

# Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya

*Site Visit on Saturday, January 21, 2023*

*-by Sadhana Kyathappala*



I arrived at Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya (KSV) just past 9:30 am from Hubli. Once we get to Kalkeri village, access to the school is over an unfinished, unmarked, bumpy, country road. When we stopped there for directions, the residents guided us, referring to the school fondly: “aah the music school”. I was visiting close to 6 years after my previous visit after which, as a chapter, Asha Boston had decided to support the school. Having heard me speak so much about KSV, my husband Raj, and my brother, Kaviraj, had also accompanied me, along with my mother, Sharada, who had accompanied me on that first visit.

As mentioned before, KSV is located on donated land within Kalkeri village. The structures that make up the classrooms, dorm rooms, etc., are made of typical, vernacular, village construction. Adam Woodward, the director of the school in charge of its day to day running, lives on the premises with his wife and son.



KSV bills itself as “A school with a difference”, and indeed this is such a school. Over 20 years



ago Mathieu Fortier (a Canadian citizen), who was a Hindustani classical music student at the time, along with a couple of others started this as a free evening music school for disadvantaged youth in the Dharwad area to teach them the rudiments of Hindustani classical music; to raise awareness of the rich heritage of this area. It quickly morphed into a residential school for the same youth. The goal was to provide access to quality academic and performing arts education to them in a residential setting, where all their needs are met. The children, and graduated alumni, are testament to the successful implementation of

this vision.



Mathieu, and his wife Agathe, along with one of their daughters, were at the school when I visited. Agathe & Mathieu typically spend some of the winter months at KSV. There were also a bunch of volunteers from Canada, folks in their 50s, who were helping with some construction work. Currently, they are in the process of building classrooms. Some of the structures are well planned and sturdier than others - all a question of resources available at the time. Several years ago, another bunch of volunteers from Canada had built what is now the library and computer lab building, which is one of the sturdier structures on the premises.



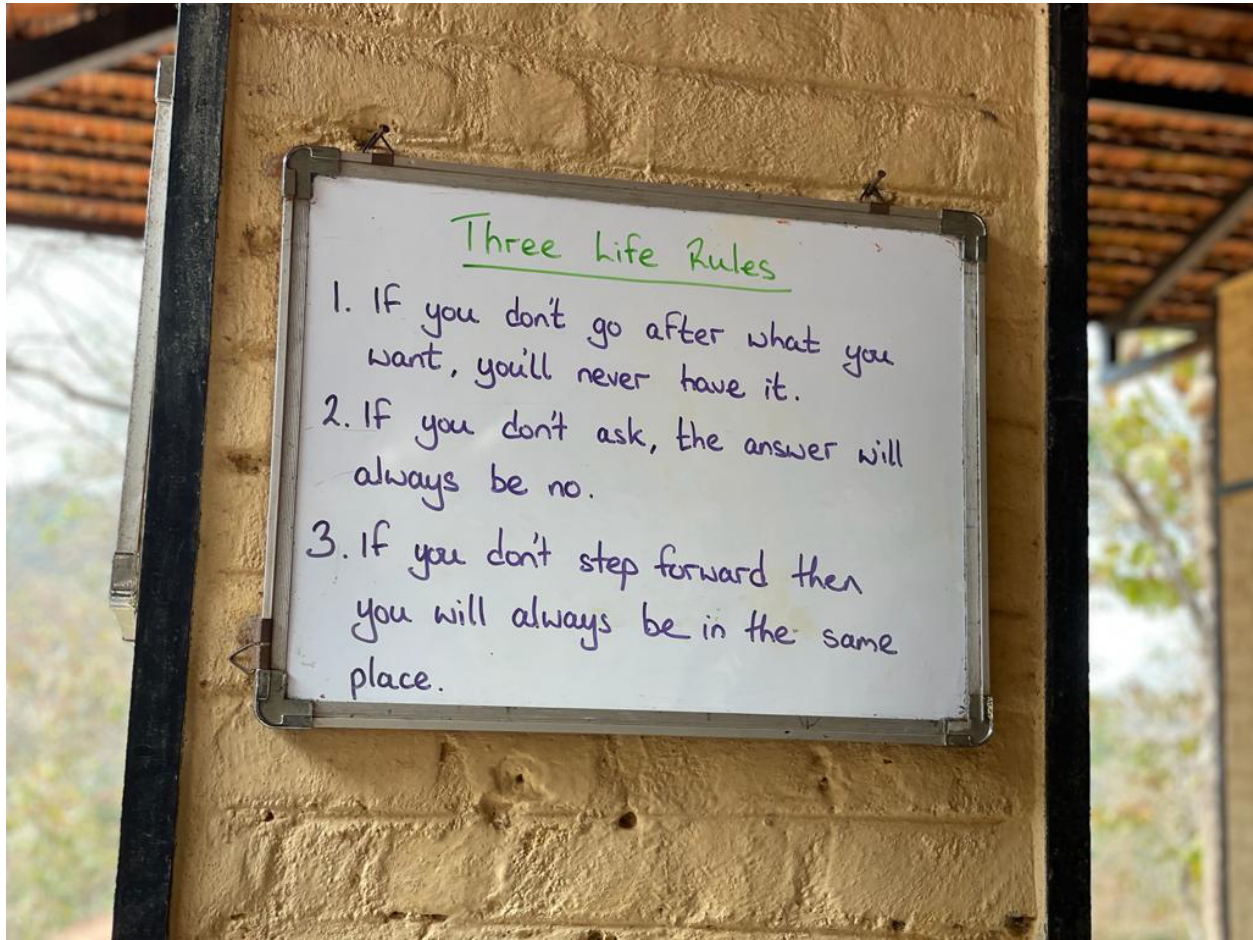
An outdoor class, under an awning, a remnant of the covid days but handy currently to make up for shortage of classroom structures that were in need of repairs / rebuilding, was in session on one side. Being a Saturday, there were no music classes. An enthusiastic class in physical education was going on in the main hall. The class had been divided into two teams, and kids



from each team were urging their team members on. Mathieu commented fondly that he sometimes needs to remind Sunil, the physical education teacher, that this was just a game. Sunil had played soccer at a high level and his enthusiasm for sports in general was infectious. Even within their limited facilities, kids from KSV have participated in long jump events at the state level, and kabbadi at the zonal level.

A few years ago, Asha had facilitated the construction / rebuilding of the main hall. Apart from these sports activities, this is also where the performances are held - whether it is the weekly student performances on Friday, or when they have visiting artists. Mathieu talked fondly of a recent event where the performances started in the evening and went on into the wee hours of the morning! Being a Saturday, we did not get to see / hear any of the students performing or even practicing, but saw several of the recorded performances from that night. We spoke with a lot of students and many express the desire and intention to pursue their musical education

even beyond KSV. A few of the music faculty are KSV alumni, who are continuing to also perform and expand their own musical careers, which strengthens and validates the goals of these children. As before, I am most impressed by the confidence and groundedness of the children at KSV.



Earlier in 2022, we had hosted Naveen Jha, President of KSV management committee and learnt that KSV had failed to get their FCRA processing submitted in time and are without a current FCRA. As a result, Asha has not been able to disburse the funds that we've received through donations specifically for this project. They recently had a visit from the FCRA staff, so we all sincerely hope the FCRA will be processed soon. In the meanwhile, they have been very fortunate in managing to secure enough funds from local donations, but funding remains a challenging situation..

Post-covid remedial classes are still going on. They have established a baseline for each student and repeat the assessments every 6 months. They have been seeing a steady improvement, but they have found that many of the students still need this remedial help. They will continue this for as long as necessary. This was a mode of operation at KSV even before - the focus here is not just to cover the curriculum, but to ensure students comprehension and growth.

Below is a picture of a functioning classroom, and entry to one of the girls dorms.



The main hall is also where yoga classes are conducted, as well as where the whole school sits down for lunch. Lunch starts with a small prayer by a selected group of children leading the recital.



Although we did not partake of the meal this time, I know from memory and the aroma that was emanating from the kitchen, it is very delicious. Adam's wife tends to some cows and chickens, which provides enough milk and eggs for the residents. She also has an arrangement with some of the local farms where she tends to some vegetable patches and cultivates quite a bit of

the produce for the meal. As mentioned before, they have solar panels, and draw from the nearby water resources - all in all, zero to very low carbon footprint.

Their library is well stocked with books, but at the time of our visit, none of the students were in the library. Mathieu expressed concern that reading was not something kids took to, and that the library was underutilized. We talked of how we could bring about this change whereby kids would be enthusiastic about reading, and would voluntarily reach for books, similar to our school days when books were a great source of fun, escape, and release. I mentioned the reading / library program in Chennai that seems to have engaged the children, with enthusiastic direction from staff, and we wondered if maybe there was an opportunity to share strategies that might increase reading interest amongst the kids here. This is something we in Asha need to discuss.



KSV also received 20 computers, funded by Danfoss. This has allowed them to set up a “Computer Lab” where kids are taught basic computer skills. For the past 3 months they have also been very fortunate that a youngster, Shantanu, has been volunteering. When he first came here, he had not intended staying this long, but he just loved the place and felt very rewarded about his contribution and has stayed. This led to the next request that Mathieu and Agathe would like to explore with Asha: would we be able to help support such volunteers, taking care of their travel and other logistical expense, and perhaps even a small stipend so that volunteers like Shantanu can afford to stay longer and do real, meaningful work. The goal of the computer lab here is to get the kids, 10 and above, computer literate, so that lack of such knowledge would not hold them back for life beyond KSV. Before Shantanu came, different staff members would help as and when time and ability permitted.

Ever since returning from covid, they have instituted periodic school wide talks focusing on emotional wellness, led by different staff members. Cycling through the different staff members ensures different perspectives are discussed, with different approaches. When we were there, Deepika, who coordinates volunteers, conducted the session. We did not attend it, instead using the time to watch some of the performances that had been recorded. It was nice to meet Deepika and Yash with whom we have exchanged messages in the past. Apart from the impression I have of the children at KSV, the staff too are very engaged and committed. This is truly a very joyful place.

Thanks to the donation of a mini-bus, they have been able to take kids to professional performances. Being able to see professionals in different venues expands the possibilities for the children, not just in terms of a social experience, but also a realization of what is expected of them to get to a higher level. Unfortunately, they no longer have a kathak teacher: staffing this position has been challenging, so they are considering going with bharatnatyam.

Mathieu asked about other areas that Asha might be able to help. Since food, culture, and climate awareness was not an issue for folks from the Indian diaspora, getting such folks to volunteer would be easier for them and productive for KSV. Would Asha be able to recruit such volunteers, with a minimum 6 month commitment? Would Asha be able to support year long fellowships for interns who want to further their commitment? They are looking for volunteers / interns with knowledge related to child welfare, social work, education, art, as well as marketing, communication and fundraising for the Indian market. They are looking to be able to reimburse them on the order of INR 10,000/- per month, apart from arranging for expenses related to flight and employment visa if necessary. Something else we in Asha need to discuss, and which would be something we could act on once their FCRA is reinstituted.

All in all, it was a very rewarding visit even amidst the financial pressures KSV is facing.

