

We (Bani and I) visited BeT Kupwara and Beerwah homes over a 4 days period from 22nd to 25th of June 2013. While it would take some time to write down the whole experience (if ever possible) here is the gist of our visit.

We were picked up by Adhik at Srinagar airport who was in Beerwah (about 40 kms from Srinagar) and another visitor, Maneesha from Mumbai who had already visited Beerwah home and accompanied us to Kupwara. While on the way, Adhik received the news that the father of a girl from a village near Kupwara but currently living in Beerwah home had died that morning. We stopped on our way to pickup the girl on our way to Kupwara. We stopped for lunch on the way and reached girl's village 'Dardpora' (a village aptly named for being home to more than 300 widows and many children without parents. You may want to google it for more information). At Dardpora, girl's relatives were waiting for us. Adhik first told the girl about death of her father, before letting the relative take her. Adhik and I joined the men's party to oversee the last rites while Bani and Maneesha were taken by women to separate room. After a while we all met in a room where Adhik emphasized that the girl should rejoin Beerwah home as soon as possible and the assurance was given by her relatives.

From Dardpora we reached Kupwara home around 3:00pm. Girls at Kupwara home welcomed us warmly but were a bit shy of us in the beginning. Kupwara home is currently managed by Pragya (who has joined recently from Pune and has background in social work) and Saleema (who has been with Bet for past 11 years, but now also working part time with a SEVA affiliated NGO working to provide vocational training to girls). Kupwara home also has 2 house-mothers who take care of girls, 2 cooks, one watchman and one person for bringing provisions for the home.

We met all the girls in a general assembly in evening, where after general introductions few girls sang songs and ghazals. After that we (visitors) were asked to leave, as Pragya and the house-mothers had to deal with a disciplinary matter. Apparently a few girls were climbing a tree in neighbor's yard and the tree fell down. None of the girls were hurt. Some of the girls went to owner's house to apologize and offered to work in the yard as compensation. However in the assembly girls were let-off after reprimand. Afterwards, over dinner we had a discussion on merit and the correct form of punishment for such acts. Next day being Sunday, all the girls were at home and busy with various chores such as washing their clothes and younger ones playing. We talked to some of the older girls (6th-9th std.) about their studies and what career they would like to chose. We gave the camera to girls and they were happy clicking photographs on their home and each other. Most of the photographs that I have shared were taken by the girls at their respective homes. After lunch, we went to a nearby "dam/lake" with girls for little bit of outing. Coming back from outing, girls organized a cricket match of "India" vs. "Pakistan" in their small compound. Pakistan won that match, however the victory was shared by all. In evening, Adhik took us to visit a girl's home in Lolab valley (about 30-40 min ride from Kupwara). This girl is in 11th Std. and part of Kupwara home but staying with her mother, as her mother needs assistance. This girl's father was a militant who was killed by the forces. We passed through some of

the places and roads that were the most dangerous during the peak of militancy. On our way Adhik and I had chat on how he got started working in Kashmir. At night a gentleman from the community dropped by to discuss the issue of access road to the land BeT has acquired for building a home. Currently there is limited space in rented house for about 40 girls. (5 rooms + kitchen + small space for office + attic for storage and 3 toilets)

Next day was Monday and the girls were up early. They had their PT session and after that they got busy with getting ready for school. Older girls helped younger ones in getting ready. Some of the girls had their exams (mid-year), so they were busy preparing for it till the 11th hour. Some of the girls had the day off (as they have just finished their exams). After breakfast, we took our leave from Kupwara home for Beerwah home with promise to come again and soon.

On the way to Beerwah home, first we dropped Maneesha at Srinagar airport and then reached Beerwah home on Monday around 3:00pm. Compare to Kupwara home, girls at Beerwah were less shy (they were also older, some of them from Kupwara home). They immediately took us to an open space and an apple orchard nearby. Again I gave them my camera to click some photographs. After coming back we played "antakhari" for some time and the girls showed fierce competitiveness. I went with Adhik to see the site for Beerwah home. After coming back we had some discussions with Mr. Zahoor (who is a teacher and trainer @ DIET and comes to Beerwah home every evening to have discussion with girls and help them with their studies). Discussions with Mr. Zahoor and Adhik revealed the complex situation of the organization amidst the mistrust between local population, the military and the militants (in older days) and how the organization has survived to make a place for itself in last 12 years. It was Mr. Zahoor and Tanveer along with Adhik and Bharati (no longer part of BWF or BeT) who conceived the notion of BeT homes. As that night was "shab ki raat", some of the older girls were awake all night praying and we could also here people praying in a nearby cemetery all night.

Next morning (Tuesday) as most of the girls left for school, Adhik took us (Bani and myself) to Gulmarg, which is about 1 hour from Beerwah. We came back in afternoon and after lunch set about another trip, this time to a place called "doodhpatri" along with some girls. We had two vehicles, a Bolero and a maruti van, so it was hard to decide which of the girls would go on this trip. After the selection (22 girls) based on multiple complex factors we set about our trip. Though the distance was not much but the roads were tough and the girls in the van had to sometime push the van to get through. But we all had fun on our trip and took photographs.

Next day (Wednesday), we had to leave for Srinagar in morning, but because of curfew in Srinagar (due to PM's visit and as an after fact of an attack on army convoy in which 8 army men were killed. The unit of the army has their base camp in Beerwah, not very far from girl's home), our departure was delayed. Most of the girls left for school in morning and some for a picnic organized by their schools. Some younger girls remained at home and spent their time either playing in water or washing clothes. Finally at around 3:00 pm, when we got the news that the curfew has been lifted in Srinagar, we left Beerwah home, but not without promise of coming back again and staying longer.

Overall, we felt that Beerwah home had a much more homely environment, which may be due to absence of a manager or house-mothers. Also, at the time of our visit the cook has taken a leave for her 10th std. mid-year exams (inspired by girls at the home). So, in fact the older girls were “in-charge”. However, a manager was to join from 28th June and Mr. Zahoor has also found one house-mother for this home. Compared to Beerwah home, girls at Kupwara home had more structured life. But, at both places, girls consider it their own home and enjoyed living there. We found that some of the older girls had real zeal of doing something in their life and understand the need to be on their own despite the social factors. Adhik told us that HDFC has approved funding for their staff (24 for 4 homes + 5) to be started from July. They also, received notification of 2KVA inverters being donated for all 4 homes through a contact in Mumbai (who works for Harley-Davidson and visited BeT homes recently).

There is much more to BeT homes, that could be conveyed in written words on short notice. In brief, we (both Bani and I) felt that visiting BeT home was the best part of our Kashmir trip and we would be visiting these homes again and other homes as well soon.