

Site Visit – Mathru School

October 04 to April 05

Rana Nanjappa: Asha CNJ Volunteer.

My report is spread over the five months I was in Bangalore. During this time I visited the school a number of times and was invited to participate in events they were involved in - outside the school. Construction of the 10-room school using the funds from Asha CNJ was started during this period. As a gesture of appreciation by Mathru, the school has been named “Asha”.

I welcome questions about this report or about the Mathru School and Trust. I am available on email at nshr@optonline.net or by phone in the US at 973 538 0914 and in Bangalore at 25271141.

This report has five parts - focussed on the Children of Mathru, its Volunteers and Supporters, the Founder, the Staff and finally the School Building Complex. Some of the information may have come in previous reports – but I have decided to leave them in for the sake of context and completeness.

The Children of Mathru.

The Mathru Residential School was started in 2001 in Maruthinagar, a suburb of Bangalore. In the first year, the founder of Mathru, Ms. G. Muktha traveled to remote villages in Bangalore District to get blind children to enroll in the school. Always, the parent/s of the children were told about the school, its goals and methods; and the students were enrolled with the permission of the parents. According to Ms. Muktha getting the parents permission initially was not easy and she had to do a lot of convincing about the benefits of the school and her bona fides. The children were from economically and socially depressed families. The mostly uneducated parents were not aware of the kind of schooling offered to the blind and how in a residential school, along with an education, they could and would learn life skills and be readied to lead an independent and self-sufficient lives. Up until then, their families considered the blind a liability. The children were restricted to their homes; and some were even locked up or tied down while their parents went to work in the fields. They were unkempt and barely able to take care of themselves. Once they were admitted to Mathru it took quite some time before they finally break out of their “shell” and slowly build up self-esteem and confidence. It takes a lot of effort and love for this to happen. But living in a closely-knit community, with children like them who have already done this, and are happy and achieving, helps immeasurably.

Mathru now employs a full-time field worker, Manjunath, to travel to the rural areas and locate blind students between the ages of 4 and about sixteen for admission to the school. He contacts the local authorities to get the addresses of blind children. He visits the houses and meets the child and parents. Tells them about Mathru and what they do. In his experience, the parents initially are wary. They are concerned - having heard

rumors of children being taken away from home and abused or set to begging or even used as organ donors. The field worker offers to take the child and the parents to Mathru at Mathru's expense, or bring blind students from Mathru to talk about their experiences in Mathru and also bring Ms. Muktha to talk and reassure the parents. He tells them that Mathru will bear all expenses of the child while at Mathru, including board, lodging, clothes and all personal expenses, including the cost of travel back and forth during vacations. (If the field worker comes across blind adults, as a service, he tells them about the opportunities available to them both for education and/or employment).

Once the parents are satisfied with Mathru's intentions and credentials they bring the child to Mathru School. The parents have to sign a consent form. The child is given a medical exam by a qualified doctor and details of the child and his parents are entered in an enrollment register along with a photo of the child. The child is groomed, given a haircut and new sets of personal clothes and school uniforms. If a child has to drop out due to circumstances beyond Mathru's control, the reason for the drop out is recorded in the register. Mathru has admitted students who were in other blind schools. Unlike in most such schools, schooling in Mathru does not cost the parents a single naya paisa. Recruiting for the school has become easier since the reputation of Mathru has been established; thanks to word of mouth and publicity in the media. There now is a waiting list for admission. Mathru encourages parent involvement; and this happens occasionally. But most of the parents are illiterate and are unfamiliar or unaware of the benefits of developmental education for the blind. However, the children are encouraged to maintain contact with their families when such contact is not detrimental to their education. Those who want to, go home during vacations at the expense of the Trust. As a policy Mathru prefers to have only around 10 students per grade. The current strength with 4 grades is 42. In 2005 grade 5 will be started, and every year one grade will be added until the full compliment of 100 residential students will be reached in 2010.

Thus far the school has managed to survive in a house owned by the trust and temporary sheds on the small property and rented land from adjoining house plots. One shed accommodates the dorms for the 42 resident students and the teaching staff. Another shed houses the kitchen, dining area, support staff, office and computer training room. Another shed has three classrooms. All the classrooms have school benches for the children and suitable furniture for the teachers.

In the house, the lower half is where Muktha and her niece live and the hall is for receiving visitors. Upstairs are three rooms. One big room is for music and elocution classes. Two donated cupboards hold a harmonium, tabla, veena, saxophone, cymbals and a kettledrum. The teacher, who is also blind, teaches singing to all the students; and instruments to those that show an interest and have talent. (Mathru students have been invited to and have participated in many public and private performances. They have won many prizes and accolades at competitions. These performances and competitions generally result in donations and other tangible expressions of support from the audience). The other two upstairs rooms are classrooms. The children, none of whom

use sight sticks, easily go up and down the stairs on their own. On my first visit, my skepticism must have been obvious. So, Muktha asked Satish, a five year old who had been at Mathru just over a year, to go to the community shed in the garden downstairs. I followed him. Without any hesitation, he walked out of the room and nimbly negotiating the stairs, went to the front of the house and then casually walked through the narrow paths in the garden and straight to the community shed! No instructions, no guidance, no cane – just Satish, with me three steps behind him. Bangalore has many power cuts. When this happens, and the rest are stuck in one spot unable to do anything because of the darkness, the children and the blind staff take over, and run the place!

The daily schedule for the children, is in itself a measure of Mathru's plans and hopes for the children. Mathru wants its students to become self-confident, individuals; who will have the potential, confidence and self esteem to become independent, productive members of society. Individuals who do not accept their blindness to be a handicap! The day starts at 5.30am and includes 15 minutes of walking, generally in the company of Ms. Muktha and the staff. Half an hour is devoted to cleaning the school and hostel; followed by listening to the news on the radio – 15 minutes in Kannada and 15 minutes of English news. An hour and a half for bathing, personal hygiene, dressing, and breakfast. The staff looks after all this; and the older students help the younger and latest enrollees. The classes for the four grades are conducted from 9.45am to 3.30pm, with half an hour for lunch. This is followed by an hour and fifteen minutes for music classes and an hour for games. An hour is spent in community singing of devotional songs along with half an hour of just personal time. After another 10 minutes to listen to the news in Kannada, the children have 45 minutes for study time. Dinner at 8.30pm and to bed by 9pm.

The children are a cheerful, talkative, curious and confident lot – like children anywhere. The medium of instruction being English it is easy to converse with most of them. As in any school, some are leaders and had no hesitation peppering me with questions about me, my family, and life in the USA etc. and even about Bush and my opinion of him!

Obviously, their knowledge about the world and current events is developed from listening to the news twice a day. They interact among themselves with gusto. I played cricket with them and it was fun. They were fiercely competitive, and I was the only person thinking about their “handicap”; they did not. After awhile even I forgot my fears and just played! They were disappointed that I did not play chess – but happily showed their skills by playing amongst themselves. I was treated to a number of music performances – vocal and instrumental. When I said I used to play the Tabla, they insisted that I play for them. The response was polite; obviously I was not as good as their best player! They showed me around their school and garden with pride. It was obvious from their conversation that they loved Ms. Muktha and the staff. On schooldays all of them wore uniforms provided by Mathru and after school, changed to informal clothes – all provided by Mathru. The children I spoke had good to sufficient command of English. Most of them knew at least one other regional language.

The Supporters of Mathru

Mathru has a diverse group of local supporters who volunteer their time, money and services to help run the school. These supporters include working professionals, students, business owners, housewives and retirees. A number of the volunteers come and spend a few hours a week, just talking to the children, answering their questions, sharing experiences and thereby increasing their general knowledge and spoken English. They also serve as examiners for the classes. I did a stint as the Math Examiner for the 4th Grade. A set of questions along with the answers was given to me. The students came in individually and sat across me. I asked the questions and if their answer was right, marked them accordingly. Once they and I got over the problem of my “accent” and language use, things went well! For example, I said fourteen hundred, whereas they knew the number as one thousand and four hundred! And “into” instead of “multiply”! Other volunteers drop in and help with administrative work and in running errands. A chartered accountant looks after the accounts and financial transactions. Some of the housewives stitch and mend the children’s clothes. Donations in kind are also a feature. All the furniture, computers and software are donated. Two software engineers in Motorola have volunteered a lot of time setting up and maintaining the schools three computers. They are in the process of designing a web site for Mathru. I was involved in writing up the material for a brochure for Mathru, to help them approach other major donors or foundations for funding. The two young men laid out the whole brochure using their computer expertise, and another supporter, an industrialist funded the entire cost of printing 50 brochures! Other donations include the many cupboards, musical instruments, student lockers etc. Many of the supporters donate the cost of meals on special occasions. At the supporters meeting held in Bangalore in March 2005, I had an opportunity to meet with over forty supporters – and these were only those who could make it to the meeting! I was asked to talk about ASHA. During the talk I mentioned that I had donated some money on the occasion of a recent family birthday – something done by many supporters. But one of the local supporters went one better when he said that on their wedding anniversary, he and his wife came to the school with provisions and cooked a special meal for all the children! Supporters with shops donate provisions like rice, oil etc. On two occasions I was at the school when supporters drove up with fruits and vegetables for the school. Institutions like schools and colleges encourage their students to come to Mathru during their spare time or vacations and help the children in their studies. Businesses donate their services and products, as well as buy the products like phenyl, soap oils and recaned items etc. made by the adult blind in the school. (In 2003-04 Mathru made about Rs. One lakh selling their products with a profit of Rs. 37,000. Mathru maintains bank accounts for those who were involved in the production and deposits the profits from the sales in the individuals’ account). Already, donors have offered to fund the furniture for some of the classrooms under construction. A landscaping business has donated its services to lay out a garden around the new school. A builder has offered cement. An interior decorator has offered his services. Local clubs like the Lions Club and the Inner Wheel Club recognizes Mathru and its work by giving annual financial grants. The list goes on. This to me is an unequivocal

measure of the faith all these local volunteers and supporters have in Mathru. And, a clear indication of their commitment towards its success!

Background of Founder:

Ms. G. R. Muktha, the Founder and Managing Trustee broke her foot in a bus accident and became disabled at the age of 22 when she was pursuing her post-graduate degree in Law. While disabled and facing all the resulting challenges, she resolved to serve the disabled. Since the disability of blindness poses myriad problems to those afflicted, she chose to devote her life in serving them. She started the Trust and all the activities to educate and rehabilitate the blind. The focus was visually impaired children from socially and economically depressed families. Ms Muktha is a practicing lawyer in the Bangalore Courts and a Professor in a recognized law college in Bangalore. It is to her credit that she is already thinking of a line of succession and has talked to me about how she is training one of the teaching staff – who just happens to be blind – to take over some of her functions as the school grows in size. In spite of her hectic schedule as she oversees the school, works as a lawyer and a lecturer, solicits funds and deals with the inevitable bureaucracies, she still manages to maintain a very active involvement in activities associated with the blind and other disabled. Right now she has been asked to coordinate the set up of a Vocational Training Center, in Mulbagal, in the neighboring district.

The Staff

Number of Teaching Staff:

Teachers: 3 (Visually challenged)
Computer Instructor: 1 (Partially blind)
Music Teacher: 1 (Visually challenged)
Voluntary Guest Teachers: 3

Qualifications of the Teaching Staff:

Teachers Training (TCH)
Diploma for Teaching the Blind (DTB)
NIIT Certificate for Computer Education

Number of Non-teaching Staff:

Cook: 1 (Physically Disabled)
Ayah: 1 (Partially blind)
Manager: 1
Field Worker: 1
Voluntary Instructor: 1 (Completely Blind)
(Mobility, Sports and Physical Education)

Mathru provides higher education to eligible blind adults by bearing their educational expenses and providing free board and lodging at the school. It arranges training for the disabled at the local Vocational Training Center and seeks out employment opportunities for them. It has successfully given PreUniversity education to one and financing the expenses of another to do her Diploma for Teaching Blind at the Ramanashree Academy for the Blind. Mathru also has sought and employed blind teachers. The teachers are a cheerful and dedicated lot. Almost all of them being blind or partially blind, they empathize with their young students. Vijayasimha, the volunteer mobility teacher is something else! He works for the Postal Department in the heart of Bangalore, is married with children – yet finds the time to come to the school in his spare time to teach the Mathru children and any blind adult mobility, navigation, games and physical education. He was a state level blind athlete himself, and one his events was high jump! Once when I wanted to take his photo he asked me if he could take mine. Camera in hand he asked me to speak a few words as he focused and clicked. I now have a perfectly framed photo of myself taken by a remarkable blind man! The prescribed textbooks for the children are transcribed into Braille by a transcription service run by the Canara Bank. The service fee is subsidized by the bank, also a supporter of Mathru. One of the teachers takes dictation in Braille. I dictated a letter to her and she handled the dictation at better speed and accuracy than my secretary at AT&T, many years ago!

The School Complex

The trust has purchased a Civic Amenities plot from the Bangalore Development Authority. The Asha CNJ grant given last year is being used to build an architect designed 10-room school to accommodate the targeted student population of 100 by 2010. Mathru is now actively seeking another 35 lakh rupees of funding to build a dining hall and kitchen (8 lakhs); dormitories to house 100 students and staff (20 Lakhs); computer and vocational training and community activities center (5 to 7 lakhs). These are architects estimates based on 2004 costs. Mathru has been actively soliciting funds for the Complex from its local supporters and has commitments for about 5 lakhs. Mathru is confident that its local supporters and other funding sources will provide funding for operations as they are doing now; and this funding will increase as the number of students increase each year. Asha CNJ is the one and only non-Indian funding source to-date. The Asha CNJ grant given last year is being used to build the 10-room school to accommodate the targeted student population of 100. With the funding available and committed, by the year end there will be sufficient space and infrastructure for the school to grow year by year. In the beginning years the unused classrooms will be used as dormitories etc. The ideal situation would be a single funding source, be it a foundation or a donor funding the whole balance of Rs. 35 lakhs by the end of 2005. I am hoping that our application to WAH 2005 will provide a satisfactory solution! If the funding comes in smaller amounts, the construction will continue, but completion will be in line with the size and timing of funds.

Chitra Vishwanath, one of the leading architects in Bangalore, has done the design of the school complex and undertaken the construction. She is a supporter of Mathru and takes

an active interest in the school. Chitra is known for her use of ecological architectural principles which respect bio-diversity. She uses natural materials available on site (mud from the excavation is being used to make blocks for the walls), wind –through natural ventilation systems, water – through rainwater harvesting, grey water recycling and ecological sanitation systems, sun – through solar cooking, water heating and lighting systems, and space- through three dimensional use. Her own house in Yelahanka, close to Mathru, and built on these principles, has become a sort of tourist attraction attracting visitors from all over the world. I visited her house and met her husband. The house was a revelation to me about how much can be done, in style, with so little! Before designing the school complex she spent a lot of time observing the children and studying their movements and activities. Her goal is a design where the children live in an environment that will prepare them for conditions in the outside world – not to give them mere “crutches” for survival.

When I left in midApril, the foundation work was almost complete. The supervising engineer hoped to finish the current planned portions by August 2005. I also met with the residents in the nearby high rises and asked for and got their assurance of help and cooperation for the school.

It’s been quite a learning experience for me. I feel that I received far more than I can ever give back. Every visit I observed and learnt something new. The warmth and affection shown by the children, the pleasure I derived interacting with them and the staff and the local supporters is something I will treasure. Supporting Mathru is a worthwhile effort for CNJ. Continued support would be commendable and deeply gratifying to all of us – be it through WAH or on our own. CNJ started the ball rolling for Guria in Varanasi. It is my hope that the same will happen when other chapters read about and get to know Mathru. And in return, I hope we too at CNJ come across worthwhile projects such as these and others like STCH, Kushi, Guria, VHS and be, in our own small way, instrumental in changing the lives of some of the under privileged children in India.