but was having a hard time with Math. Interestingly, when I asked her about her favorite subject, unaware that she was a special needs child, she mentioned she liked math. She then showed me her math work book and seemed reasonably comfortable with answering the math questions in there, although they were problems for a lower grade. It was interesting that while her math skills did not measure up with our yardstick, she considered Math her favorite subject and seemed to be enjoying learning it. How does one value a child’s learning – does it only need to be measured by where it fits on a standardized yardstick or is it enough if the kid is enjoying learning it?

Several girls had come in to the home as toddlers, went through their schooling year staying at Prasanna Jyothi and had gone on to take up jobs or get married and now lead normal lives. Among the several stories of such girls which Mrs. Sundari shared with us, was one about a girl who said that she wanted to become a nurse when she came in as a little girl to the home. She went on to complete her education in nursing and became a nurse at a good hospital.

Infrastructure:

The home is located in a safe residential neighborhood and with a compound around it. It also had safety grills installed at all access points to keep any intruders away. The home had a security guard in the past, but after a recent renovation to improve the safety aspects of the building and safety grills reinforcement, there wasn't much of a need for a security guard. Also, the home has full-time warden to look after the girls and I did not find anything that may be a safety concern.

The building had undergone renovation to upgrade the rooms and improve safety during the first six months of 2012. During this time, the home had to be moved to a nearby rental house. Mrs. Sundari talked to us about the challenges of finding a rental house for a home with 25 girls during those six months. The girls had to live in a much smaller place for those six months and had to deal with relocating out and back.

Medical: A doctor helps support medical needs of the girls on a pro-bono basis and Prasanna Jyothi pays for costs of any medicines needed.

Funding and Asha's engagement:

Mrs. Sundari did mention that the funding has been delayed lately. She was also aware of the fact that Asha Austin has been dealing with funding deficits and was appreciative of the fact that the stewards were doing their best to get funds to the project.

All expenses for the home, except education expenses of the kids, are supported by Prasanna Trust and through a few local donations. Asha Austin has been funding the educational expenses. I would strongly recommend that impact of any delay, uncertainty or shortfall in Asha's funding be understood clearly through consultations with the project partner and any funding changes, if at all, be phased-in rather than making abrupt changes that would jeopardize the project and impact the children at the home.

Recommendations:

- *Community support and engagement: There has been little if any support from community. The support has been mostly from individuals and that too sporadic. Some individuals come in to interact with the kids and play with them for a couple of hours once in a while, but this has only been intermittent and has not translated into any longer term involvement. That may be one area for the project to explore, although it would need focused effort from someone other than Mrs. Sundari. She may not have the bandwidth to look into this aspect.*
- *Initiatives for sustained funding: The project has a scheme for donors to support food expenses through their annadhana (food-donation) program where a donor can support the food expenses for the kids for a day. There are some takers for this initiative*

occasionally. The project also has an initiative to support the expenses of a child for an entire year. This initiative also has had limited traction, but may be another area that can be explored to help bring in sustained funding for at least some of the girls and hence help offset the overall project costs. Given the location of the project in fast developing urban location with an expanding and upwardly mobile middle class, this can be a potential option for long term sustenance of the project.

- *Mentorship program: Another way to improve community involvement is to have some kind of a mentorship program where college going students and professionals can be encouraged to contribute some of their time to mentor children at the home. The proximity to all the high-tech companies and affluent, well-educated community should make this a promising initiative. There is not much in terms of learning support at home for these girls and this initiative will certainly help with that aspect.*

While many of these recommendations seem promising and can bring qualitative improvements to the project, it should be noted it may not be reasonable to expect Mrs. Sundari to implement these initiatives with her current bandwidth. Even if it needs bringing in additional help, such initiatives will help in the long run and possibly even turn into a funding stream through increased community involvement.

Comments

- *Although there were religious pictures at a few places around the house, these were merely what one would find in any home where faith is part of the family life. There did not seem to be any overemphasis on religion or its overt influence in their lives. Hopefully this aspect has been sufficiently vetted, discussed and scrutinized by Asha Austin at this point in its engagement with the project. It is being mentioned here only for reasons of completeness of this report and not as a serious concern.
[Also, one needs to note that the project was started by Swamy Sukhabodhananda and Prasanna Trust and it may be unreasonable to expect Prasanna Jyothi to be completely disconnected.]*
- *With the implementation of RTE expected to bring changes to the educational landscape in India, it bodes well for Asha to increase or at least continue engaging with projects such as Prasanna Jyothi which indirectly support the education of children in need and are not parallel school structures. Such projects are not as much at the risk of being adversely impacted by RTE.*

To conclude:

In a society which is plagued by many other problems and where a large number of children are orphans or are abandoned by parents, odds are stacked against such kids making it through school and going on to restore some normalcy to their lives. Against this background, it

was heartening to visit a place like Prasanna Jyothi and to hear about the stories of several who came in to this home as kids, grew up here and have gone on to become socially and economically independent. The kids here are born into circumstances that are anything but normal. Prasanna Jyothi helps bring about a semblance of normalcy in their lives and does a commendable job at that.

We are constantly looking for success stories amongst projects supported by Asha – what better success story than seeing a little girl, having lost one or both parents, come in to a home and walk out as an educated independent individual. Prasanna Jyothi fits perfectly well with Asha’s mission and is a very worthy project for Asha to be engaged with.

[Site Visit Report by Madhu Kakarala]

Pictures from Site Visit:

Children photos from site visit have not been included in the site visit report due to privacy concerns. Pictures from the site visit are available in these albums. Access to photos of the children in these albums is restricted. Please email Madhu – tomadhu AT gmail.com – for access permissions.

- Prasanna Jyothi Site Visit - December 2012 - Album 1 (Photos by Venkatesh Iyengar)
- Prasanna Jyothi Site Visit - December 2012 – Album 2 (Photos by Bhanuprasad)