

Visit to Shishur Sevay - January, 2010
 Kasturi, Asha Central NJ; kasturi@cantab.ne

It was a regular winter afternoon, the 18th of January. I was back on the familiar premises of 17/2/7 Sahapur Main Road (which is somewhat of a misnomer, as you really have to take a meandering narrow lane leading to the house from the main road) to visit Shishur Sevay, home of twelve girls (three to thirteen years of age), their caregivers and their mother, Dr. Michelle Harrison.

The children at Shishur Sevay are orphans, who were abandoned by their kin, and eventually adopted from a government orphanage by Michelle. Shishur Sevay was established in 2006, and the children first came home in early 2007. the four younger ones (Rani, Barnali, Sonali and Ganga) suffer from multiple disabilities, including Cerebral Palsy. At Shishur Sevay, ever since they came, they have been undergoing physical therapy - training their bodies to sitting upright, standing and developing control over limb movements; speech therapy, and special education - primarily geared towards training them to 'say' sounds, learn words, associate words with objects, and building alternative communication skills. Previously they used to go to day school at the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy (IICP) but this year they were taken out, as the school was not keen enough to cooperate and share everyday details of their progress and curriculum with the parents. After that, they have been mainly schooled at home, with trained special educators and under Michelle's supervision.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES.							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6 am	Breakfast for all and walk to school for Ganga and Bornali M-F.						
7 am	GANGA AND BORNALI TO SABITRI SCHOOL; RANI AND SONALI AT HOME.					LAZY MORNINGS	
8 am	SPECIAL EDUCATOR FOR GANGA, BORNALI, RANI, SONALI						
	ACTIVITIES:						
9 am	ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION AND VOCABULARY BUILDING						
	MUSIC						
10 am	GROUP PLAY						
	COMPUTER EDUCATION						
11 am	CRAFTS						
	SPE. ED						
12 pm							
1 pm	LUNCH						
2 pm							
3 pm	REST						
4 pm	PHYSICAL THERAPY, MOVEMENT, STANDING, TOILETING TRAINING, GROOMING						PLAY, TV, AND MUSIC.
5 pm							
6 pm	PRAYER						
7 pm	SUPPER, BATH, AND RELAXATION, TV, MUSIC						
8 pm							

Very recently, in a bid to integrate them with mainstream children, Michelle made use of a mostly defunct rule in place in Government schools whereby children with disabilities are entitled to enroll in regular government schools. An arrangement was made with Sahapur Sabitri Balika Vidyalay (where the older girls go) and now, Ganga and Bornali, two of the younger girls also are regulars at Sabitri School! I must mention that their school-going serves the purpose of blending-in more than anything else though, as the school is not equipped in practice to train and teach children with special needs. However, both Ganga and Bornali simply love to go to school with their *didis*!

Here is the current weekly schedule in place for the younger ones (see above figure).

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I was pleasantly surprised to see how much the girls had improved as far as their limb movements and communication was concerned. They had outgrown older desk-chairs, were able to stand, holding hands. When I last met Rani in June 2008, she would respond feebly to music, especially beats. And now I found her with the same rhythmic leanings as I played her favourite drum to her. She responded well to the drumbeats and tapped along enthusiastically. Rani's frequent violent seizures have come under some control, though not disappeared entirely. Bornali, Sonali and Ganga had also improved with their communication skills. They seemed a happy bunch of kids. While I was around, the physical therapist had just left, and the evening caregivers had taken charge of the little children.

The eight older girls were having their evening class in the in-house classroom upstairs, which we interrupted briefly, just to say hello and exchange a few quick words! They go to school at a local government school, Sahapur Sabitri Balika Vidyalaya. Before they came to Shishur Sevay, they did not have scope or access to education. As a result, Shishur Sevay has been putting most of its efforts to try, experiment and devise optimal ways to teach late learners (LL) and slow learners (SL). The process of learning is often further complicated by remnants of the traumatic and abusive childhood some of the children had had to go through leading up to behavioral issues, feelings of insecurity and alienation, and deep-rooted fears. All of which, Michelle, and her staff have had to patiently try, overcome and heal over the years.

Just like Shishur Sevay has special educators to help the LL group, they are trying a new strategy with the three top students, to try to move them forward in hopes of their skipping a grade. Michelle told us that the learning disabilities teacher works with them separately, helping them to accelerate their school learning, but also using other strategies to broaden their knowledge base and skills. They follow the newspaper and clip out interesting articles; they "research" information related to what they are learning in school. They are trying to make the small group become the prototype.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE FOR OLDER GIRLS.							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
6 am	Breakfast and Walk to School						BREAKFAST AND LAZY MORNING
7 am	SABITRI SCHOOL					SABITRI SCHOOL	
8 am							
9 am							DRAWING
10 am	Return Home					Return Home	
11 am	ENGLISH					CRAFT AND GEOGRAPHY	
12 pm							
1 pm	LUNCH						
2 pm			Soc. Work GROUP		Soc. Wk GP.		
3 pm	MATH AND HISTORY					PLANNED ACTIVITES	PLANNED ACTIVITIES
4 pm							
5 pm	BENGALI AND SCIENCE					BENGALI	
6 pm	PRAYERS						
7 pm	HOMEWORK					DANCE	
8 pm							
9 pm	Computer practice or reading or dancing or TV						

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Below is the floorplan of the place. The "Main room" is where we met the younger ones, and the "Classroom" is where the older girls were having their evening class.



The children have been making slow but steady progress at school. Besides school, they have been performing rather impressively in sit and draws, and especially in group dance performances on several occasions such as Teachers' day, Puja festivities, and cultural programs in school and the local community. They even had an extraordinary public performance at Madhusudan Mancha to their credit. Below is an example of one of their drawings during a mock practice before a sit and draw (the theme was "nature"). The girls are slowly growing to take studies more seriously. Later this year, some of them hope to sit for class five entrance exams for one of the more 'elite' and better-known schools in the city.

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Two of the main problems that seemed to continue to trouble them are 1) finding committed teachers for the older girls - who would stay for long term and teach the girls with high academic expectations, and 2) certain behavioral problems, temper tantrums that continue to trouble one of the older girls in particular. A third problem is with finding an administrative assistant who would oversee the daily affairs and help Michelle with some of the administrative work. At present, Michelle seemed to have found a temporary help, but was on the lookout for a more permanent solution.



Archives at Shishur Sevay (Jan - Dec, 2009)

Michelle maintains a day-to-day account of the life at Shishur Sevay on her blog. Here are the diary entries from the past year.

December 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/12/index.html
November 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/11/index.html
October 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/10/index.html
September 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/09/index.html
August 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/08/index.html
July 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/07/index.html
June 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/06/index.html
May 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/05/index.html
April 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/04/index.html
March 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/03/index.html
February 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/02/index.html
January 2009: http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/01/index.html

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Photographs:



Photos: L to R: Rani cozies up in woollens; An elated Bornali; Ganga showing her disapproval with a scream, very uncharacteristic of her usual happy self; Rani holding Michelle's hand and standing on her feet; I am playing drums to Rani (she loves percussion!); Ganga back to her jolly self in the childrens' dorm room.