

Vistas

A Newsletter from Visthar
Issue 3, March 2008

Towards inclusive communities

It was an interesting coincidence to have Good Friday, Holi and Milad-un-Nabi fall on the same day. Its significance was certainly not lost on us. In a climate where religion is politicised and politics communalised, we strive to find creative ways to reclaim the prophetic message of all religions. A message of life that simultaneously critiques and challenges all systems and structures that hinder or distort life. An affirmation of life that is not restricted to humans. And a celebration of life in the context of communities. Not religious, cultural or exclusive ones but 'Easter Communities' that is all inclusive, recognising and respecting of difference.

This newsletter is long overdue. Partially due to our dilly dallying about whether it should follow a similar format or published as a report of the organisation. Given a variety of factors we are back with the newsletter format and we hope you will receive it with the warmth from our hearts and our optimism that *another world is possible*.

Over the years we have consolidated our work and today it is broadly classified under two heads: the first Academic and Nonformal courses and the second Advocacy. Besides this we will also share with you a little of our life as a community. We sincerely hope you enjoy reading this and we would value hearing from you.



ACADEMIC AND NONFORMAL COURSES

Over the years, involved in training for civil society organisations, led us to a partnership with academic institutions both in India and overseas. This year marks twelve years of an initiative with colleges in the USA.

Social Justice Peace and Development

In the early hours of the 31 of August 2007, 18 American students and professor Douglas Huff arrived in Bangalore. The eleventh batch of students for the Social Justice, Peace and development: (SJPD) study abroad programme jointly organised by Visthar and two liberal colleges in the USA: Gustavus Adolphus College and Concordia College.

The interdisciplinary programme is widely recognised as a creative study abroad programme. The focus of the study programme is to enable participants to reflect on global realities using Indian socioeconomic and political realities as a case study. The consistent accompaniment and mentoring of the Professor and course coordinators at Visthar provides ample scope for student nurture.



“This is the third group of students that I have led for the SJPD program, and I can say without any qualification whatever that India never fails to surprise, educate, and challenge me, and I am quite sure it will do the same for the very talented 2007 batch. SJPD has undergone many changes over the last eleven years, thanks to the dynamic staff at Visthar it remains one of the finest study abroad programs in all of the American higher education”

Professor Douglas Huff
Gustavus Adolphus College, MN, USA

Internship at Visthar

Our names are Bethany Mueller and Ambryn Melius and we're both honored to spend two months at Visthar during March and April 2008 in an internship experience. We are alumni of the 2001 Social Justice, Peace and Development program. Our experience agitated and inspired us, serving as a focus for our undergraduate experience. The stories, field visits, and welcome of the Visthar community contributed to our work after our college graduation in the social service field, in direct service to homeless populations in the United States. Since our first departure, we have felt a strong desire to return to Visthar and contribute to a community that provided so much for us. Further, we are both hoping to enter graduate level coursework in the fall (Ambryn in movement therapy/counseling, Bethany in social work) and so, returning to the didactic environment of Visthar felt like an important opportunity before these next educational steps.

During our time at Visthar thus far, we have assisted in the preparation and implementation of the “Gender, Conflict and Disaster in South Asia” Conference and participated in International Women’s

Day celebrations at Visthar, and most recently, at Koppal. It was an honor to be welcomed into the sacred space of celebration, reunion and resistance, so strongly embodied by the Bandhavi girls and their mothers.

We are also excited for the opportunity to facilitate student workshops in the month of April in creative movement, as a precursor to the Festival of Just Peace. This workshop will strive to explore concepts of identity, self and community via creative movement, along with promoting the potential of movement and dance as a mode for personal and community growth, healing, and transformation.

- Ambryn and Bethany

School of Peace

Post, what is euphemistically known as 9/11, a collective of ecumenical organizations made a commitment to search for authentic responses to the growing religious fundamentalism of the war on terror. The result was the formation of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). Visthar, in partnership with the ICF, offers a 3 month course on Just Peace titled *School of Peace*. With participants from conflict zones of South/Southeast Asia, the course aims to build perspectives and skills towards conflict transformation, and



more importantly towards setting proactive agendas for just peace in different parts of Asia.

The course deals with three themes; Self, Other and Community Conflict; Violence and War; Transformation. Following a Freirean pedagogy, participants are encouraged to read, reflect and write, learning from experiences at the grassroots. At the time of writing, 18 participants from 6 countries in Asia are participating in the third year of the *School of Peace*.

Festival of Just Peace



The culmination of the School of Peace Programme, 2007 was marked by the Festival of Just Peace on the 5 of May 2007. Unlike most festivals that have a religious inspiration this was a festival with a difference. It was a festival to celebrate Resistance and Hope that marks the struggles of people striving for a justice and peace.

Organised in collaboration with the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (Hong Kong) it was a day long carnival with the coming together of artisans and artists interacting with the public and also depicting their works of art and products. The festival also

featured an international film festival followed by discussions and Q and A sessions about areas of conflict in South Asia. Photo exhibitions of people's struggles, sale of arts and crafts and other rural products, cultural performances of music, dance and drama were also part of the festival. The festival was a resounding success with more than 500 people participating.

Even as we make plans for the festival this year, we are organising a series of summer camps offering Theatre, Creative Movement and Handicraft under the banner *Children envisioning alternative futures* even as the children will be given an opportunity to display their talents at the festival.

J-Term – A Guest Programme

Visthar also offers our facilities and skills towards co-ordination of Guest programmes. One such programme was titled "India: healing the Mind"

The course was offered by Professor Barbara Simpson from Gustavus Adolphus College. Visthar provided organisational and facilitation support.

This 4 week course introduced students to Reiki, Meditation, Ayurveda, Hypnosis, Yoga, Massage, Acupressure and Theatre and Arts as human development. Students were challenged to examine concepts of health, healing and also the



dynamics of the body mind connection. The students were also given opportunities to visit, view and experience firsthand traditional healing methods practised in parts of South India.

Workshop on Gender, Conflicts and Disasters in South Asia.



A Workshop on Gender, Conflicts and Disaster in South Asia was held from 4-6 March at Visthar. The workshop was facilitated by Ranjani K. Murthy, Mercy Kappen and Kiran Bhatia, advisor on Gender and Socio-Cultural Research to the UNFPA in South and West Asia. In addition, Dr. Mohammed Daim Kakar, a senior physician with the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health, enriched the conference with his high-level expertise of relief work in Afghanistan.

Participants included NGOs, INGOs, the private sector, and government agencies with much experience in both direct relief work and policy-level advocacy, with backgrounds in medicine, ecology, disability rights, education, youth empowerment, Muslim women's empowerment, health management and mental health. They came from all over India, as well as Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.



The keynote address on Gender and Emergencies by Ms. Bhatia, provided an excellent framework for the topics to be covered at the workshop. Ms. Murthy as the chief facilitator stressed the importance of continuing to work from the axiom of, “Build back better and more equitable.” The sessions strived to see the connections between gender concepts, and spent a great deal of time examining case studies and disaster management plans with a gender lens. Policies at the international level, down to local, grass-roots contingency plans were examined. Various methodologies were used: Presentations, group discussions, games, and individual group work and reporting.

Institutionalising Gender within Organisations and Programmes – A Trainer’s Manual by Ranjani K Murthy and Mercy Kappen.

The manual is the second in the series on Gender, Diversity and Development produced by Visthar. It has been conceptualised to familiarise gender facilitators with ‘conceptual and strategic frames’ for institutionalising gender within development organisation. The manual we hope would contribute towards bringing about changes in societal institutions in favour of women/girls and marginalised men thereby furthering gender and social equity.

ADVOCACY

Besides our work in training, over the years Visthar has been recognised as a support service organisation for several social movements in the country, including NBA, NFF, TNCWU and others. It was our ongoing campaign on violence against women that led us to establishing a programme of Releasing and Rehabilitating girls in the Devadasi system.

Bandhavi

The Bandhavi programme is two years old. The faltering steps have become more sure and steady and poised to sprint. The girls have gone on ahead and have grown physically, mentally and spiritually as we seek to continually affirm the self and the community and foster their creative expressions. The girls who did not know how to write are now writing poetry and yes they have their own in-house magazine, titled Inchara (bird’s melodies) to show for it. While they have learnt from us we have also learnt from them even as the older girls are now in a process of mentoring the younger girls.



Adopting an integrated model of learning the students learn from a variety of experiences. Herbal Gardening, Agricultural Projects, Animal husbandry

Pottery, Recycled Paper Products, Baking, Animation and Natural Medicine – preparation and application (extended to the community) even as the students are in the next level of learning in Yoga and Theatre. More information on Bandhavi is available in *Sambrama* a Bandhavi newsletter which is also available online.

Responding to ground realities

Our programme with the girls include an ongoing relationship with their mothers. During one of our many visits we were confronted with yet another form of slavery.

Extensive surveys in taluks of Koppal district enabled us to see the concentration of children in bonded labour. Today we have established a base with minimal staff and are in the process of extending our work, laying the foundation for a process of releasing and rehabilitating Children in Bonded labour.

And with the mothers of the above two categories we have begun a process of collectivizing them and preparing them for political participation.

Calendar 2008: reaching out to heal

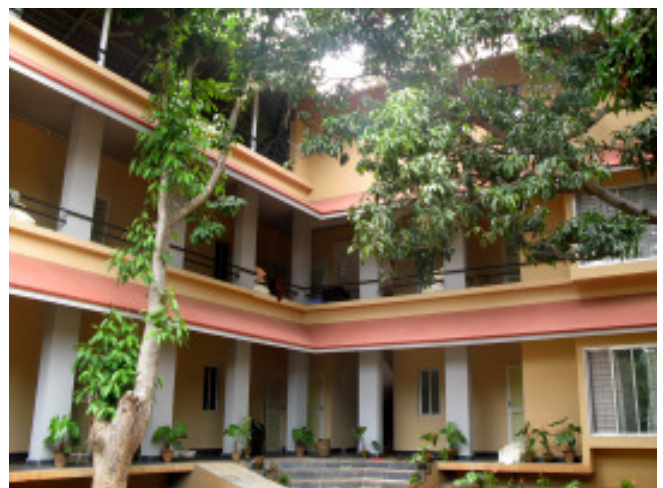
The six page recycled hand make paper, 12 picture (warli drawings) calendar largely a product of the Bandhavi girls is an expression of children reaching out to heal other children and through this process, sow the seed for transformation of society. We can never thank KNH enough for taking the idea seriously and for the order of 3500 calendars. More importantly the linkage made with Starhe Girls' School at Nairobi. While the modalities of how the communication among children will take place, our girls are excited. It is not merely a product in the market. It is an expression of the grace

of children to be grateful for what they have received and the recognition that their freedom is tied in with the freedom of others. People round the globe are fascinated by the story and other orders are pouring in from India.

RESOURCE AND LEARNING CENTRE

The Resource and Learning Centre (RLC) is a facility that lends itself for conferences, trainings, workshops and seminars etc. The conference rooms are well equipped and can be modified as per request. The *Aala* with a high grass roof (crafted by artisans) can accommodate about 200 people while comfortable lodging and boarding can be provided for 74 people on a twin sharing basis. The RLC has three blocks namely *Mangala*, *Mallige*, and the new block *Sampige* and a well equipped kitchen and a uniquely designed dining hall .

In April last year we have inaugurated yet another residence hall. The two storied block with 13 twin sharing rooms and attached bathrooms can accommodate 26 persons. *Sampige* boasts of complete Wi-Fi accessibility, a lounge cum entertainment centre with (TV, VCD), laundry service, a well equipped classroom room and a roof top area which would lend itself to many purposes from a theatre space to a conference area thus combining



several conveniences under one roof. Since last April we have a continued occupancy with over 34%. This is a vital service that we provide and cater to as it offers a form of income generation for our programmes.

We have been proud to accommodate several organisations – nongovernmental, faith based as well as corporate. Many of our guests have been with us in the past and returned for consecutive programmes having been very appreciative of the unique package - the environment, the service and staff at Visthar.

It was a real pleasure to visit Visthar and see the excellent work being done. The campus, beautiful, artistic and caring facilities and sincere staff all contribute to make Visthar a very special place. I am most impressed with the Bandhavi programme and the outstanding effort to support them to transform their lives.

Kiran Bhatia
UNFPA, Nepal

LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY

In a society where the notion and practice of Community is determined by caste or class, at Visthar we are struggling to ‘walk our talk; and create “Inclusive communities”. We are ‘peoples’ drawn from different religious, caste and linguistic groups. We represent a range of ideological persuasions. We are learning to be attentive in our listening, respectful of difference and affirming of the plurality that is the Visthar community.

As part of our experience together we share a meal and time together each day for a beverage and a ‘chat’. Invariably the chat turns out to be a learning session. Using participatory methods, different

members of the team facilitate a learning process on a range of subjects. The aim is ‘formation’ as individuals and as a team. The time keepers in the team are constantly reminding David to ‘kiss’ it (Keep It Short and Simple). And he does surprise us on occasions. Besides our coffee sessions we have made our retreat an annual feature. So also the Visthar day - a day for renewal

Coffee break at Visthar is so happily.....unique. It is mainly characterised by a sharing...a sharing of ideas, of warmth, of humour, of art, of culture, of concepts...of various fields of thought and intense Learning.

- Lyola Thomas
Programme Head- Communication

Retreat

This is now an annual feature. For us it is a time to consciously evaluate ourselves and our work. The retreat was held in the sylvan surroundings of Deepahalli, a Marianist seminary in Bangalore and it was led by Brother Mani Karott, (Regional coordinator for the Indian Branch of the Little Brothers of Jesus) who has many years of experience as a special educator facilitating training in Art Therapy.

The methodologies included creating a personal shield (individual collage work), Art Therapy and the Hot Seat (individual – group feedback sessions) These guided



activities were based on certain themes the foremost being building inclusive communities.

Visthar Day: A time of renewal

As we approach 20 years of our life and work as an organisation, committed to Just Peace, we decided to make visible the selfless contribution of individuals who make Visthar what it is. It was also a time for renewal. The solemnity of the occasion and the immensely positive feedback has resulted in our decision to make this an annual feature: a day for renewal and gratitude. Besides recognising individuals who had put in sincere years (over a decade) we also worked in the garden clearing a patch of land and planting medicinal plants.

Recognition of the contribution of staff, in our continued journey together towards Just Peace, without doubt adds impetus to individual service, thus enhancing sincere and wholehearted performance.

-Sampathkumar,
Administrator - Programmes

Doctor of Humane Letters

David Selvaraj has received news that he will be conferred with an honorary doctorate. To quote President Peterson of Gustavus Adolphus College, "I congratulate you on your outstanding service to International Education, to Peace and the People of South Asia. We are pleased to recognise these contributions with this honorary degree."

All of us at Visthar rejoice at this honour and we believe that this is to be shared by each one of us. For David's work has



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been also the work of Visthar. Secondly we believe this recognition is an honour bestowed on the *Aam Aadmi* whose struggles have been validated. For David's work and the work of Visthar is no more or less than journeying with the *Aam Aadmi* and visibilising their struggle for justice and peace.

Our Board Members

We are pleased to have on board as new Trustees the following:

Dr Revathi Narayanan
Prof Hasnath Mansur
Dr. Theodore Baskaran

We are grateful to our trustees who continue to steer the ship providing guidance and credibility. The other members include:

Dr. K. C. Abraham
Mr. David Selvaraj
Ms. Mercy Kappen
Ms. Ranjini Krishnamurthy
Prof. Muzaffar Assadi
Dr. Mohan Larbeer

We acknowledge with gratitude the services of Mr Thomas Paul who had laid down office on completion of his term.

It is with deep regret we announce the passing away of Mr P. S. Nagarajan, a well respected member of the Board of Trustees and a former senior member of the Indian Administrative Service.

An invitation to journey with us

We value your friendship and support and hence request you to

- Send us your feedback
- Furnish us with your contact details
- Put us on to your mailing list
- Contribute to any one of our projects