

Asha for Education Site Report

Project: Guria
Location: Shivadaspur, Varanasi, India
Date of Visit: September 27, 2011
Volunteer: Claire McRaith

I arrived first to the main office of Guria at 1:00 pm where I was met by Samir, who keeps track of the accounts, and Ajeet Singh. When I arrived Ajeet was meeting with a group of American students on a program learning about NGOs in India. Many international student programs like these visit Varanasi and spend time volunteering at Guria. They help with the art therapy and computer classes in the center, and some stay involved in Guria when they return to their homes and universities by organizing fund raising and awareness campaigns. I also met Tom, a volunteer from Ireland who was spending the year at Guria helping wherever he is needed at the center, and helping with the office work and answering emails.

Ajeet sat down with me in his office, where we discussed the many projects Guria is working on. The main job for Guria is to investigate the brothels and hold the police and government officials to the law. He showed me a video of a recent sting on the red-light district of Allahabad that was involved in the trafficking of minors. Without the work of Guria, the police ignore what is happening in the brothels, and are paid off by the pimps to let it continue. After months of work and investigation by Ajeet and a group of concerned civilians, they were able to rescue 20 of the young girls, but lack of police support meant many had to be left behind. Guria is also involved in court cases prosecuting the traffickers, attempting to end the cycle of human trafficking by enforcing the laws.

Around 2:00 pm Ajeet's wife and second-in-command, Manju, took me to the site of the Non-Formal Education center in Varanasi's red-light area. There are from 50 to 70 children, at one time at the center. All the children come from homes in the red-light district, with many of their mothers and fathers working in the brothels. All the children, except the very young, also receive a formal education from the local government school. During the school break, the center remains open all day for the children.

This toy zoo made out of recycled items was an art project during the summer vacation





During the school year, the center serves as an after school facility where the children participate in art therapy, meditation, and tuition. The children come in two shifts, according to the government school schedules. From 2:00 to 5:30 the first group comes. Manju says the first group has more time to play games, and do the art therapy, while the second group who come from 5:30-7:00 are the older children and they focus on tuition and completing their homework.

There are also computer classes instructed by foreign volunteers, but they didn't seem to happen on a daily basis.



On my visit to the center, we first arrived to the original three classroom building, one classroom on the ground floor, one classroom on the first floor, and a third room that had been used as an infirmary in the past, but that project had been stopped. There were about 50 children in the center at that time.



In the first classroom there were two teachers helping the children make clay sculptures.



The second classroom on the first floor had the youngest kids in there with two teachers. When I walked in the kids were all sitting around the room, each with a stuffed animal. They were probably about to do some sort of activity, but when I started taking photos they all just ran at the camera.



Every time I tried to take a picture of a kid they would show me their toy by sticking it in front of their face. They were really sweet kids and very excited to show off the center.



One of the teachers talking with Manju in the younger kids' room

Apart from the stuffed animals, the younger kid room also had a small teeter-totter and toy slide.



The third group of kids were the oldest, and they were all playing outside in the small yard with one teacher. Manju and I went out and together the children and I played a big game of kabaddi.



The paintings on the walls were done by the children with the help of a British NGO. After this all the children lined up and we went to the other, larger building for meditation and snack time. This was around 4:00. The children sat quietly in rows while Manju led them in a meditation. The children were asked to calm their minds and reflect on anger, think about a time they got angry, or someone was angry with them, and how it made them feel. During this meditation, children began to fall asleep. One-by-one they were laid down on the floor by the teachers.



After that it was snack time. The ground floor of the building is equipped with bathrooms and a kitchen.



The meal was dal chawal



Then Manju took me on a tour of the rest of the building. There was another classroom on the ground floor, which held the computers. The first floor had a large room with lockers and a bathroom. This room is intended to be the night shelter, but it is not currently being used due to lack of funding.



The second floor is under construction, but the hope is to have that as part of the night shelter also. Reading the description from the 2008 site report, it seemed like no work had been done on this room.



The Non-Formal Education Center that Guria has proposed to build in Mau would be a two classroom building, like the first building I visited in Varanasi. Guria is already working in Mau but currently has no building of their own there. More than a place of peace and fun for the children of Mau, the center would allow Guria to remain in the red-light district and become part of the community. The main purpose for the center is so that Guria can have a continuous presence in the area. By owning property and becoming part of the community, it becomes much harder for the pimps and brothel owners to run Guria out of town when they become threatened by their actions. It also allows for continuous surveillance of the area to know what is really going on, and if new girls arrive.

Besides this, the center does seem to be an oasis for the children. In Varanasi, the center is located right in the middle of the red-light district. The place was full of kids and the atmosphere was very happy and exuberant. It felt like a safe place where the kids could unwind and release some energy, where school and home are not such safe places. The size of the original center in Varanasi, which would be what would be built in Mau, seemed to be adequate for the number of children, and the building was nice, friendly, and welcoming. I think it would be a good addition to any community.