

# Sambrama

A Bandhavi newsletter  
Issue 3, July 2007

## Keeping hope alive

*I am very free in Visthar  
I am like a flying bird  
Not just that, I am free  
To take whatever path I feel.*

*All children should have  
this freedom, that I have.*

- Renuka L., Age 14



This is so heartening and a reminder of the awesome responsibility to enable our girls experience authentic freedom and the nurturing spirit to embrace and heal others who are on a common journey. The 10<sup>th</sup> of December, International Human Rights Day, marked a milestone in this journey- Bandhavi was one year old.

*Bandhavi* and *Samagra Shikshana Shale* (SSS) reflect the politics and praxis of Visthar in responding to contemporary forms of slavery. There is no other way to explain the Devadasi system. In spite of legislation, the practice remains alive; underground but alive. A case in point is the article in the Kannada daily *Udayavani* of July 9<sup>th</sup> 2007 reporting the visit of Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy to Koppal district, meeting with over 2000 Devadasis who had gathered to present their legitimate demands. The manifestations might vary from region to region but the practice of untouchability and virulent gender based discrimination and violence is obvious and must be addressed.

In this the third issue of *Sambrama* we have attempted to let the children enter into a conversation with the readers. Several individual donors who are unable to visit make enquiries about an average day at Bandhavi and the experiences at school. We hope this issue will help provide the information. Though we have tried to be faithful in carrying the stories, pardon us for inaccuracies in translation.

Renuka's poem is a powerful message. This is the message of most of the girls at Bandhavi. The "broken people" have the spirit and potential to embrace others like them and in that process bring about healing. An empowerment for themselves and seeds of transformation for the rest of us. The calendar 2008 is an expression of this spirit and power.

And we continue to celebrate God's gift of life and grace that enables the girls to keep hope alive and to be the bearers of love and peace.

### The Bandhavi journey

The Bandhavi programme is based on a three pronged approach of rescue, rehabilitation and advocacy. Girl children at risk of being dedicated as Devadasis are identified with the help of local civil society organisations and encouraged to participate in a program of residential care and schooling. Through the programme at *Bandhavi* and *Samagra Shikshana Shale* they are rehabilitated and empowered to take control of their lives. The program follows *a rights based approach* which involves networking, campaigns and advocacy with likeminded organisations. The program includes working with and through NGO partners involved in empowering the Devadasi communities to resist violation of their rights and explore alternative livelihoods.

### Seeds of an authentic community

We live in a beautiful garden with many trees, flowers and vegetables. In our campus there are many girls and the teachers give us a good education and all of our needs are met.

In Visthar we see many sisters and brothers living together like one family I feel.

M. Rajeshwari, 10 yrs

"*Neat and tidy*" is how you would describe the girls dormitory if you would walk into it after the girls have

left for school. The mattresses are rolled up and everything has been put back in place. But this is a far cry from how it used to be. The girls had no concept of order or cleanliness – they would also stow their soiled clothes any which where - their bedding would never be rolled up and their clothes would be strewn all over. It took months of repeated coaxing reprimanding and disciplining to reach this stage of cleanliness and respect for space. Even today we have occasional lapses which we counter with additional chores after school hours.

Some of the other issues that programme staff and house parents continue to tackle are deep seated feelings of insecurity, shame, fear, anger and anxiety that are manifested in bouts of crying and destructive behaviour. It takes great sensitivity and skills to deal with behavioural problems like extremely disorganized behaviour, emotional problems, bedwetting, loss of appetite, nail biting, squabbling and daydreaming.

The ongoing counselling programme was initiated in the month of October 2006. Earlier there had been repeated references to the word garbage either in the children's drawings, paintings, narrations or theatre presentations. Family life and domestic bliss were unexperienced joys – but today at Bandhavi hope has slowly struck ground, taken root and is slowly blossoming.

The head of the Bandhavi programme, Leena, and our house parent Rathi have lovingly and tirelessly committed themselves to the emotional health of the girls enabling the children to come to grips with the realities of their world – to discover their hidden potential and blossom into creative and caring human beings.

At Bandhavi children learn to love and care for each other. Working among these very precious, tender human beings is indeed a joyful, meaningful and satisfying experience.

Leena, Program Head Bandhavi

### Exploring the wholeness and holiness of life

While we hope that the intellectual stimulus at SSS will excite a life long desire to learn we also seek to provide the children with a spiritual nurture that will inspire them to grow as authentic human beings. We believe that this spiritual nurture would assist them in leading a life with

a clear purpose, help them in forging strong relationships and provide them with the ability to deal with difficult situations. The spiritual guidance in Bandhavi places the child in the center and assists her in forging a new network of relationships with self, the other, the environment and God. This is done through storytelling, music, yoga, games and meditation.



## A milestone

It was the fulfilment of a long awaited dream - the inauguration of *Bandhavi* (Friendship in Kannada). The programme for the children of Devadasis was inaugurated on Human Rights Day December 10, 2005. This initiative was through a strong conviction and commitment to the cause of these girls existing in the brink of disaster. A year later – Bandhavi stands on sure foundations and it is time to celebrate our journey.



The day dawned bright on December 10, 2006 and the girls turned out in their best clothes for the procession that marked the beginning of the anniversary celebration. They congregated under the tamarind tree together with the adult invitees. A single pigeon took to the skies symbolising the aspiring freedom of the girls.

Guests included Dr K.C. Abraham, Mr Sathish Samuel, Professors Hasnath and Hasan Mansur, representatives from NGO partners, Prof. Per Anderson and students from USA and our neighbors: Liza's home and Kutumba.

The beat of the Tamte played by men from the village had people's pulse racing and their feet tapping. The girls identified with the music and danced drawing the adults into the process. The movements and the mood was one of liberation - a conscious walking away from slavery.

## Learning to Learn

Child centred education forms the core of the Curriculum at SSS. The children are enrolled under the Karnataka Open School and are grouped as per their aptitudes, skills and current pace of learning. They learn Kannada, English, Hindi, General Science, Social studies and Mathematics. SSS also gives importance to social education and vocational training.

Paper making, pottery, tailoring, carpentry, animal husbandry and agriculture are an integral part of the learning. The children have a new project of tending 1500 pineapple plants. In partnership with Spastic





Society of Karnataka they learn baking, drawing and animation.

The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wish to learn.

J. Lubbock

## Namma Shale (Our School)

The environment at our school is very good. The way our school is built is very nice. We keep our school and classrooms neat and tidy.

We have prayers at 9 in the morning. Then we read and discuss the newspaper. We also read inspiring poems and quotes. Everyday we learn different things. Kannada, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science are some of the subjects we study. Our teacher explains in a way we understand. If we do not understand we ask questions and this makes our teachers happy.

We also learn pottery, paper making, tailoring, bakery, drawing and cookery. We go to the Spastic Society in Indiranagar to learn bakery, drawing and cookery. Some of us also learn animation there.

At the pottery class we work with clay. We learn to create dolls and other beautiful things. In the paper unit, we listen and observe carefully to what Stephen *anna* teaches us. We use old newspaper, old clothes and other waste material to make paper. We also learn to make boxes, paper bags, birds, houses and many different things.

R. Nimbamma (12 yrs) and N. Eramma (10 yrs).

## From spectators to spec-actors

15 children from Bandhavi participated in a Theater workshop on the 7th of March, 2007. The workshop was conducted by Jon from Thailand and Richard from Australia, theatre persons from Makhomphom Theater Group, Thailand

The children were encouraged to perform a dance and a skit so as to get an understanding of their abilities. This was followed by group building exercises designed to enable participants see the value of team work. The trainers then started with the delineation of Image Theatre. Image Theatre is a kind of dialectic theatre, as those who view the image created are also able to 'mold' and 'sculpt' the bodies of the participants to more accurately portray their opinions on the issue. This process is repeated until a general consensus is found, in which all are content that the image is an accurate representation.

The facilitators started with the depiction of physical structures such as a Church, Temple etc. and then moved on to the presentation of a problem. They then explored the process of changing the situation and concluded with the development of a solution. A process of this kind aids in interiorisation of values and ideas.

## Breaking Barriers, Building Communities

Besides our intensive journey with the girls, we also have an involvement with the mothers. This we carry forward in the form of a campaign on violence against women and projecting the Devadasi system as a glaring example of a violation of rights and a gender based violence.





International women's day '07 saw girls at Bandhavi participate in postermaking, being part of a procession and slogan raising against patriarchal structures and systems that dehumanise, calling for a more inclusive, nurturing and healing society. This very process (girls participation in international women's day celebration) was reenacted at Raichur, during the women's day event. This not only brought tears to the mothers but also a boost encouraging them to march to the respective government department, making their demands known as Devadasis.

### *Equal rights for everyone*

At the women's day celebration I learnt that women have rights. I also became aware of how the community and the society views woman, why they celebrate Women's Day and also the different kinds of problems women face today. I thought about how to find solutions for these problems. I also became aware of the Devadasi system and who was responsible to make them devadasis. It is very unjust and it should be stopped.

Women should not be looked down on. Women should be paid equally for their work. All this was explained through drama. I also learnt that one should not believe in superstitions. Alcoholism takes away the basic needs like food, shelter and clothes. The whole family will be on the streets. These are all very wrong. There are many girls like me who live in poverty, children of labourers – schools should be built for them district wise. They should all receive basic facilities. We submitted a letter to the government toward this. This made me very happy because I was helping other children. I am very glad that I was involved in this programme.

-Padma A., 14 yrs

### *Peace rally*

India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy

We participated in a rally organised under the Mahatama Gandhi Statue at MG Road, Bangalore. This was to condemn the bombing of the Samjhauta Express. The staff and students of SSS, Visthar and School of Peace were also present. After the rally Prof Ramesh spoke about world Peace. By participating in this rally I became aware of how there are problems that rise out of caste and religious discriminations between countries and how even wars are fought. Because of this pain and death result. It is my desire that neighbouring countries should live together with cooperation and peace.

Padma A., 14 yrs

### *Women's Rights*

I participated in the women's day rally at Bannappa Park. At the rally a little girl spoke about her life - about how her parents had sent her to become a Devadasi when she was very young. She spoke about her trials boldly in front of all the people at the rally. Many physically handicapped people were also there. I was very troubled listening to all their problems. Some boys sang about society, and how there are no rights for children, how women are suppressed and discriminated against in our society. They do not allow them to be educated. I learnt about all this. Devadasi system should be stopped. All the women protested vehemently and I too joined with this group and protested.

Lakshmi, 13 yrs

71 children returned to their homes on a 15 day vacation to be with their community; to share their stories, their joys. 8 girls (5 from Bijapur and 3 from Adoni) did not come back after the vacations. This was a major set back and disappointment. Despite all our attempts and education these children have been kept back with the mala fide intention of making them Devadasis.

*We need to be conscious of the power of evil and hence reorient our strategies. Dilemmas will remain and we certainly do not have all the answers.* Although we are all disappointed at losing these girls there is still hope... looking at the girls who have returned with dreams in their eyes. This gives us strength and motivation to continue our journey.

- Sham Khalil, Project Co-ordinator

## Celebration of festivals

Celebrating festivals is an excellent way to celebrate life and also provide the children with a variety of creative expressions of joy. Festivals while fostering integration, can also create valuable sensory memories that connect us to tradition and to nationhood. At Bandhavi - *Onam*, *Dassara*, Christmas, Republic Day, Independence Day and Children's day were celebrated with gusto among other festivals. Conscious efforts are made to enable children go beyond the materialistic orientation and to remain with the beauty of each festival.

## Festival of Just-Peace

The festival of Just Peace was a festival with a difference. It was a day long carnival at Visthar on the 5th of May 2007. It was a celebration of the dreams, hopes and valiant struggles of people against all odds and the hope that "another world is indeed possible" The festival was also a culmination of the 'School of Peace,' a four month training programme for participants from conflict zones in South and South East Asia, grappling with perspectives and issues of justice and peace (just peace).

The carnival included an international film festival, international food festival, photo exhibitions of people's struggles, painting exhibition, sale of arts and crafts and other rural products and culminated with cultural performances of music, dance and drama. The children from Bandhavi enthusiastically participated in the Festival of Peace. Fully aware of the reason and concept behind the festival they wholeheartedly aligned themselves with the festival. Apart from their empathy and their role in the inaugural, they were also given a stall of their own in the food court.



With the support of the staff the children took turns at the different activities in the stall. They were in high spirits, chattering gaily as they rolled, stuffed and fried making various kinds of *bhajis* - onion, potatoes and chilli. The stall was a huge success and the children donated the money that they had earned to the cause of the festival.

## A South - South Solidarity



The calendar 2008 is out and is already receiving rave reviews in Europe. This is a Bandhavi product and we have proudly displayed this at the back of the calendar. From the making of the paper to the drawings (warli tradition) it was always the girls who were in the fore front. And then it was Mercy aunty who thought up the idea of finding texts for the drawing. Each one had a text based on the UN convention on Child Rights in child friendly language. All of this is special. Now add to it the fact that this calendar was offered to KNH not only for extending their advocacy work but with a request to market the product and to share the proceeds with another children's effort in another part of the world. At the time of writing Visthar are delighted to have news that KNH would order 3000 calendars and the proceeds to be shared with Starehe Girls' Centre, Nairobi. A contact has been established. This is not merely South - South, but a solidarity of hope.

It was a special gift to be invited and to participate both at the Kirchentag and subsequently at meetings at KNH, Duisburg. I thank KNH for making this possible. For all their extensive work, KNH remains humble 'incarnating' themselves among the excluded. I pray that they will deepen their analysis and sustain their journey.

- David Selvaraj, Visthar

## The Bandhavi and SSS team

The members of the Bandhavi and SSS team are like pillars that hold up a shelter to our children as they are nurtured and cared for to develop into independent authentic human beings.

Each of our team members provide vital service as they carry on their daily work. Raju, Shankar, Radha, Shakila continue to widen the horizons of the children Rathi continues as Houseparent and (is also learning to drive now) Leena as the Project head of Bandhavi is like a mother to the children committed to their well being and growth. Sham and Mercy as Project co-ordinator and Associate Director of Programmes continue to steer and guide the Programme to explore new frontiers while David as Director continues to challenge and inspire all of us everyday.

We are also glad to welcome two new staff members to the Bandhavi team Sheela Halkurike as one of our house parent and Halkurike Shivashankar as our Educational coordinator.

Fare thee well!

The class room at Bandhavi was filled with effervescent emotions and overflowing with giggling girls. It was a farewell function but the kids were paradoxically in high spirits. But that was because Sebastian, was keeping them in splits and the kids were obliging him being all keyed up with emotion at the thought of losing their dear teachers, Latha, Shylaja, and Sebastian. The kids had organised a farewell program for their dear teachers with a song of blessing and a flower dance conceptualised and choreographed by themselves. But when the farewell speeches began the tears started flowing in real earnest. It was a poignant moment when the staff who were bidding adieu tried to leave the children with words of wisdom and advice - the kids kept hanging on to their words, literally and one child wouldn't let go of Shailaja's pallu as she followed her gentle movements around. The children presented them with charming home made bouquets at the end of the farewell.

There are two lasting bequests we can give our children. One is roots, the other is wings.

Carter



## Looking ahead

At Visthar plans have been afoot to build a new residential block for another 100 children. The estimated cost of the building too has been approved by KNH. On the 12 of April 2007 the children at Bandhavi performed the ground breaking ceremony along with the delegates from the KNH partners meeting.

## People journeying with us

Some times the people that cross our paths open for us doors that we have not glimpsed yet. We take this opportunity to thank our esteemed visitors who spent time at Bandhavi and have thus opened many doors for us. They continue to inspire us with their lives. Liana Hoornweg from Edukans, Shobha Ganne, Bala Subramaniam, Sarah Lizzul, Mary, Karen and friends, Dietmar Roller, Christian Casper, Rolf Krammer, Katja Korf and Beate Feldkamp from KNH, Thomas Jayaraj and Hasnath Mansur. *It was indeed very special to have Swami Agnivesh the international president of the Arya Samaj visit us and also Dr. Ruth Manorama the latest recipient of the Alternative Nobel Prize Award.*



We are grateful for the commitment and generosity of our institutional donors KNH and Edukans which keeps Bandhavi functioning smoothly and also for the thoughtful benevolence of many others.

Sometimes a small thing you do can mean everything in another person's life especially in the life of a child who is denied her rights. Heart felt thank yous from all of us go out to: Lions Club Kalyannagar, Bangalore, Mary Paul of Kutumba, Frontier Management Center, Munniamma, Chandra Shahayaraj, Ullas Reddy, Francis Salvadore, Latha Reddy, Theresa Shirley, Radha, Sebastian, John and Sham Khalil from Visthar, Lauren Fuler, Lindsey Fox, Lily, Mary and Melony from SJPD, Sonia Khalil, Maria Khalil, Prof. Hassanath Mansoor, Amala Maraina, Bala, Andreas Reddy, Peter, Lily, Pauline Chinnappa, Charles Rosemary, Diary Chinnappa, Mary, Mabel, Karen, Lazer Susheela, Theresa, Carleena Reddy, ING Vysa, Peoples Pro, George, Fr Vincent, Sujatha Stephen, Bal Raj, Shamala, Sreenivasanilaya (CHC) Mary Joyce, Rev. Mohan Larbeer, Green Channel, Kowlon Union Church, Wakonda Church, Max Ediger (SOP), Suresh Paul, Dr. Rebeca Jacob, Dr. Deepa Subramanyam, Rev. Dr. Mike Butterworth, Student's Christian Movement, Dominic, and Biblionef, Holland.



Bandhavi team at work

Where life blossoms  
Where exploitation is rooted out  
Where humane relationships are forged  
That is a garden for children  
That is Bandhavi

Halkurike Shivashankar,  
*Educational coordinator*

## An invitation to partnership

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life.

- Enroll as a friend of Bandhavi paying a minimum of Rs.1200 per annum
- Enroll as a volunteer of Bandhavi and assist in teaching, health care, fundraising and documentation.
- Enroll as a one time donor and contribute towards an endowment fund, or capital fund
- Buy the calendar produced by the children.



Children with gifts from Biblionef



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