

Special Report of Mumbai Visit - July 2002

Twenty three children and three teachers and us - we had all been to Mumbai for eleven days. The days were packed with events and meeting people. The whole trip started with Ragh and I talking budgets and the five children from Mumbai and Niru listening. They wanted to 'raise funds' by putting up a show. Ragh and I immediately agreed which surprised them. Our motive was to have them understand the work involved in putting up such a show; to show the team effort that is required; and finally, since they are all very bright children but tend towards the casual, to teach them the joy of effort and the joy of hard work. It seemed an easy way to teach them those values: rather than through academics where every one grows too serious. So, we told them that they'd have to choose the songs, decide on skits and write the script themselves and we would help them if they asked for help. They chose nine songs and wrote a number of skits. Most of the scripting was done by Niru and they were hilarious. But of course we did censor somethings for fear of offending sensibilities. The songs ranged from the very serious - two were in Sanskrit, one in English and the rest were in Hindi to suit the audience. All the songs were tough - originally sung by MS, and other classical singers of the north. But they really practiced long, hard and cheerfully. Of course there were moments when they felt they had taken on more than they'd expected! Then, when they got their act ready, they trained 13 children from the village to chant the 15th chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, to dance for two of the songs they were to sing. The age group from 5 to 9 years. All of it took a good month and a half.

For the trip itself, we had Sushila (Aruna's sister) arrange everything - our stay, food, auditorium, sight seeing, bus... She was aided by the parents and her own teachers. We sent out invitations to all our present and prospective donors. On the 19th evening we had the programme. The children were amazed : there were about 400 people who wanted to see them! The programme went off beautifully. For the first time they were singing along with musical accompaniment and using the mike. It took them a few minutes to get used to. The children from the school too went on stage and sang and danced and spoke their lines in skits as though they had been doing all that all their lives - and these are children who have never seen an a/c auditorium!

The programme was a success. The surprise item was Niru and Ragh singing a bhajan - it was the first time that both were on stage! Niru had

prevailed on him to sing with her. Niru and Ramie had chosen 4 songs to be sung entitled 'The world we are inheriting and the world we wish to leave behind.' The first is a prayer : 'Please, give us peace, give us light, give us freedom, give us sunshine, give us friends, flowers, let us live. Lord, all our lives we have prayed for better world, prayed for peace....' The original is a song by an Israeli - Illanit.. For the world they'd leave behind they sang that their faith in the Lord is so complete that they'd accept life's ups and downs equably; that their pass word will be cooperation and good will and harmony. The audience was moved. They loved all the skits. One was a musical entitled : A day at Shikshayatan. Niru's humour was greatly appreciated. She had put together notes from various 'varnams' to make it sound like an argument and while she and Ramie sang the notes, the other four children - Tanvi, Dhruv, Rushabh Bheda and Rushabh Vora - pantomimed an argument they had whilst playing a game of cards. Niru gave the vote of thanks.

Every invitee was given a thank you card made by the children, with a photo of the children in school and a Mira agarbatti.

The evening ended at 2300 hrs but the children were too excited to go back to the rooms. The next day, Sushila rang up and said that the collection was 50,000/- in cash and as much in cheque. The cheques are still coming in. We have brought home a lakh after all expenses. The children had hoped to cover costs only and even then they expected the expenses to be 20,000/- The rest of the stay we took the children and teachers sight seeing. IMax a virtual reality theatre, planetarium, science centre, Borivali national park to see white Siberian tigers, Kanheri caves to see Buddhist cave viharas, south Mumbai to see the skyline and an elevator ride and a boat ride and one day to shop! The days were full and each evening the children came exhausted physically but having learned a lot.

Two incidents that made the trip memorable for me

The Lions Club presented the children with new clothes for games. When we got back to the rooms, I asked the children whether they'd like the clothes for themselves or give the ones we left behind and to a child they said that they'd like to give.

The second were the caterers who fed us through the trip. They cooked food with great love and ensured that the children were fed well. And on special days they made sweets for the children. The children were so happy.

There will be a Mumbai exhibition of photos, things bought, essays and compositions for the benefit of those who remained at AVK. The exhibition will last a week giving the children time to learn and read.

Before we left for Mumbai we had talked to the children all that they would see. We talked to them about the physical features of the land they would traverse, the crops that they would see and of the soil. We also talked of the stations they would pass and what they are famous for. So the children enjoyed the train ride to and fro. Since I've always talked of snow capped mountains some of the children felt a little cheated that the Western and Eastern ghats had no snow! We also taught the children to use Western style toilets, to eat with spoons. The result was that they were at home in new situations too.

Since we were in Mumbai during the monsoons there were misgivings amongst the Mumbai people that the whole trip would be a wash out. There were rains through the trip but never did it come in the way. That was Mother being with us all the time. In fact, on the last day the children said that they hadn't seen typical Mumbai rain and the sky opened up for an hour. So we enjoyed that also.

We had a number of experiences in Mumbai with the traffic police. In one instance we needed to make a U turn and there was no way to do so. There was a traffic cop whom we appealed to and he allowed a special turn. So we gave him a thank you card and batti too. He was red with laughter and when the children all shouted bye to him his face lit up like a Christmas tree. The other instance there was a very grouchy cop who caught us making a left turn where we shouldn't have. When we lived in Mumbai that was the road we took to go to the museum. The policeman abused the driver and I told him that I was to blame since the driver was only acting on instructions. The policeman said that his job was to catch all those who made mistakes. I told him a teacher was like a policeman only the teacher is expected to catch a child before he made the mistake - if he really cared he should have stood before the turn. He looked at me grumpily and asked for a bribe of 50 rupees. I gave him and took the children to the museum. When we got back the driver said that the policeman wanted to see me. He smiled and said, " I asked your driver about you when I saw all the children obviously from a village. Your driver told me about your work and your children. He has been driving you around for the last five days. I even bought him a tea. I may not donate to

your cause but at least let me not take anything from you." And he returned the money.

We got back on Friday -26th. When asked what they had learned from the entire exercise this is what each had to say:

Nirupama : 14 yrs Work is fun and ensuring every body also has fun is what makes it more fun! And your reward is proportionate to your work plus a little more!

Rushabh Bheda 12 yrs :

The impact of the trip on me:

To prepare for a trip is to know before hand what I am going to do, see and meet. At museums and science centers, read instructions before operating a gadget. Now I know what we have to do with small children. I had fun .I gained more information.

The impact of the programme

No more stage fear. And never get nervous even if I make a mistake. 80% percent was the practice and 20% percent was my work on the spot that helped me overcome my nervousness.

Dhruv Patel. 11yrs :

1.On this trip I got a lot of information through the places I visited.

2.The impact of the programme on me was that we should be organised.

And we should not get upset or nervous at the last moment even if things are not as we prepared.

Ramya Seshadri 13 yrs

The impact the journey on the train had on me:

I learnt that traveling with lots of smaller kids isn't always fun. But on the other hand traveling with three people other than myself isn't much fun either, so I figured out it is better with lots people around. Another thing I learnt is that if I didn't show any anger to kids who troubled me, they took greater advantage!

The impact the show had on me:

I came to know that if I get tense then I would not gain anything. One more thing I learnt is that if you do something beautifully - that you should work out of your heart - and if you do something beautifully and the best you can, then the people who are waiting eagerly for you will be most happy.I learnt another thing that is every thing should be done perfectly and completely.

Tanvi 11 yrs :

The impact the journey had on me:

On this trip, I learnt that to wherever I go I should ask for information. Another thing I learnt is that traveling in a group is fun.

The impact the show had on me:

I overcame stage-fear. I learnt that we must be well organised. We mustn't get upset at the last minute. We should not change anything which is already set. If you get tense then nothing will get better.

Rushabh Vora :

Where ever we go we should read and do some homework before we go somewhere. Before we do any work we should read and understand.

The impact the show had on me :

My stage fear has gone. I thought my relatives will come but then I didn't pay any attention to them. I was concentrated in my dance or song. Now I know how to take care of small children. On 19.7.2002 the show went beautifully because 60% for practice 20% for confidence 20% for braveness.

The teachers too had this to say of their experience

Suryakala :

1. I felt as if I had gone out with my family like I used to with my own parents. I felt young again.

2. I learnt that I could speak without feeling shy / open hearted speech, the warmth - one need not be quiet and sad because of material lack.

3. I learnt that age does not matter, that one could have fun seeing new places and experience new things.

4. I learnt that one need not know any one to make a person feel important and at home.

5. I am going to be outgoing from now.

Sundari :

1. I was most struck by people's openness. Every one was always smiling - and looked fresh even at 11:30 at night!

2. I would like to make my children and the children at school be more socially aware people; I'd like to guide them about how easy life can be if there is team effort, if people work together. Here we always wait to be asked; it is better to offer help and ensure work is completed.

3. I understand the need for computers today: I understand that if our children have to get what children in Mumbai get - science centers, planetarium and such like - our children need a medium that will be a good substitute. I now intend to buy a computer at home too.

4. I have also learned that I can ask for what I need / want. I have never voiced my thoughts for a long time now. Now, after returning from Mumbai I have told my husband that our children should have a computer and he has agreed.

She quoted the sentences that moved her most during the trip:

Gayatri : We give so we get.

Padmini : I am very happy to have the teachers from AVK in my home,

having lunch. Am I dreaming?

Manoj : You are all doing a good job, keep it up.

About Aaji(Tanvi's grandmother): Her love for our children as though they were all her own grandchildren.

About Sushila : She wanted to show off our children as though they were children of her school.

Lakshmi :

1. I had always thought I was doing a lot for my child until I saw the kind of games and books that children in Mumbai have. I wish I had seen such shops and books earlier. Now I have to find ways to ensure that I quickly close the gap by sending him to workshops / camps.

2. I was struck by the easy informality Mumbai - no one stood ceremony.

3. I was also struck by the warmth - even if they are all friends and well wishers - they all did come and spend as much time as they could and they were so excited about their own city and showed it off with such enthusiasm.

4. I shall do for the children here at school whatever I think they miss by being here in the village.

5. I was most struck by the Prince of Wales museum's Ratan Tata's collection. For the first time it occurred to me that as a rich man he has enjoyed his wealth - something that no text book relates. That we have never been encouraged to spend our money for joyful things like a painting! It gave me a new insight into what is true richness.

All this was possible because of you and your continued support. We thank you for having come and met our children. They shall treasure this trip. Even now some have not really come back to us! All that's your love showered on them.