

# Sambrama

A Bandhavi newsletter

Issue 1, April 2006



## Celebrating the girl child

Literally going deep into a (dry) well, they dispelled the fears of the adults. In a rare display of artistic skills they astounded those who had gathered. The children of Bandhavi led from the front in a celebration of the International Women's Day at the Resource and Learning Centre, Visthar. The colours, symbols (painted by the children), the rangoli, and the colourful clothes provided the backdrop for the graceful yet vibrant moments and soul stirring performances. Acting as seeds they coiled on the ground. Responding to nurture and care, they grew as plants. In an awesome performance of cutting edge theatre they claimed to be *seeds of freedom* and *seeds of creativity*, breaking barriers and building authentic communities of hope and life for all. And yet only three months ago they were, as a friend and well wisher observed, "voiceless".

Bandhavi, a project of Visthar, is a tiny effort to stand with and facilitate growth through holistic care and nurture for 50 girls drawn from Madiga communities, more specifically children of Devadasis in North Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Bandhavi is a programme with residential facilities on the Visthar campus. By way of integrating the children with the community our girls participate in an educational programme, Samagra Shikshana Shaale, (also on the same campus) which includes other girl children, school drop outs from the neighbouring villages.

At the time of writing, we are yet to receive any kind of sustained funding. Visthar have in faith launched the initiative looking to the wider human family to pitch in and be part of the journey of affirming life in all its fullness. Our lives have been touched and is being daily altered. We have received a lot of praise for the intervention and some amount of practical support from individuals, churches and fellow NGOs. We would like to acknowledge your generosity and solicit your continuance in our journey.

We hope to bring out at least two issues of Sambrama, through which we will share stories of shame, courage, dignity and above all grace.



## Restoring Child Rights

*Every child has the right to survival, to live healthy, happy and free. Every child has the right to protection, to be free of all forms of exploitation and abuse, degrading treatment and neglect. Every child has the right to development, to learn and be self sufficient, to live her dream and find her potential, to play and enjoy friendships and love. Every child has the right to participation, to be respected and express herself, to be informed and free to think and believe.*

*(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)*

Fifty girl children stand up to claim their rights and Bandhavi is born. Bandhavi, a project of Visthar is a centre for nurture and creative development. Affirming the rights of the girl child to health, education, and a life free of abuse and violence, Bandhavi is a celebration of the indomitable spirit of girl children. The residential programme enables the girls to reclaim their childhood, freedom and dignity.

Located on our campus in an idyllic setting, Bandhavi situates learning in the context of living as community with nature. Every activity enables the children to grow as individuals, as well as build a community that lives in love, respect, trust and friendship. Over the next eight years the children will celebrate diversity, respect differences and learn to live in harmony with each other and with nature.

### *My life in the village*

*My life in the village is very beautiful. My village is very green and filled with fields, hills, streams, and ponds. I remember my school. I have very sweet memories of school because I used to have a bath, comb my hair and dress up and go to school. In the afternoon they would give us lunch and I had many friends. I used to share all my difficulties and pains with them. I used to spend the evenings singing, dancing and telling stories with my friends.*

*The festivals, customs, and fairs of my village are rich with colourful and emotional experiences. The sky in my village is black and filled with stars. My people have both love and hate for each other. Sometimes they fight but then they come together. I like the work done in my village such as ploughing the field, planting crops and taking the cattle to graze.*

*My village life on the whole is happy but along with this there is sadness, and fear. We are slaves because of our caste, customs and poverty. In order to forget all of this I used to sit with my elders and drink alcohol. This lets me forget my troubles and I am happy. I fly like a free bird and everything is mine yet I have nothing.*

*- Eramma, 11 years old*



*Rajeshwari's picture of her village*

## New Beginnings

At the inaugural of Bandhavi on the tenth of December 2005, children from North Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh who are at risk of being dedicated as Devadasis, stepped forth in courage and lit lamps of hope along with their mothers. Guests and well wishers brought greetings and encouragement to the children. Our chief guest Mr. Parthasarathy, leader of the Madiga Human Rights Forum, brought his message in poignant poetry and song. Speaking of the injustice done to the Madiga women through the Devadasi practice, he highlighted on issues of caste, gender and the abuse of religion and tradition.

### *My journey to Bandhavi*

*Where do I begin? My grandmother had already dedicated me to the goddess Huligamma. I am a new sacrifice to the Jogithi, or Devadasi system. My family is waiting with hope and dreams for me so I can earn for them. The rich people in my village want a new sacrifice. I had no hope of being freed from this situation because my father is sick, my mother is helpless and I have younger siblings. So I had decided to accept my fate.*

*At this time the women's group in my village spoke to my family about Bandhavi but they did not want to send me. It was very difficult for me to leave my family. But I had to decide quickly or the cunning people in my village would force my parents to sacrifice me to a wicked practice.*

*A new life was calling me and I made the decision. This is an important turning point in my life. My dreams for the future can come true because this new life is god's reward to me.*

- Renuka, 14 years old

## From Spectators to 'Specactors'

Over the past months the children have grown to love and enjoy living at Bandhavi. They have brought to Visthar a new vitality with their laughter and spontaneity. In this short period they have participated and contributed at various levels and to different constituencies.

- They have successfully planted and grown their very own kitchen garden.
- They enjoyed the children's exchange programme at Timbaktu Collective at Pennakonda in Andhra Pradesh.
- At the valedictory function of the Social Justice, Peace and Development Programme, (a semester long interdisciplinary course for students from the US), they interacted and joined in the activities of the event.
- At the Inaugural of the School of Peace (a course for international participants being held at Visthar), they brought the message of women's bond with the earth through song and dance.
- They won the prize for the dance programme at the children's carnival conducted by ECHO, a Bangalore based NGO.



*Performing at the School of Peace inaugural*

### *My life at Bandhavi*

*Bandhavi is a sacred space. This is my dream come true, an opportunity and a turning point in my life. This is not a school or a hostel but a temple. I am proud to be part of Bandhavi. The people at Bandhavi are representatives of god and I feel like I have found my family here. This is not just a school where lessons are taught. It is a community where we learn to live in respect and dignity. The environment of Bandhavi is free from hierarchy based on caste or class. I have felt more like a human being after I came here. My first lessons at Bandhavi were on being human, on sharing, participation and exchanging ideas. My mind, body and soul have truly blossomed here. The food, space, people, buildings and work done at Bandhavi is very good.*

*Bandhavi encourages me and instills courage in me to contribute to my community and my village. I wish to return to my village as a messenger to bring hope and new life to my people.*

*- Lalitha, 13 years old*



*Children with the fruit of their labour*



*Nurturing seeds of freedom and creativity*

### **Breaking Barriers, Building Communities**

Depicting life in their villages where girls are sacrificed to the goddess through the trickery of the religious and powerful, the Bandhavi children asked, “International Women’s Day for whom?” “You celebrate this day, but in our villages everyday girls are being sacrificed, what celebration is there for them?”

The Bandhavi children amazed, and pulled at our heart strings as they participated in song, dance and drama at the women’s day celebration at Visthar. Reflecting on the theme *Breaking Barriers, Building Communities*, the children painted, made clay models, and performed. Responses were quick as they were asked how they would protect the seeds of freedom and creativity that were planted in the drama. Their spontaneity and enthusiasm in the activities, and their fearlessness descending a deep dry well, left all who participated proud to be associated with them.



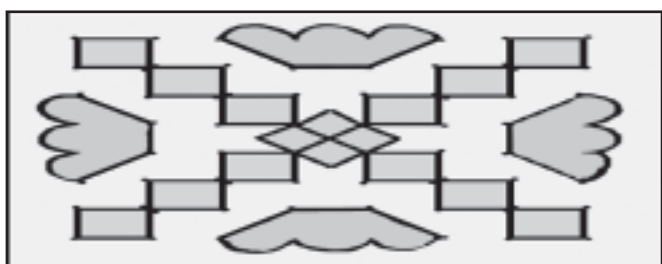
*Going into our own wells*





*The Bandhavi Team*

Visthar are committed to the Bandhavi project as we see it as a practical expression of our ongoing campaign on violence against women. In similar vein we are deeply committed to alternative education which we hope to undertake through the Samagra Shikshana Shaale for the children of Bandhavi and school dropouts from the neighbouring villages. Besides dedicating part of our buildings to the project we wish to ensure our ongoing support to the staff at Bandhavi and Samagra Shikshana Shaale.



*Devi's rangoli design*

### ***Discovering the child within***

*I do not have children of my own, but at Bandhavi I am the parent of 35 children. The world of Bandhavi is very different from the world outside. The children have created a world of openness, freedom, space for expression and creativity, trust, courage and confidence and I, with them, become a child once more.*

*Lakshmi S., House Parent, Bandhavi*

## Our Partners

We thank our NGO Partners: The Nava Jeevana Mahila Okkuta, SABALA, AARDIP and READ Anthyodaya at Raichur, Adoni and Bijapur respectively who have been working tirelessly with the devadasi community for many years. Through their experience and base in the community they have identified the children and worked with the mothers to bring them to Bandhavi. They continue to sustain their efforts through the women's organisations they promote. Hence the women's organisations and our NGO Partners continue to guide us every step of the way.

*READ Anthyodaya is grateful to the Bandhavi project that has a clear vision. It is really a hard step taken to work on this programme; the challenges are going to be many for all involved in this task. The adolescent girls will become great women of this country and their communities in the near future. They bloom where they are planted. READ Anthyodaya will stand by Bandhavi in all its ventures.*

*Sam Chelladurai,  
Executive Director, READ Centre*



*Relaxing after lunch*

## Looking Ahead

It is our striving that as the children grow from girls into young women they will not only receive their high school and pre – university certificates, vocational skills, and opportunities for further study, but will build an organic and vibrant community, even among themselves at Bandhavi. We look forward to seeing them become women who believe in the power within them, to change their situations and build lives of freedom and dignity.

We understand the financial implications of such a project and negotiations are underway with Concern India Foundation, Infosys Foundation, ING Vysya Foundation, and Kinder Not Hilfe (KNH). In the meantime we have launched the project with loans, advances and gifts from individuals and organisations.



*Celebrating Ugadi at Bandhavi*

### The Bandhavi Film

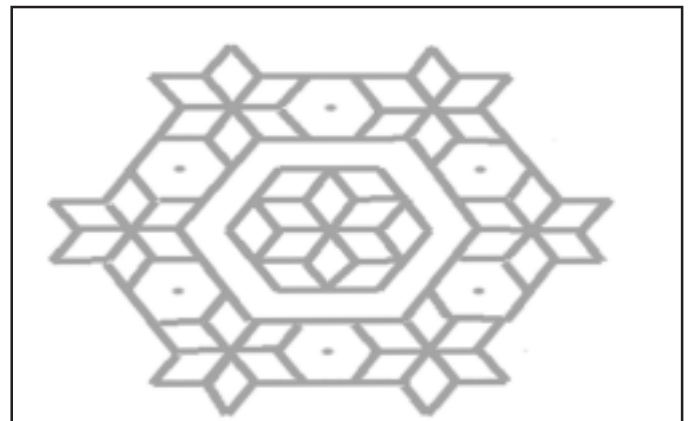
Visthar is proud to present a documentary film on Bandhavi, produced by Wietse Dijkstra, an intern from Holland. The film is available at Visthar and makes the journey with the children from their villages to Bandhavi.



### Greeting Cards for Diwali, Christmas and New Year

The children at Bandhavi are working on handmade greeting cards for Diwali, Christmas and New Year. The cards will be on sale shortly and can also be made to order.

The making of these cards are part of the learning at Bandhavi and an opportunity to give their creativity wings! The proceeds will go towards the programme.



*Indira's rangoli design*

The rangoli is a colourful design drawn on the ground with coloured, or white, powder. The design commonly adorns the ground in front of an Indian home.



*Our smiling 35!*

## With gratitude

We owe a great debt to individuals and institutions who have contributed generously of their time, talent, finances and material resources. We see this as an expression of your ongoing journey with us, enabling children celebrate their childhood.

We express our gratitude to the students of the Social Justice, Peace and Development Studies programme 2005, Prof. Barbara Simpson, Rev. Vincent Rajkumar, Rev. Victor Joshua, Ms. Ranjini Krishnamurthy, Mr. Bharath Kalyanram, Mr. Philip Viegas, Ms. Poornima D'abro, Mrs. Noorain Khalil, Mr. and Mrs. V.G. Iyer, Mr. Javed Khalil, Mrs. Beulah Shatananda, Ms. Irene George, Ms. Ruth Manorama, Rev. P. J. Lawrence, Mona Lisa Interior Designers, Mr. Naveen Norhona, Mr. Bryan Samuel, Mr. Anup Chakravarthi, Mr. and Mrs. Vijay Alexander, Mr. Noel Shatananda, Ms. Samita Khaiyum, Dr. S.K. Subramanian, Mr. Suresh Paul, Mr. Deepak Koshy, Mr. Sajieve Kurien, Mr. Syed Basha Ahmed, Ms. Lisa Ahlgren, Mr. and Mrs. P.T. James, Mr. and Mrs. P.S. Nagarajan, Dr. Beulah Wood, Dr. Paul Hiebert, Mr. Richard William Joseph, Mr. and Mrs. James Duvall, Prof. Hasnath Mansur, Mr. Gautam Haridas, Ms. Shanti Chacko, Ms. Nirmala Karunan, Mr. Vimal Nathan, Ms. Lynn Hoffman, and Dr. Don Legget.

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We specially thank Edukans who have made a significant contribution to help us launch the project.

## An invitation to partnership

The power of change lies within each one of us. The children of this land deserve to live in freedom and dignity. Come and be part of this celebration of the girl child. Here are some ways you can be involved.

- 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 and greeting cards produced by the children.



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