

# BWF SITE VISIT REPORT 2018

By: Anup Som

I have been involved with Asha Silicon Valley since 2004 and known about BeT (Basera-e-Tabassum) as one of its projects for several years. Ten years later, I got to learn more about Borderless World Foundation and Mr. Adhik Kadam, it's founder-director, when he visited the San Francisco Bay area.

In May 2018, I found myself wrapping up a big project in New Delhi and thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to spend a few days in Jammu and Kashmir, visit the 5 BWF homes and meet the resident girls and caretakers.

Over 6 days, I visited each of the homes in Jammu, Kupwara, Beerwah and Anantnag once. The Srinagar home was our hub in Kashmir so there was back and forth several times.

This was a refreshing, humbling, inspiring trip. I witnessed indescribable beauty in landscapes and people, contrasted with harsh conditions and extreme situations. Kashmir is an ancient land of saintly people. It's also in transition. While I anticipated palpable undercurrents of militancy, I didn't notice any. Perhaps it was the company I mingled with - underprivileged and hopeful young souls sheltered by a unique, caring organization. There's a lot more to Kashmir and Kashmiris than meets the eye or grabs our attention. While it may have safety issues at times, I did see tourists from distant parts of India. I do heartily recommend visiting Kashmir. Your senses and soul will appreciate it.

Below is a chronological sequence. I've tried to keep the notes somewhat raw. Details and memories were too numerous to report. This is followed by some home specific information and endnotes.

## May, 22nd 2018: Train from Delhi to Jammu

I took an evening Rajdhani Express from Delhi to Jammu. Strangely, my smartphone time automatically switched to Pakistan sometime after crossing into Jammu (from Punjab). I had to manually switch the timezone back to India. No prepaid service is operational in J&K so my US and Delhi prepaid SIMs stopped working.

## May, 23rd 2018: Jammu

### Early morning: Arrival in Jammu station

As I stood out beside the small crowd, Adhik found and welcomed me. He picked me up in a BWF vehicle (salvaged after it had drowned in the 2014 flood!). I started using Adhik's WiFi Hotspot since there was no signal on my phone and I wasn't carrying a postpaid sim.

### 6 am: Jammu Home

After morning prayers and breakfast, the girls got ready for school. Then, accompanied by a staff member, they walked about half a kilometer to the main road where the school bus picked them up. I wished them well in school as we waved each other bye-byes.

I got to know from the staff that 3 girls had passed the class 10 examinations with 92% marks. Congratulations were in order! This was a good occasion to share chocolates I had brought along from the US (fortunately not melted in Delhi's heat).

### Noon: Jammu Plot

Adhik drove us to the Jammu plot (16000sq ft) where construction for BWF's first owned home was planned (all their current homes are rented). A pucca shed, for storage of constructions supplies, was already in place. We explored the

L-shaped area and surrounding for less than an hour. Adhik shared some details of their plans and potential for expansion.

Then we picked up Mr. Daftari from his residence and proceeded to the BWF office. This is an air-conditioned space which Mr. Daftari lets Adhik use as and when necessary. He retired as a senior officer from State Bank of India. Adhik introduced Mr. Daftari also as one of his spiritual advisors. Again, I was offered Kava (Kashmiri Saffron tea) which I gladly received as my tummy can't handle regular chai with dairy.

#### **5 pm: Back in Jammu home**

Watched the kids singing and dancing. Interacted with a few of them. Interestingly, a common favorite subject in school was Computers - they find it easy and fun!

#### **8 pm: Shopping time**

Went shopping for Eid dresses for all BWF staff. Generally, they purchase supplies in bulk for all homes, often from Ludhiana. Local styles are collected from Jammu.

Dinner was at a roadside restaurant - sponsored by Rajni and her husband.

#### **Overnight: Drive to Srinagar**

9 km Chenani-Nashri Tunnel (India's longest road tunnel), part highway (very smooth), part unpaved (bumpy!). Adhik drove all the way. We took a couple of short breaks nap and chai breaks.

## **May 24th, 2018: Entering Kashmir Valley and Kupwara**

Drove into valley early morning. Noticed cricket bat factories and military patrols along the highway.

#### **6am: Brief stop at Srinagar home**

Many girls were up already. Adhik and I freshened up quickly, had some snacks and headed to Kupwara around 7 am. Met two interns visiting from Pune. Neha and Zahara - psychology majors - had been doing their research here for several weeks. They joined us on the trip to Kupwara.

#### **9am: Kupwara Home**

We were welcomed warmly by some of the girls before we met Nitin Upadhye (volunteers for BWF, based in Delhi) who was already in Kashmir for a few days. The kids were ready for school. Some had already left.

As we went upstairs, I was taken with views of snow clad mountains - white, blue and grey. Gorgeous!  
Good time to deliver more chocolates.

Nitin was here for some new compliance requirements. New IDs were to be made. Portrait photos of each child were to be taken later in the day. The 2 researchers started helping with the ID making process. Records of students were provided.

I saw the details of children's school and performance records. They have a good new manager Zahida Meer.

Next, I joined Adhik and Nitin to survey a prospective property across the street. This was recommended by "Mama ji" an elderly, long-time supporter of BWF, who joined us. The two-story building with an ample backyard seemed to have sufficient rooms for kids, kitchens and bathrooms. The owner seemed willing to customize per BWF needs.

#### **Mid-day: Women's Development Centre**

The Women's Dev Center (across street) with sanitary napkin and embroidery operations needed to relocate close to Srinagar into an army camp in Sumbal. To be run by the Army, but in BWF's name. Musharraf (of BWF) would continue to lead it. I wasn't much help cleaning up the premises and loading 2 hired trucks with all related equipment and supplies.

Musharraf and Nitin had some paperwork at the Govt Electricity office. I joined them on the errand. In downtown Kupwara, I noticed pronounced army presence (truck in picture).

#### **4 pm: Photo session at home**

Nitin started taking passport style pictures of each girl. The Pune volunteers Zahara and Neha matched details in records for IDs mandated by JJ Act (Ref. in endnotes). Some girls took control of Nitin's camera and an impromptu photography lesson ensued. I caught them in action with my phone camera (not quite as professional looking).

I then got a chance to spend time talking with girls in the evening.

#### **5 pm: Kids bid goodbye to Adhik**

Their fondness toward him was palpable. A group photo session was quickly arranged. Then we headed to Srinagar with Nitin driving this time.

#### **Night: Srinagar home**

After dinner discussions with girls

- . I shared videos of Aka Nandun - a Kashmiri play I had attended in Delhi and performed by 7 BWF girls. The girls were thrilled to see their sisters on a big stage

- . Approached by a few girls asking where I live, what I do, about America

- . One girl (Saba/Sabrina) said her favorite subjects were Math and Physics. She is in class 12 (finishing in December) and is interested in engineering. We spoke about my entrance into engineering and her plans to pursue the field. Sabrina hopes to follow the NEET exam route (Exam in 2019 May)

- . State Board exams start in October. First class 8, then 10, then 12.

- . 2 others interested in Engineering (Gulshan in class 11, Snowber is younger)

- . 4 BWF girls are already studying engineering in Kanyakumari - via NEET.

## **May 25th, 2018: Srinagar home, Sumbal Army camp**

#### **Morning: Srinagar**

There were water issues in the neighborhood for the last few days, hence I limited myself to a sponge bath with hot water. Breakfast included Kava, scrambled eggs and Kashmiri roti.

I briefly joined a BWF staff meeting on the middle floor. The main discussion centered around issues unique to the Srinagar home (BWF's only urban location) and a mix of girls brought in from other BWF homes. Apparently, some older girls were not setting the best example after returning from distant parts of India. The staff seemed to rely more on Salima to better understand and resolve the issues.

Next, I chatted with some girls who were back from school. Took some pictures and video introductions. Wore Team Asha Tshirt - many older girls were familiar with Asha and shared their appreciation.

In the background, there were often girls taking turns washing utensils or clothes by the tap below the spiral staircase.

This could be due to poor water pressure upstairs. A problem that was resolved with a booster pump later.

#### **1pm: Off to Sumbal with Nitin and Salima (and an embroidery machine)**

We picked up Ghul Hussain (liaison between BWF-Army) who works with Salima's husband Khurshid (who also works with the Army) just before entering Army Camp 1. Inside, we assessed the two proposed rooms where new dev center could be set up. Then drove to the main camp to discuss details with the commander (Major name redacted). He noted his appreciation for BWF and commended support from Asha. He also indicated personal interest in extending army support.

With the commander's support, Ghul Hussain had recently started an NGO for youths (beyond scope of Asha). On existing the camp, Ghul coaxed Nitin to visit his village (Batti Pora, near Sadat Pora) - a minor detour he promised. Unpaved road. Very limited facilities. Very poor. Even Salima noticed the destitution and felt a bit scared. She lives nearby

in Sofa Pora but wasn't aware of such abject poverty so close to home. Ghul reiterated lack of toilets, roads. We visited one of few new structures (not completed) with a handloom installed. Intent being to revive the traditional art, teaching the regional skill anew. I noticed a home built by Habitat for Humanity.

Then Nitin's truck got stuck in the mud - hour long attempts finally resolved when villagers collectively lifted the rear out of the ditch! I somehow ended up with mud all over my clothes. The villagers helped clean up. Big hearts. Generous souls. Nitin was so impacted overall, he promised to return and explore ways to help.

It got too late to head to Beerwah so we decided to return to Srinagar.

### **10:30 pm: Srinagar home**

- All hands meeting - Adhik explains JJ Act transition - J&K enforcement has started lately.
- . Strict rules on property size (non-living quarters), office space, house mother to children ratio 10-12 etc
- . 4 girls in Srinagar home were above 18 - not "children" anymore, so cannot be kept in the home
- . Some still in class 12! Hope is to minimize the impact on schooling.
- . Such cases need an affidavit saying that they volunteer at the home - and can be paid in kind. Basically, they need to work.
- . Other options are considered

14 older girls had visited Mumbai with Kranti (another NGO) which was a good experience and influence. But in a few cases, some disruptive attitudes were acquired, affecting younger girls. These may have been compounded by social media that some girls got exposed to. It was heartening to see all staff and residents resolve issues in an open forum. Everyone was encouraged to speak their minds and express concerns.

### **Night: Srinagar**

## **May 26th, 2018: Beerwah, sightseeing at Gulmarg, Anantnag home**

### **Morning: Drive to Beerwah**

#### **7:30 am: Arrived at Beerwah home**

Hustle and bustle of morning activity before heading for school. Some children may have already left. All available were gathered upstairs. Adhik gave staff their Eid dress materials. I took video introductions.

Adhik conveyed the JJ Act update to staff and kids. Comparison with YT - Yatim Trust, shelters for boys. Adhik expressed need to shift to larger space due to JJ Act.

#### **8:30 am: Group photos before parting**

#### **9 am: Prospective new Beerwah home**

We walked to a nearby property. This building looked attractive to Adhik. Seemed to have sufficient rooms. Yard space perhaps a bit limited. But ample covered roof space and long balcony. Kitchen, pantry area were well organized. Several pictures were taken. Nitin and Beerwah staff were already in favor of it. On the way out, Adhik pointed out a detached room with a shutter. This could make a good office space as mandated by the JJ Act.

We caught a whiff of fresh Kashmiri bread baking and Adhik politely barged into the next door where we noticed a tandoor in action. More generous, warm souls. More warm bread for me. The locals, of course, would wait till sundown during Ramzan. Adhik has been joining in Roza for several years.

#### **10 am: Beerwah plot**

Next Adhik took me to see BWF's Beerwah plot of land (10500 sq ft) for building a future home. This was a very short drive. Took pictures of the plot. Noticed some green round fruit - I'd never seen walnuts in the raw.

### **Late morning: Gulmarg**

The rest of today seemed right for some sightseeing. We were already halfway toward Gulmarg so continued in that direction. On the way, we saw fresh cherries at a roadside vendor. I couldn't resist picking up a box full. By 10:30 we were passing Tangmarg before the ascent to Gulmarg. The windy road up as well as Gulmarg itself were breathtaking of course. Hadn't I visited as a child in middle school? So wonderful to be back all these decades later! I could feel my mental batteries recharging. The Himalayas are famously known to do that ...

### **Early afternoon: Back in Srinagar**

We prepared for the trip to Anantnag. Then drove on another segment of Srinagar-Kanyakumari Highway (NH 44). Saffron fields and shops lined parts of the route.

### **Mid afternoon: Reached Anantnag home**

Remarkably cheerful faces. Particularly cozy ambiance. Very warm reception - first a senior girl, then Princey who runs home since 2009.

This home has been at this location since 2011. But now need to move due to JJ Act - require more yard space etc.

Talking to staff, we learn:

- . One girl was shifted from Kupwara to Anantnag. Then Srinagar
- . Another girl was transferred recently from a non BWF school/home. BWF was recommended by the principal. This girl was now very happy at Anantnag home.

Soraiya arranges washing of my clothes. I take a warm water shower (Geyser).

Anantnag is one of the better run homes but also has limited headcount of about 30. Any larger, and Princy feels she can run the home but it gets difficult to nurture that many children.

After this Adhik presented staff presents for Eid.

Met and chatted with Mr. Zahoor who teaches Quran and Kashmiri in the mornings and tutors younger kids in the evenings.

Video introductions in the yard...

### **6:30 pm: Time for Cricket and singing**

The girls' excitement was contagious. Zahoor started bowling. The ball went flying all over the place, including to the neighbor's - sixers! I got my turn at bowling. Thankfully my joints cooperated. After a long over, I was urged to bat. Somehow, I had difficulty getting out - despite clearly deserving it 3 times. The generous girls had pity on me and insisted I play on. So who took videos while I was busy playing? The girls took over, of course. Occasionally I reminded them to hold the phone steady.

As cricket wound down and darkness approached, I tried to capture group pictures. Some girls seemed tied up preparing for Iftar (breaking fast) so others obliged. After a handful of selfies, they broke into songs. One melodious solo encouraging little girls wanting to join Roza was memorable (Ramzan fasting is not obligatory before adolescence).

### **Night: Anantnag**

## **May, 27th 2018: Anantnag to Pahalgam, return to Srinagar**

### **Morning: Anantnag**

Adhik got a good night's sleep. He was sleep deprived last few days. Had been very busy along with Nitin working out multiple home moves. I took a nice warm shower. Thanks to the geyser. And the view of distant snow covered mountains was a bonus.

### **9 am: Projector training**

After breakfast with Kava, omelette and Kashmiri bread, Adhik instructed Soraiya on operating a projector. She had grown in BeT but after 18 started helping the home while continuing her studies in DIT (Diploma in IT) nearby.

### **11:30 am: Group photos**

Including Adhik, staff, Neha and Zahara.

### **Noon: Sightseeing in Pahalgam**

Another place holding fond memories from my childhood. It was gorgeous along KP Road, adhering to a tributary of Jhelum. I noticed whitewater rafting.

The Amarnath Yatra route branches off from Pahalgam. Adhik ventured off the main road toward Mondlan - it got greener, steeper and more spectacular. Horses grazed on lush slopes. Red flowers bloomed in a Masjid compound. The backdrop was blue and white mountains.

The next stop was a surprise. Verinag Spring is a main source of river Jhelum. But this was no glacier. Rather a cold water spring. The adjacent Mughal Garden was picturesque. Evidence captured.

### **5:30 pm: Back in Srinagar area**

Zahara and Neha were interested in the evening market by Dal lake. After dropping them off, Adhik drove partially around the lake. We visited Hazrat Bal and picked up some Halwa and Puri (Kashmiri style - more like giant bhatura) for Iftar. Next stop Kheer Bhawani temple en route to Sumbal/Safa Pora. We attended aarti. This temple is of much significance to Kashmiri Hindus. But few of the displaced pandits get to visit it like they used to before the late nineties.

I postponed my return to Delhi by another day. For the extra day, Adhik planned more local sites of the spiritual kind.

### **Night: Srinagar**

Due to loose wiring in the bedroom upstairs, the lights went off. Snowber to the rescue! She deftly reattached the electrical wires and taped them for good. For a girl in middle school I was impressed with her initiative, skill and confidence.

## **May, 28th 2018: Spiritual tour in Srinagar, Fixing water pressure issues**

### **8am: Spiritual tour in Srinagar**

On Hari Parbat (a local hill), we visited Maqdoom Sahib and Shri Shakti Maa temple. Next, Adhik and I visited Dargah Dastgeer Sahib - with immaculate, intricate Islamic patterns inside.

Then we drove up Shankaracharya Hill. Saw more Hindu tourists from distant parts of India - Bengalis, South Indians.

### **Noon: Back to Srinagar home**

Water pressure issues persisted. After discussing with staff, Adhik decided to add a booster pump. I accompanied Zamruda to nearby Khan Hardware (walking distance across the main road). The store owner was quite familiar with BWF and seemed supportive. He had a running credit line and seemed to offer discounts. Gladly, he arranged for a plumber to assess and install the pump. Once water started reaching the upper floors, we were all quite relieved.

### **7:30 pm: Iftar and Namaz**

It was nice joining everyone for Iftar - a light snack of sherbet and dates to break the day's fast. The girls were singing hymns led by a few remarkable voices.

### **8pm: Dinner**

I enjoyed a big dinner with the whole home. Lots of rice and meat this time.

After dinner, I went gift shopping for a few ladies in my family. I'm grateful to Salima for selecting the shop and recommending popular local artifacts. Turned out to be great choices.

## **May, 29th 2018: Emotional Goodbye**

### **Morning: Srinagar**

#### **7:45am: Smaller group photos as girls prepare for school**

After the usual light breakfast and a warm shower upstairs (the new pump was working!), I headed downstairs to greet girls one last time as they got ready for school.

#### **10am: More group photos with staff and a few older girls**

Then Goodbyes. Many thoughts and feelings ....

Adhik and I headed to the airport. Ruhi joined us as she needed a ride. She grew up at BeT and is currently resident staff. On Adhik's request, Ruhi sings a beautiful song (I record a few seconds). She wanted to pursue singing and was supported by BWF for training in Maharashtra but her mother didn't approve and sadly she had to quit. (Later, I watched the bollywood film Secret Superstar about a girl aspiring to be a singer in a severely discouraging environment. Interestingly, the lead actress is Kashmiri. Was reminded of Ruhi and other girls with so much potential but lacking enough family support).

I was traveling very light. Instead of baggage though, I was now loaded with emotions and memories that will last for the rest of my lifetime.

#### **12:20 pm: Flight to Delhi from Srinagar airport**

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Some home specific data follows:

### **Jammu (Fah)**

Children: 30

Staff:

Rajni - trustee

Sushma

Tanya - oldest sister

House mother - not one full time, rather role shared by 5 ladies

One lady peon

One local coordinator

Rooms: 8 living, 5 toilets, 7 washbasins

### **Srinagar (Basera-e-Tabassum)**

Children: 40

Staff:

Salima

Insha

Ifra

Zamruda

Ruhi

Watchman

Local coordinator

Rooms: 15 living, 9 toilets, 9 washbasins

## **Kupwara (Basera-e-Tabassum)**

Children: 37

Staff:

Zahida Meer - Manager

Head cook

House mother

Chowkidar

Local coordinator

Cleaner or sweeper

Rooms: 8 Living, 4 bathrooms (1 outside in works)

3 Floors. Library, office upstairs

Tuition available for

Classes 10,11 - separate from schools

Younger kids tutored by Zahida

## **Beerwah (Basera-e-Tabassum)**

Children: 45 (Up to 56. 16 moved to Srinagar)

Staff:

Riaz Wani - local coordinator

Sheikh Zahoor (Trustee)

5 total staff (1 short per JJ) : 6th has been appointed

Manager

Cook

Helper

Local co-ord

Watchman

Rooms: 8 Living, Kitchen separate, Watchman room, Three toilets and bathroom

## **Anantnag (Basera-e-Tabassum)**

Children: 30

Staff:

Princy - manager

Zahoor - coordinator

House mother - Surat

Cook

Night chowkidar

Soraiya: warden

Rooms: 6 living, 1 kitchen, 2 bathrooms

## Endnotes:

1. The JJ Act refers to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juvenile\\_Justice\\_\(Care\\_and\\_Protection\\_of\\_Children\)\\_Act,\\_2015](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juvenile_Justice_(Care_and_Protection_of_Children)_Act,_2015)  
Some mandated requirements may be in line with Asha for Education's guidelines. So, in future, Asha could possibly leverage JJ Act audit reports, when available.
2. Over the years, most of the homes have had to move. Multiple times. Typically as the children grow in age and number. Or if the rent increases too much. Lately, the JJ Act has necessitated more transitions. So the data on number of rooms etc. could be obsolete soon.
3. Daily routines and schedules were not typical for most months in Kashmir because this was during Ramzan.
4. I recommend having a post-paid SIM while in J&K