

Site Visit: Shisur Sevay – visited May 31st 2012.

(By: Arunima Dasgupta, runee20@gmail.com, Asha Volunteer, was Asha BTV Chapter Coordinator)

When I walked into the 2 storied house – on a quiet in-street of Taratalla, I wasn't very sure of what I would achieve in a 1 hr visit to a place that I hardly had time to research on. The results were very different as I walked out and then a couple of hours later walked back in for a little while.

The 2 storied building has a watchman sitting behind the iron gates. You have to enter your name / the purpose of your visit and your time of entry at the gate. At the inside door I was greeted by Michelle in her beautifully clad sari and complete Bengali look and got introduced to Purba and Maggie. We sat down and Michelle gave me an introduction of her work. A doctor by profession, she decided to move to Kolkata and brought all her savings with her to open an orphanage for little children who were literally living in the streets of Kolkata or in really pathetic government homes after being abandoned by parents because of the child's disability.

She explained that there were a total of 14 children in her little home and most of them were little to severely disabled. I learnt that while previously these kids were being sent to Bengali medium schools, their school has recently been changed. All 14 children now ride a bus (owned by sisur sevay) to go to a ICSE affiliated English medium school in budge budge. Michelle explained to me how she figured out that while knowing their mother tongue was important, but the ICSE school board was better equipped to handle the disabled children. Moreover in Indian education system learning in English has its own advantage and I could completely agree to the smart switch given the need for English as their media for education. We talked about Michelle's long drawn connection with IMH Kolkata which does not exist today but she showed me the sign which she brought back from the demolished site and has proudly put it standing in her garden.

Now it was time for the tour. The children were all in the house as it was summer vacation and as the door opened up from Michelle's small office room to the big room filled with little kids sleeping one next to the other, I could not help but feel a sense of satisfaction in the air. Not all of them were asleep though. There was a tutor in the room and some of the older kids were busy learning math skills from this tutor who came everyday to teach the children and help them catch up to the school curriculum. The switch to the budge budge English medium school had happened only 5 months before this so the older kids had a lot to catch up on. I sifted through some of their work. Many of them had very good handwriting and one of the kids in the 6th grade explained to me her daily routine and all that she learns in school and at home. We then went upstairs to a classroom which looked exactly like my daughter's classroom in Summit St Vermont. Michelle had little cubbies for each of the kids, there was a big map of the world, lots of books for different grades, so many hands on activity stuff and a big white board. The room had big glass windows and was neat and clean and very well maintained.

Now it was turn for me to see the bathrooms. They were marbel floors with showers and had facilities for both Indian and western style. Very neat and clean bathrooms which Michelle said was cleaned and maintained by the staff and the older kids. I thought that was one of the best practices Michelle could instill in them – the concept of cleanliness is godliness. By the time I completed the tour of the whole

place, most of the children were up from their afternoon siesta. There was Ganga a little girl with cerebral palsy who needed help with most of her things. I met her and saw how the older kids take care of the little ones. How they act as older sisters to these little ones and help them with their daily needs. However there are ayahs (helpers) for most of these kids with disability and these helpers go to school with the children and help them in their classroom activities as well. This is a concept not much heard of in private / public schools in Kolkata – at least if you go back a couple of decades. However Michelle has been able to break barriers and introduce this very basic concept of every child's right to education and the ability of a school to accept a child with disability and provide them with the same education that another healthy child from a more normal background is entitled to.

As I walked out of that place a good 1 hr later I couldn't help but compare this to the other site visits that I have done in the previous years. Both my aunt and I agreed that till date this was the best place I have ever visited and would like to help keep Michelle's hard-work and her earnest dreams of giving her 14 children a better future that they would never had imagined had they stayed on in their respective past living conditions.

I would encourage Asha to have Sisur Sevay definitely as part of WAH so that Michelle is able to continue her effort in bringing the best for her 14 children.

There is a very strong sense of honesty, trust, giving and happiness in the environment in sisur sevay. I hope Michelle continues her work and we providing her the funds keep her motivated in her efforts. I think she would do good if she decides to keep the total number of children to 14 and not increase this number because then the possibility of individual attention that the children receive today may be compromised.