

Site Visit Report – Shishur Sevay July 29, 2007
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This short report summarizes my visit with Dr. Michelle Harrison's Shishur Sevay project in Kolkatta on July 29-30, 2007. I had known Dr. Harrison's work in Kolkattathrough my interactions with Asha CNJ volunteers. Prior to her expatriation to India, she had been involved with Asha CNJ projects based in Kolkatta, includingthe Save The Children's Home (STCH) project. I decided to visit her during my next visit to the Khajurdaha project.

I was picked up at the Kolkatta Airport by Michelle, Mrs. Jasvinder Kaur (Gibi) and their driver. We reached Shishur Sevay late in the night, at 10 p.m. or so. Some of the older girls were awake and greeted us as we entered the house. The house is in two levels, the ground level being the residential quarters for the children, Michelle and the caregivers. Upstairs has a study room for the children. I was not allowed to enter the living/ sleeping quarters of the children, as males are not allowed in their rooms, according to Shishur Sevay's policy. I quite appreciated this.

Michelle described her journey that made her decision to return to India. Having adopted a girl from Kolkatta in the 1980s, Michelle has been a frequent visitor to India. She had been involved with the orphanage from where her child was adopted. However, during one of her visits, she found that the children were not being cared for properly. She decided to quit her career with a major pharmaceutical company in New Jersey and decided to move to India. Shishur Sevay (Childlife Sanctuary) was started in February2007, with Michelle's personal savings. She got the license from the government to start the orphanage, but it came with quite a few preconditions. She was asked to take care of four physically handicapped children. In spite of the challenges involved, Michelle gladly accepted them. However, vested interests and government officials have been asking her to accept children who are not orphan (meaning that they have one or both of their parents alive). Michelle has been challenging this in court and they have threatened to cancel her license and take away the children if she does not comply. Also, the local government has demanded that the orphanage be registered as a Trust with Indians on the board. Due to her prior negative experience, Michelle has resisted this request. In spite of these daily struggles, Michelle has kept a very positive attitude and takes excellent care for the children. We discussed various challenges that Shishur Sevay has been facing late into the night, while one of the physically challenged children required attention. Michelle took care of her and had to hold the child well into the night.

We discussed ways in which Asha could support Shishur Sevay. Michelle had indicated that since her organization does not have an FCRA clearance, she would not be able to accept funds directly from Asha-USA. She indicated that it would be great if Asha India can provide support for her organization. I promised her that that I would bring it up for discussion with Asha India volunteers. Michelle indicated that Asha CNJ has been willing to provide moral support during her crises with the local government.

¹ Please note that I have refrained from mentioning the names of the children to protect their privacy. Also the pictures taken my visit will be altered to protect their identity.

The next morning (July 30th), we woke up sharply at 5 a.m. to begin our day. Michelle must have hardly had two to three hours of sleep that night. Still she was fresh and ready to start the new day and the challenges. It was quite a sight to see all the school-going children (eight of them) getting ready in an orderly way. Older children were helping the younger ones get ready and they were all dressed in smart school uniforms. There were eight of everything (tiffin boxes, water bottles, bags etc.). Michelle has hired a cook to help with and she was extremely efficient in handling the children's needs in the morning. Older children who finished their breakfast early were singing songs at the gate. One of the children had an eye infection, so Michelle (she is a medical doctor by profession) attended to her and advised her to stay at home. I was a quiet observer in the midst of the entire hustle bustle. Some children came up to me and spoke in Hindi. We got ready to drop off the children in the school. Children formed a line and we started for the school, with Michelle leading the way. It was quite a sight to watch them go to school singing all the way. The neighbors who by now are used to this sight were greeting Michelle on the way. We reached the school by 7:45 a.m. on time for the school assembly. We said goodbye to the children and watched them take part in the school assembly. Children attend a local government school. Michelle mentioned that some of the children are behind in their schooling and had to be admitted in lower classes. She had arranged for tuition classes all day during the summer for these children to catch up with the curriculum. She has additional tuition help in the afternoons for these children.

After dropping off the children in their school, we returned back to Shishur Sevay. On the way, Michelle did vegetable shopping from a street vendor. She is his usual customer. She pretty much cleaned up the entire cart, quite understandable considering the size of her family. After our return to the house, we spent some time with the four physically challenged children. Michelle has arranged for a nurse to take care of them (providing massaging) in the mornings. Some of the children were quite excited to see cartoons on the TV.

Around 9 a.m. we left Shishur Sevay for our site visit to Khajurdaha Nabankur United Club. Michelle and Gibi graciously agreed to join me for my site visit, along with Mr. Basu of Kolkatta. We reached KNUC project by mid-afternoon. Michelle and Gibi stayed till the evening and returned back to Kolkatta.

This trip, while very short, gave me a glimpse of Michelle's enormous courage to run this orphanage in spite of all the challenges she has faced. Her motherly care and conviction to provide the best care for the children is clearly evident in all her operations. I hope Shishur Sevay will overcome the challenges and the children have a bright future. Asha should support this initiative in any way we can.