Bal Ashram Site Visit Report, Viratnagar, Rajasthan, Dec 22 2008

**Overview**

“Bal Ashram visit was the most memorable experience of my life”, so said my father-in-law. It was indeed eye-opening and heart-rending to see the miraculous work accomplished by Bal Ashram trust. Bal Ashram trust in Viratnagar, Rajasthan has a rehabilitation centre (not funded by Asha) and a banjara school (funded by Asha Dallas). We visited the banjara school first which was in the interiors of the village and was merely 4 bamboo pillars with a hay roof on top built on a dry sand hill. There was no proper road to reach the school as it is a few kilometers away from the village market. We received a warm cultural rajasthani welcome with the girls dancing and singing and the camels around! The banjaras constituted of 30-40 nomadic families which had finally decided to settle down on this hill top. The school has 2 teachers and 1-2 admin staff. The main teacher, who also goes around the village spreading awareness, was extremely dedicated and had taught the students well in a year’s span. We made them read books, solve mathematical problems, recite poems and *dohas,* show drawings and answer a few questions. Most of the boys and the girls answered correctly and confidently. A lot of kids were very enthusiastic and eager to respond to every task. All of them would sit on the floor in that cold weather and carried books and bags. I was extremely impressed to notice that the water borewell had been constructed despite the shortage of funds to keep the banjaras adhered to that settlement and the school.

**Issues/Suggestions:**

* We should try and increase teachers’ salaries as they are extremely dedicated and are single-handedly trying to educate the kids.
* There was a demand for a restroom/bathroom. I strongly feel we should help construct the same for their sanitation and health. This would be a very good incentive for them to stay near the school.
* Electricity: Banjaras currently use solar energy which works for 8 hrs. This is certainly not enough for running the school as well. The office manager has applied for electricity. Since, they are nomads, effort is being done to provide them with an identification (ration card is the first step). This is an ongoing process and will take some time.
* We should seek help from Bal Ashram’s other big donors in addition to Asha for ensuring the continuous sustenance of the school.

**Bottomline**

I see tremendous potential and future for this school provided the banjaras and the teachers don’t move from that place. The office manager of BAT is extremely motivated and so are people from Delhi and if the school gets continuous support from us, we can indeed help empower and educate the very first of the 7 generations of rajasthani banjaras. I see this as a big impact project for this unknown, unidentified community.

**Rehabilitation Center**

Although we don’t support the functioning of Bal Ashram’s rehab center, but, I find mentioning the commendable, unbelievable work by Bal Ashram worth mentioning in this report as it was extremely enlightening and moving experience for all of us who visited this center. This rehab center is a residential center for the kids rescued from exploitation at work, child labor as well as kids under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Bal Ashram volunteers even risk their lives and rescue girls from trafficking. These were a special group of kids. When our car entered the center gate, they started screaming slogans of “*Inklaab Zindabad*” and I was taken aback by their energy, patriotism and the fire to do something. The rehab center harbors them and teaches them discipline of life, basic informal and formal education, 6 trades of printing, painting, welding etc, computer education, music etc. They even have their kids’ friendly *panchayat* where they discuss about governance, rights and duties and raise their issues. The center is a huge facility amidst the lush mountains and has fully equipped library, hostel, break room, green lawns, computer center, generators etc . I was impressed to learn that one of their students got an award (equivalent to chidren’s nobel pize) from Amir Khan. This facility was also visited by Bill Clinton and many other foreign delegates. I would like to conclude by narrating one short story:

We asked one random kid on his way to clean the playground the following questions and were taken aback by his impressive answers:

We: What is your *dharam*/religion?

Kid: *Manavta* (humanity)

We: Will you come with us if we pay you more?

Kid: No, I will go earn myself when I grow up and get educated?

We: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Kid: Teacher

We: Who is Prime minister of India?

Kid: Dr. Manmohan Singh

We felt an emotional connection with the banjara and rehab center kids and believe that we should do as much as possible to get these special kids the education and wonderful life they very well deserve! It is a must-visit place.