

## ASHA for EDUCATION TRIP REPORT.

**Site visited:** Ashraya, Kollam, Kerala.

**Trip dates:** November 14, 15, 2018

**Visiting Volunteer:** Gangadhara Mathad, Asha-MHV, NY.

My trip started on Nov 14, 2018 when I flew from Bengaluru airport via Indigo airlines to Tiruvananthapuram (originally Trivendrum). Being an early flight, I arrived Tiruvananthapuram (airport symbol TRV) at around 10:00 AM, where Mr. Venugopalan Nair, Director of Ashraya, had come in his personal vehicle to take me to Ashraya in Kollam (a seaside town, also located on the back waters of Ashtamudi lake), about two hours away from TRV airport. On the way to Ashraya, I checked-in and dropped my luggage at Quillon Beach hotel situated on the Arabian Sea. We reached the school around noon.

The school is located in a single large building (originally Chinmayananda ashram) on the personal estate of Mr. Venugopalan. A large banyan tree shades most of the front area of the school building. Ashraya is a residential



rehabilitation center for Physically and Mentally challenged children from economically and socially backward communities of the area. It's mission is to mould each challenged child into a self-reliant and dignified individual so as to take care of themselves when they return home after some years of training (till age 15) at Ashraya. Feed back from the parents has been very positive: returning children not only take care of themselves but also help parents in household chores. Ashraya, by taking over the responsibilities of a challenged girl child, provides the mother the much needed freedom who then can attend to earning a living for the family. The school also provides employment to physically challenged students above the age of twelve by providing them special education training e.g. vocational training, computer education, tailoring & embroidery, cooking & domestic chores.. A day at Ashraya begins early at 5:30 AM with the house mothers and resident teachers helping the

challenged girl students to get ready for the day. After routine morning activities (brushing, bathing etc.) the school day starts with “mantra” chanting which has been found as a technique to improve their memory retention and speech/communication skills.

When we reached the school, the classes were in session. After we said “hello” to each other and introduced our names, the girls – age 5 to 15 – sang some songs and performed some group dances.



We then broke up for lunch around 1:30 PM. I have to make a special mention about lunchtime discipline the girls have been taught. All girls, except the one



that serves, sit at a large table while the volunteer student (rotated on a daily basis) serves the lunch plates filled with various items by the teachers. The lunch we all ate together was wholesome, with chapatis, two curries, a dal, rice and salad. After each child is served the lunch plate, the serving student then sits with her plate and only then all the girls after chanting a mantra begin to eat in silence. I was amazed and impressed by their discipline, being mentally challenged. After the meal, three girls, by turn, wash all the plates and stack neatly on the kitchen shelf. The kitchen, the furniture, and the utensils were all very clean, and the students nicely disciplined and well behaved.

Classes continued in the afternoon. The classes consist of speech, art, yoga, music and dance, and physical therapy for those needing it. Some classes are on a daily basis and some on a weekly basis. There are 27 girls at Ashraya and six are enrolled in VIIIth grade at Govt. High School, Koickal. As a result of individualized training program, three daughters of Ashraya have completed their graduation from SN Women's College and Jyothy Niketan College, Kollam.

What personally impressed me was the "gurukula" style of education provided at Ashraya. Not only are the girls taught basic and needed behavioral and communication skills, but also taught other values like yoga, art, singing/dancing, mantra chanting, household chores, cleaning the school grounds - in other words, lessons on proper living. The school has received excellent feedbacks from parents as to the ability of returning children in contributing to the overall well being of their family. This is the result of excellent work by the staff and management of Mr. Venugopalan and Mrs. Dolly, the head teacher. The children are well taken care of on an individual basis and are happy and well adjusted. Most of the students are residential while some return home in the evening.

Most of the funds requested from "Asha for Education" is for the staff salaries. All the female staff is in their twenties and tend to leave when they get married. Finding new staff, training them properly to care & love and teach the challenged children is no easy task; but Dolly seems to be capable and doing her job admirably well. The Ashraya institute needs all the support Asha can give. I thank the Asha-San Diego chapter for giving me this unique opportunity to visit and acquaint myself with a fine institute as ASHRAYA. If additional information is needed, please contact me at 845-559-9408 or [swamimathad@yahoo.com](mailto:swamimathad@yahoo.com) Thanks and Happy New Year.

Gangadhara Mathad  
Asha-MHV volunteer, NY.  
December 20, 2018.