

Ashraya Site Report



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On June 23, 2023, I visited Ashraya, a combined day school and residential rehabilitation center for mentally and physically challenged girls, in Kollam, Kerala. Established by Mr. Venugopalan in 2000, the mission of the center is to help disabled young girls learn the necessary skills to be useful contributors to society. Through daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, and arts and crafts, the girls develop fine motor skills, which drive many of the duties that women in rural parts of India serve. The primary mission of Ashraya is to provide autonomy for the girls and give them equity to live their lives as functioning members of Indian society.

Entering Ashraya

I arrived at Kollam in the evening right before my flight out from India back to the



states. After a long drive, I was welcomed into open arms by Dolly Sreekala (who endearingly had me call her Dolly Chechi), the headmistress of the school. She introduced me to the girls, who were sitting together braiding each others' hair and getting ready to retire for the evening. We all

sat in a circle in their main room and introduced ourselves, where I spoke with the girls while they braided my hair and told me about their Ashraya experiences.

While they ranged in their age and disabilities, one thing that was consistent was how happy the girls were. Some of the girls were nonverbal, but the other girls were still able

to tell me that they enjoy living at Ashraya. Dolly Chechi was able to tell me about many of their lives outside of the center, particularly the forms of discrimination that disabled girls face. Since women are expected to handle the majority of the housework and also care for children, many of the girls' families see them as burdens since they are not able to contribute the same way an able-bodied person might. This is why learning fine motor and homemaking skills are very important.

Tea Time: Facilities and Finances

After some group-based fun activities with me, my mother, and the girls, Dolly Chechi and I grabbed some chai and biscuits to discuss the way the site is run. The girls' days

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are very strictly scheduled, from when they wake up to when they go to sleep, to keep them active, learning, and happy. They have young women who are trained in taking care of special-needs children assist them with getting ready in the morning, and they are subsequently dropped off at the dining room to grab breakfast. One of the cooks

was the aunt of a girl who had attended Ashraya, and she told me how the program assisted her niece in contributing to her home, becoming as self-dependent as she could be considering her circumstances, and feeling ready to move back to her home. The majority of the staff are either relatives of Ashraya girls, or even Ashraya girls who grew out of the program and became ready to assist future residents.

I had to take a quick restroom break, and I saw that the facilities were all very nice. The girls were also getting ready for their showers before bed, and we were informed there is one toilet for every three girls. While personal hygiene can be more difficult for disabled people to take care of, Dolly Chechi indicated that



educating the girls on menstruation and other feminine hygiene has not been difficult at all. We also examined the kitchen and dining area more closely, where there are large sinks and a very clean environment for handling food. In general, the space was very well kept.



This is when we met Mr. Venugopal, who is the primary benefactor to the institution. Upon my



mother asking his motivation for setting up the school, he let out a chuckle and told us that some people are simply called to duties that they know to be necessary. We asked what their primary mission for Ashraya was, and he emphasized that it has always been about reclaiming autonomy for girl children with disabilities. Particularly because of their physical and mental barriers, these girls' are at risk of being rejected by society, left without care or even a home in severe cases. Dolly Chechi informed me that there were 25 girls in total living at the site, with 15 of the girls as permanent residents. For some of

these girls, their families treat them as burdens for being disabled, ranging from an uncomfortable to potentially unsafe environment for the girls. By providing an



educational residence and employment after graduation, the girls have a lifelong home for them to gain comfort towards, which is especially important for the mentally disabled girls.

This was where we began discussing finances. Each girl costs around 6,000 rupees per month on average (for all 25 girls).

While they do accept fees, many of the girls have financial hardships, and they operate on a “pay what you can” model. Only around 60%

of girls pay any sort of cost whatsoever. Their most

common expenses include food, materials, education, medical care, hygiene products, and staffing. With a 1:4 ratio of staff to students, they want to make sure that girls are constantly supervised and have accessible help whenever



possible. Since many of the girls hired are very young, they do not hold permanent positions once they get married or move away since the nature of their job requires them to live on-site (they are given room and board as well, free of charge). Outside of Asha, they have a monthly private donor, which they opted for over a corporation or political donor since this can cause potential biases. They are not affiliated with any groups or

religions (although they do have a Ganesha statue for the girls to pray with) and are accepting of all disabled girls in need.

Ashraya's Education System

We finished our tea, and Dolly Chechi and one of the staff members, a girl with cerebral palsy who grew up in Ashraya and now helps the new residents, showed me several of the art projects that the girls worked on. They learned important skills such as weaving, coloring, and more crafting skills. The primary motivation for these activities is learning fine motor skills (something that mentally disabled children in particular can struggle to develop) while also expressing themselves through artwork. For these girls, there are such great situational barriers to higher education that their schooling primarily focuses on activities like singing and creating art, which are group based and target the necessary skills they need to function in greater society.



Outside of this primary course, there are three levels of students: primary 1 (4 students), primary 2 (10 students), and secondary school (4 students). Children above 14 are in prevocational training (6 students), where they learn computer education as well as cooking and domestic chores. This is accompanied with a one month vacation, where the families can see what their girls have learned and how they have progressed in their abilities while at Ashraya. They also provide families with counseling to better support and understand their daughters. The youngest girl is seven years old, while the eldest is

23. By expanding the program, they would allow girls to live out their lives at Ashraya, similar to the girl who is currently employed and assisting the others.

Departure and Summary

After this final demonstration, we discussed the area a bit more. When we initially arrived at the site, Google Maps was unable to tell us the location of the site properly; however, the community was well aware of the home and was able to direct us to the appropriate location. I was personally under the impression they were well regarded in the community and very knowledgeable on the happenings around them. There were also some members of the Kollam community who visited the site to pray to the Ganesha statue and tell us their own experiences with Mr. Venugopalan and the girls, all of which were positive.



As we walked outside, I spent some time praying before departure and looking around



at the site. The Ashraya home itself was in great condition, with lots of open space both inside and outside for the girls. A gorgeous banyan tree and playground were in the center of the grounds, with a garden at the front where we entered. As Dolly Chechi showed

me the different plants the girls would tend for (which were also directly used for cooking), it made me reflect on how great their cause truly is. By providing resources for these girls, Ashraya embodies the kind of equity necessary to help address disabilities, particularly in conjunction with gendered issues, in India.

With additional funding, the site would be able to fund more permanent staff. Their biggest hit in staffing occurred post-pandemic, and it's been difficult to train and retain staff since. Despite this, they are able to keep the girls comfortable and attended for, and there are more than enough resources for these girls to flourish. Mr. Venugopal, Dolly Chechi, and the rest of the wonderful staff have done well to provide a home for these girls, and by meeting their requests for funding, Ashraya can continue providing a home and education for disabled girls.