

Sakhee Sewa visits South India Charity Projects

Shishukunj Vidyalaya and Sebastian Hunter Memorial Trust



Many of us donate, sponsor, leave legacies or take part in events for good causes that will change people's lives in some way or other. There is poverty, lack of education, disability, and illness's all around us in this country and abroad. People in Britain have a good heart and give generously. This act of giving is growth in our spiritual lives and makes us feel good, whole and connected with the world.

In under-developed countries many of us feel deep sorrow but think that there is nothing they can do. The scale of poverty is immense. While poverty is indeed extreme and widespread, we can make a small difference.

Inspired by selfless women, we formed a group called '**Sakhees Sewa**' - a group of 8 friends who are committed to Sewa (voluntary work). Our aim is to learn about the circumstances of underprivileged children and women and try and improve their quality of life by sharing our knowledge of health, hygiene, education and empowerment in a fun and interactive way.

Our first two Sewa trips were to the slums of Gujarat. Our third trip was in March 2015 where only four Sakhees were able to travel. Mina Haria, Sunita Dhanani, Shila Shah and myself, Laxmi Patel. This trip took us to BGMS Ashram – Shishukunj Vidyalaya for under privileged children in suburbs of Bangalore and to the Sebastian Hunters Memorials Trust's (Seb) projects supporting tribal villages in the foothill of Jahawadi Hills in Vellore.

We stayed for one week at Shishukunj Vidyalaya which houses 125 children from 6-16yrs with a ratio of 75% of girls to 25% boys. Most of the children have been abandoned, orphaned or are from dysfunctional families. One Shakti has raised funds to support this Ashram in the past and it was a pleasure to see the progress the Ashram has made.

Babubhai (a fieldworker of Shishukunj) came across BGMS whilst on his search of Sewa for Children. Babubhai became heavily involved when he saw the plight of the children and became a guardian to them. Through Shishukunj and well-wishers the whole Ashram has been transformed. The dormitories which once housed triple bunk beds with double occupancy now houses single beds and single occupancy per bed. A new temple, a sports hall and now a School has been built on the premises. The once muddy ground now has paving and a garden for the children to walk and play on.

What did we do at **Shishukunj Vidyalaya Bangalore?**

Mina and I with our skills set, took yoga laughter, warming and loosening sessions. We also taught in classes – the importance of studies, active listening and First Aid and hygiene for children.



Sunita took on a big challenge to teach delicate and taboo subjects on puberty, menstruation, 'safe and unsafe touch' and hygiene to the children and the teachers as well.



Shila had researched environmentally friendly sanitary pads. An accountant by profession but here was teaching girls how to cut, sew and use Sanitary Napkins. All the sessions both in Bangalore and Vellore were a great success. We believe that these basic hygiene lessons will make a big difference to their lives.

Any opportunity we got, we taught how to hand wash, brush teeth and the general discipline of cleanliness around the Ashram. We had discussions with the young leaders, reflecting on the day and where improvements could be made.

The children had exams in two weeks' time so we played Memory games involving cards, names and pictures and guided them how best to revise through fun. They told us they had

never laughed so much. It was great to witness their joy when they experienced the love and affection from us.

We fulfilled our UK donor's wishes of giving fruits and treats like ice cream. Books, pens, pencils and hair bands were distributed to children and women both in BGMS and in Vellore.

Sebastian Hunter Memorial Trust



From Bangalore we headed to Vellore where we were met by Emma who works for the Sebastian Hunter Memorial Trust, www.sebsschool.org. Emma, well connected, well educated, a respected and caring person worked within the community changing many people's lives. We had first communicated with her only two months before our visit. She did not know of Shishukunj or of Sakhee Sewa and yet she pre planned our visits and supported us throughout our time in Vellore.

Emma took us to see many of Sebastian Hunters Memorials Trust's (Seb) projects. Please see their website for more information. www.sebsschool.org

For a day we visited Thandyakottai via an Eco Trail, high in the Jahawadi Hills set up to give women work. There is very little arable land. Men are in prison due to being caught making illegal alcohol or chopping and selling sandalwood. Many women are left to fend for their families.

To help these women Emma and her team started cottages industries like soap making and poultry farming so that they could earn some money.

We had supported a project and collected funds from our well-wishers to donate 10 pedal operated sewing machines. Emma had put in place a training programme for 10 days for 30 women, from which 10 women would be selected for receiving the machines. They would start making and selling their produce and at some point would start paying back ½ of the machine cost for purchasing further machines.

Here there were childhood marriages. Girls would go to the betrothed and live with him for 3-6 months. If she got pregnant she would marry him. If not, she would come home. Babies were gifts of God. We met a young woman of 18yrs with a 4 year old daughter, a 24 year old with 5 children. Life expectancy was 45yrs. Widows were treated very badly. It was a hard life for women and some would eat poisonous berries from the forest to end their lives. Water was collected from the spring water hole where animals also drank.

When teaching about the menstrual cycle with an interpreter, we were surprised to learn that they did not know 'how' you needed a man to conceive. We were put on the spot and tactfully we explained. It was real eye opener for some of the women. We gave them health tips and first aid.

Seb projects have also built 5 schools around the hills of Jahawadi. The government has taken over one of the schools after the successful attendance of the students. We had opportunities to be with the children and did similar things as we did in Bangalore. We learnt that payments were made to parents who allowed their young children to be taken away in trucks at night time for child labour. Schooling was the best thing to break this horrible chain of events.

What did we get out of it?

We Sakhee's feel very privileged to have visited and served these projects, some so remote that alone we could never know of, or reach them. We are so fortunate to have met some hard working and inspirational people. We feel truly blessed to have been in a position to witness the joy of giving. Of making maybe a small difference but bringing them nearer to the world we would like to live in.

We had to think on our feet, to be spontaneous, creative, and communicative. To be open to learn new skills. Being part of Sakhee Sewa we have grown internally, become a little more confident. We have a lot to learn and more to give and have been humbled and blessed by our experiences.

We hope you have enjoyed being part of our journey.

Laxmi
(One Shakti Yoga Instructor)