

VOICE is the first Asha project I visited. Having read quite a bit about the project I had a sketchy idea about what to expect. But reading about something isn't the same as seeing it! I had the opportunity to visit all 3 centres, viz. Andheri West, Andheri East (Pumphouse) and Dadar.

**Day 1:** I got dropped off at Victor and Rajashri's home in Andheri. Their home also acts as the office for VOICE. Augustine drove us to the Andheri East centre where lessons were in progress. The location of this centre isn't the pumphouse anymore. Classes are now held near Mahakali Caves, for a rent of Rs. 6000/month.

The regular instructor had called in sick that day so Victor was filling in. The class was made up of 5 girls and 3 boys! Finally more girls in a class! :o) The children will be taking the National Open School examination in 2003. The 'classroom' itself was a pleasant, bright and airy place. Spick and span with an immaculately clean washroom and bathroom. I was told that the kids are in charge of keeping the place clean and that it not only teaches them to be responsible and inculcates clean habits but also gives them a sense of belonging. The back room is mostly used for storage, etc. while the front is where the children spend most of their day. The walls of this room were covered with colourful posters of the alphabet, drawings of yoga positions (more details about yoga to follow), lists on the rights and duties of citizens. The latter really blew me away! These posters are the handiwork of some of the children and an instructor, Sachin Waikar. a trained commercial artist, Sachin is also the screenprinting instructor. His motivation for being at VOICE is, he worked his way through school and paid for it himself. He knows the kind of challenges these kids have to face everyday and is able to relate to them. I saw him at the Dadar centre a few days later and was again amazed at the ease with which he handled the children.

The Yoga classes were started for a pretty interesting reason. At one of the outstation trips, the Bansiwars noticed adolescence making itself more noticeable. The older kids were pre-teens or early teens and were showing signs of raging hormones, etc. There was also the apprehension that some of them might get demotivated and go back to the street. Yoga seemed to help keep them focused and more importantly the children enjoyed it! So it continues and everyone practices yoga for an hour in the morning. The Swadhar children spent most of the day learning physics while I hung out with Sachin and the younger ones. By the time I left, they children had become friendly enough to volunteer to sing, play the recorder and rechristen me!

**Day 2:** The MIT chapter funds activities at Dadar so I was very keen on meeting the children there and checking out the centre's activities. The space is right next to Dadar station, under Kavi Kusumdas flyover. These rooms or galas were donated to a few NGOs and rented out to a few businesses by the then Maharashtra State government. All VOICE had to do was pay utilities. Governments have changed at least a couple of times since then and so has the policy. All these organizations are now going to be charged full rent, which in the case of VOICE would be about Rs. 4500/month. Because of its location the Dadar centre has more working children. It is also the vocational training centre. All the screen-printing, card and diya making, etc. activities happen at Dadar. The gala itself is just a long 20'x 40' rectangular room with a small high window on each of the short sides. The high window is a blessing for the kids, more for the girls because it keeps peeping toms away. Again, like the Andheri (E) space, Dadar was impeccably clean. Posters and drawings adorned the walls. There was small, very small, library with

handmade picture books, games, toys, etc. Some of the game had been thought of by the children themselves and the instructors then helped make them. A train station game with names of all the stops on the Western and Central line. Since a lot of the kids either work/worked on platforms and/or on the trains it was very beneficial to them. The one I found most interesting was a Bombay street version of 'Life', a much somber version. Unlike the original Life where one gets married, had babies, has a car, everyone is happy all the time and the worst thing that happens is you lose a chance to roll the die, this one took a practical approach towards real life. It had cards that asked what happened if you dropped out of school or took drugs, smoked, etc. and the flip side had answers and points for each answer. There were also some fun things about Chowpaty and having septuplets, etc. Overall, a lot more interactive than the average board game and a brainchild of one of the children. There was also a Children's Encyclopedia that the kids loved.

The Swadhar children spend some time at Dadar too, learning various vocations. The boys mainly learn screen printing and the girls are taught tailoring, making handicrafts, etc. This centre also has a weekly computer class; unfortunately the teacher turnover rate is pretty high. After the success they've had with yoga, adding a weekly judo class is in the works. The kids at this centre range from about 4-16. The little ones are mostly siblings of children who've been at VOICE for some time. They don't study much and spend their day playing, etc. but VOICE encourages it because being at the centre keeps them off the streets and in a safe environment. It also gives them a feel of what things could be like if they went to school. Sachin pointed out a few children who had refused to work with their parents and instead opted for school. The population is a mix of regular formal school goers and non-formal ones. The latter spend their day at VOICE learning and following a very similar routine as a normal school. They have uniforms, school bags, fixed study times and play times. Most of the children spoke Marathi and warmed up to me a lot quicker than the Andheri folks. I was asked to help (read complete) with homework, play catch, recited the alphabet to (in 3 languages), learnt a few family histories played Dog and the Bone, all in the less than 2 hours.

When things finally quieted down a bit, i.e. the children were in class, Sachin, Ganesh and Maruti (Swadhar) showed me the screen-printing process. Very straightforward protocol with easily available raw material and a great demand for it made it a vocation that VOICE wanted to teach the children. The setup is pretty cheap and seed money needed is about Rs.6000 or so. By the time the children leave VOICE they hope to have saved most of the money on their own. VOICE gets a lot of orders during the Diwali and Christmas seasons and they end up making about 2-3 lakh rupees from merchandise sales, every year.

The day's highlight was a skit that Santosh had put together. Santosh used to be a regular at VOICE till he had to drop out and work to support his family. His younger sisters are with VOICE and in school. Santosh works at the flower stalls close by and still frequents the centre. To date he has saved almost Rs.10,000. The skit was a hilarious bit related to the drawbacks of eating junk food on the streets! I found it especially hilarious because we, in the US, dream of that street fastfood quite bit, indulge ourselves when we visit India and then complain of the same tummy aches that Santosh's skit talked about!

I left the centre around 5 p.m. to beat rush hour on the train. Although it paled in comparison to the time I spent at VOICE, riding a Bombay local was another amazing experience and a neat way to end a memorable visit.