**Write-Up Review for Vikasana- Duglapura Bridge School**

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As a young woman who has always held an insatiable curiosity of the Indian culture, I applied for an internship position with Vikasana, a South Indian non-governmental organization under the sponsorship of ASHA for Education-Seattle. I received notification of my acceptance into the internship program and in the fall of 2011 I ventured to Chickmagalore District, Karnataka where I would spend three months assisting in the rehabilitation of former child laborers.

After a day and a half long journey across the globe, I was relieved to see the smiling faces of Varghees Cleatas, Gopi, and Shruthi, the Vikasana staff who picked me up at the Bengaluru International Airport in Bangalore. After enjoying a sweet, milky tea together the group split up- Varghees, the Program Director for Vikasana, headed to a weekend seminar in inner-city Bangalore and Gopi, Shruthi and I began the five hour-long journey to the organization’s headquarters in Tarikere, Chickmagalore District.

I felt at home the moment I arrived at Vikasana’s Chatanahalli Bridge School, a residential hostel located just outside of Tarikere. I stayed there for the first few weeks of my time in India as construction on my room in ASHA’s Duglapura hostel was not quite completed. Sponsored by the German organization Karl-Kuebel Stiftung , the Chatanahalli school hosted 42 students, boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 16, along with 5 adult caretakers- teachers, a cook, and a watchman. Not to be forgotten are Tipu Sultan and Pinky, the resident canines. I was embraced by all as a family member and graciously ushered into my new, Indian lifestyle.

I moved to the ASHA-sponsored Duglapura Bridge School after a short but lovely few weeks with the Chatanahalli crew. I knew the moment that I arrived in Duglapura that this was my home. I was welcomed by 18 wonderful children, Sarajoma (“Auntie”, the school’s resident cook) and Philomina, the gold-hearted bridge school teacher.

The children were loving, outgoing, and almost always wore beaming smiles on their faces. They were clean, well-fed, and seemingly grateful to be living in the bridge school. Their clothing, while somewhat tattered, was repaired with miniature sewing kits. Towards the end of my stay they received new school uniforms from Vikasana.

Sarajoma Auntie and Philomina fully embraced their roles as caretakers, and the children both loved and respected their mother figures. Sarajoma always prepared nutritious meals for the bridge school family. The fresh vegetables, milk, and yogurt provided to her by Vikasana nourished the bodies, minds, and souls of the entire hostel family, three times daily.

My primary duties as an ASHA intern were watching over and playing with the children, and I even led group yoga classes. I taught the children basic English words using art; I spent many evenings at the chalkboard, scratching out figures and labeling them with their English names. The children copied my etchings and colored them with the crayons I brought from America. We enjoyed many movie nights and dance parties with the assistance of my laptop, and I fashioned a hula-hoop from a water hose and duct tape that I purchased in Tarikere.

The children bubbled with creative energy and intelligence, as was evidenced by their art and aptitude for learning new English words and phrases. The bridge school might better foster their supple minds if equipped with more learning materials (including the basics: papers, pencils, and art supplies).

I felt quite comfortable in the private room provided to me by Vikasana. I was given a bed and ample space for my clothing, books, and travel bags. The hostel was even equipped with a Western-style toilet for volunteers. The toilet functioned, but as I normally had to fill it with water in order to flush it, I considered it a “hybrid”, Indian-Western commode.

A few weeks into my stay I developed a respiratory illness due to mold growth on one of my bedroom walls. I figured that the monsoon rains had leaked through the uncompleted staircase adjacent to my room and initiated the mold growth. I discussed my hypothesis with Philomina and we arranged a visit to an Ayurvedic (natural medicine practitioner) in Tarikere. I was then offered a separate room on the opposite side of the building. With natural medicines and fresh air from my new room’s giant, double-paned windows, I was good as new within a week.

Overall, I was quite impressed by the Duglapura Bridge School facilities. The land purchased for the school’s construction was emerald, encrusted with bush-topped coconut trees and jungle grasses that writhed and curled up as our bare feet walked over them. Ginger, tapioca, cilantro, and other crops flourished throughout the lot, and Vikasana staff ploughed barren earth to make way for new coconut saplings.

I was somewhat concerned at the state of the children’s play-yard. Due to lack of funding, Varghees informed me, construction on the bridge school was incomplete and quite erratic. The building provided ample space for its residents’ daily duties of eating, sleeping, and studying, but the space for outdoor playtime was ridden with nails and rusted fencing- no doubt a hazard to bare, tiny feet and toes.

As a foreign intern I was treated with upmost respect and courtesy. My co-workers at Vikasana were helpful and always accommodated my needs and made time (and had patience for) my many, many questions. I was given the freedom to explore my surroundings at will, and I made several trips to the district capital of Chikmagalore and even journeyed to Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka that, due to its status as a booming technology headquarters has come to be known as India’s Silicon Valley.

Varghees was always a phone call away. He welcomed me into his home and I enjoyed many evenings with his family. I especially enjoyed his wife’s Ayurvedic cooking! Shruthi, the mentor assigned to me by the organization, became one of my best friends during my three month stay. Not only did she teach me about the inner workings of a non-governmental organization, but she showed me how to live as an Indian woman. She has a strong, beautiful character and is undoubtedly a powerful asset to Vikasana’s crew.

My Indian experience changed my life completely. I am thoroughly grateful for the opportunity provided to me by ASHA and Vikasana alike, and I hope to have made a positive impact during my stay at the bridge school. I fully endorse ASHA’s continuing support of the Duglapura Bridge School, a place that has become a home, a nest of love and safety for children who have seen some of the world’s darkest corners. With ASHA’s help, these children are much more likely to advance in their formal studies, attain a wage-paying job, and grow as confident, contributing members of the Indian society.