

## Visit to Shishur Sevay: 19th December 2008

Joydeep Acharya, Asha Central NJ

On Dec 19th, I went to Shishur Sevay to meet Michelle and catch up with the wonderful work that she keeps on doing. I took a Metro till Jatin Das Park and from the Hazra crossing, boarded an auto for New Alipore. I got down at an intersection called the SBI crossing because there was a SBI branch in the opposite side of the road. At that intersection another road originated, at right angles to the one that I had been traveling on. The board proclaimed its name as Ramtanu Lahiri lane but its local name is JK Pal Road. I boarded a rickshaw and went straight. After a while the name changed to Sahapur Main road and continuing straight, the rickshaw turned into a lane in the left which after a few twists and turns lead us to the Shishur Sevay building.

The building seemed to reverberate with the excited chatter of many voices. As I entered the small drawing room, which was filled to the brim by books, files and furniture , Michelle stepped in and greeted me.

When I had last come here almost two years back, there was only one child, but now the place had around 13 children from 3 years to 14. Out of this 4 of the smallest children suffer from cerebral palsy and receive special in house therapy. Michelle said that the therapists didn't come as per a regular schedule but that was a minor inconvenience as compared to the grand scale of activities that take place at Shishur Sevay. The children used to go to Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy (IICP) previously, but then she became dissatisfied with their methods.

The children looked happy and animated. The elder children were doing their homework as any normal school going child would do. But they were not children from normal backgrounds. Michelle had said more than once that they have had very troubled lives, often spent in a cruel and unfriendly street corner or a railway platform. The younger ones were being engaged by their 'masis' or attendants. Michelle said that the children had responded quite well to treatments and were in a much better state than when they had come. The masis seemed caring and patient which was heartening to see. They seemed to have a genuine affection for the children and were not putting up a show for Michelle or myself. The children had different varieties of specially designed chairs with supports so that they could sit and stand without falling down. The carpenter who made them was nearby, busy designing sleeping bunks for the children. Michelle said that he was a very capable but a little stubborn person.

The smaller children were darlings. There was something intrinsically innocent and spontaneous about them that made your heart warm up. A very endearing aspect of Shishur Sevay was the bond between them and the older girls. Some of the older girls had readily assumed the roles of didis and mentored the little ones from playing with them to teaching them how to dance. Michelle said how one of them (I am very bad with names and can't recall) had dreamt that her new-found younger sister had become well again and could walk around on her own. This illustrates that Shishur Sevay was giving the children the most important thing that they need – a family.

Of course Shishur Sevay is beset with many problems as well. The place has grown big and bustling with activities and it would be a great relief for Michelle to find a reliable second in command. Her long time companion Ms Gurbinder Kaur was slated to take over that role, but due to various unfortunate circumstances, that was no longer possible. On a long term basis, no one can single-handedly look after the day to day logistics of running such a big home, supervise the children's education, appoint and monitor teachers and masis, all the while fighting with the Govt for giving legitimacy to Shishur Sevay. It is a tribute to the extraordinary dedication, perseverance, grit and fearlessness of Michelle that she has managed to achieve this impossible for so long, but some respite is the need of the hour. I asked her about her back-up plans of running Shishur Sevay without her.

“If case of an emergency my daughter and son-in-law will take over this place. Andrei will come to India periodically and see it that the place is being run well. Otherwise I am grooming some of the older girls so that they might assume some administrative responsibilities in the future.”

The retention of teachers seemed to be another problem. Remuneration was not the issue. Luckily however, the availability of the masis seemed to be satisfactory.

The children did their homeworks diligently. Some of them had beautiful handwritings that reminded me how bad mine was. As the children finished their homeworks they brought their copies to Michelle for inspection and she noted their progress in registers. This included even Bengali homeworks, a language alien to Michelle but over which she had evidently mustered enough working knowledge to judge the progress of the children. I noticed, as I had done in the previous visit, that she peppered her speech with various Bengali words and phrases.

Michelle could be stern with the kids if the situation demanded. It was no surprise that the children called her 'mummy'; a mother who was part of their family and not merely a noble benefactor who had her own life.

Overall I was very impressed with what I saw. There were definite improvements in the children's lives after coming to Shishur Sevay. The place was a model home for homeless children. With a little more luck and additional capable people at the helm, it could go on maintaining its high standards forever.

## Rani

- Kasturi, Asha Central NJ

At Asha CNJ, We have been in very close contact with, and have been having at least two visits per year to Shishur Sevay, for the last couple of years.

I met Rani in June (2008). Rani talked to me with her eloquent, expressive eyes. She smiled - just twice - but otherwise was meditative, quiet, absorbed. Her hair

was still wet from the shower, and adored her innocent face in careless curls. Her thin lips were parted but she did not speak. She clutched at my camera-strap and pulled it so hard I almost dropped it. She clutched at my churidaar, too, and tugged at my dupatta. Rani is a keen observer and keenly observed every move we made. She watched intently, yet indifferently, as we fed the rabbits. She swayed and tapped her hands on the desk, in perfect beats, when the tape-recorder played Salil Chaudhury.

Rani is not this calm always. She gets into seizures - violent fits of rage, anger, passion.



Rani, sitting in her chair in the morning sun...

Rani, large, moist, eloquent, talking eyes...

Rani, swaying her thin fragile body with every beat of music...

Rani, tugging hard at my camera strap...

Rani will stand up and speak someday.

"Somewhere at some new moon, we'll learn that sleeping is not death."

## **Archives at Shishur Sevay (June 2008-June 2009)**

Michelle maintains a day-to-day account of the life at Shishur Sevay on her blog. Here are the diaries from June '08 to June '09.

June 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/06/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/06/index.html)  
May 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/05/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/05/index.html)  
April 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/04/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/04/index.html)  
March 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/03/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/03/index.html)  
February 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/02/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/02/index.html)  
January 2009: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2009/01/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2009/01/index.html)  
December 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/12/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/12/index.html)  
November 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/11/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/11/index.html)  
October 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/10/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/10/index.html)  
September 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/09/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/09/index.html)  
August 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/08/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/08/index.html)  
July 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/07/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/07/index.html)  
June 2008: [http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur\\_sevay/2008/06/index.html](http://travelingcloud.typepad.com/shishur_sevay/2008/06/index.html)