

An Update from Varanasi by Richard Sclove...

Dear Friends of Sonoma Ashram and Bal Ashram,

I live in western Massachusetts and serve on the board of directors of Sonoma Ashram. In 2006-07 my wife Marcie, teen-age daughter Lena, and I shared the gift of living for a year at Bal Ashram, Babaji's ashram in the ancient, sacred city of Benares, India.

Marcie and I are now one-week into a month-long return visit, and Babaji has asked me to reflect on how the ashram has changed. My observations and photographs appear below.

Namaste,

Richard Sclove (Richard@Sclove.org)

Bal Ashram, 19 Feb. 2011



Looking out over the Ganges River at sunrise from the roof of Bal Ashram earlier this week. Note the people wading ankle-deep in the shallow water. The river is abnormally low owing to recent upstream diversion of water to new industrial projects.

Bal Ashram, Feb. 2006



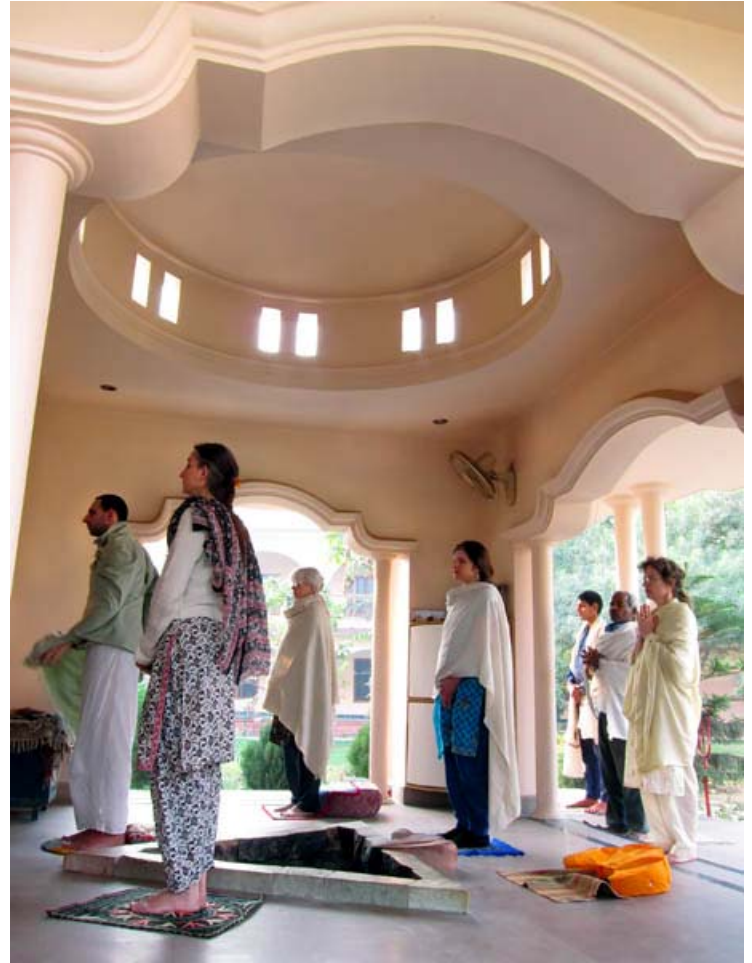
Bal Ashram, Feb. 2011



The courtyard of Bal Ashram as it appeared in 2006 (left) and this week (right). Today Bal Ashram has mature shade trees, green grass, a fresh coat of peach-colored paint, a completed 2nd story (including a glass-enclosed, marble-floored yoga and meditation room overlooking the Ganges river), and a beautiful new two-domed temple.

There have been important improvements in Bal Ashram's physical plant, but the social and programmatic changes are even more dramatic.

In 2006 Bal Ashram was essentially an orphanage for about 20 children. Here those children, who came from impoverished or abusive backgrounds, became members of a safe and loving group home.



This year Babaji arrived at Bal Ashram in early January, and he will stay for 2 months. Left: Babaji performing morning *puja* (worship) before a statue of Maha Kali – the benign destroyer of human illusion – that sits along the back side of the ashram temple. Right: Ashram staff and western visitors standing in the temple at the conclusion of morning meditation.

The greatest limitation in those days was that the ashram did not fully live up to Babaji's vision and standards during the 9 or 10 months when he was not present to oversee operations.

Today that has all changed, and - while they might deny it- much of the credit goes to Kamla and Loknath, two dedicated Italian educators who are in residence, managing Bal Ashram's daily activities, for 10 months of each year. They are complemented by a strong staff that includes more than a dozen full and part-time members.



Loknath and Kamla (right) lining up the younger Bal Ashram children for their morning visit to the ashram temple.



Each morning the younger Bal Ashram children (ages 3 to 11) march themselves into the ashram temple where, remarkably, they spend about ten minutes chanting, praying and meditating under their own supervision.

Bal Ashram is now much more than a nurturing home for abandoned children. In 2006 the ashram provided a smattering of rudimentary primary education, under an open-sided tin roof, to about 35 neighborhood children. These were kids who would otherwise not have received any education at all.

From that humble beginning the ashram has now developed Anjali School, where trained educators teach about 90 children from disadvantaged backgrounds . The school has well-equipped classrooms and provides a solid education for kindergarten through third grade.



Children playing in the courtyard of Anjali School, adjacent to Bal Ashram. Brick schoolrooms sit along the left side of the photo; a bicycle-pedaled school bus is at the lower right.



Left: Head teacher Raju leading the Anjali School's all-student morning assembly. Right: Deepu, another teacher, making the rounds of his classroom to offer individual guidance. When I saw chattering monkeys scamper across the classroom roof, the children – who are accustomed to such occurrences – paid no attention.

Bal Ashram's former cow-shed is now Project Shakti, where poor women are receiving practical vocational training.



Left: Women from Project Shakti practicing their new sewing skills. Right: preparing chilies for pickling.

Directly across the Ganges River from Bal Ashram, Babaji has launched the Amrit Sagar (“Ocean of Bliss”) project, which will gradually develop into a much-needed regional center for hands-on environmental education. Amrit Sagar is already providing fresh organic milk and vegetable crops to the Bal Ashram children, who love helping out with farm activities.



Girish Sharma, center, who manages Amrit Sagar’s development, explaining the organic dairy operation. The fresh Amrit Sagar yogurt that I ate on-site this morning was the best I’ve ever tasted.



Left: Amrit Sagar's ever-vigilant water buffalo protecting the organic cabbage patch from any threat of wayward pesticide application. There's a solar oven in the background. Right: Ramesh explaining organic honey production to my wife Marcie at the Amrit Sagar apiary. Although Indians usually like having their photo taken, these bees proved an exception. Lacking protective clothing, I scrambled for cover each time a bee began declaring an objection.



Two Amrit Sagar bullocks powering an innovative pump that can be used to pump well water as well as grind crops (photo by Kamla).



Sudhanshu showing two western volunteers Amrit Sagar's biogas system for transforming cow manure into cooking gas.

Three months of the year Dr. Ivor Wolfe visits Bal Ashram from England to conduct a clinic that has provided free eye examinations and eyeglasses to thousands of needy Benares recipients.

In short, since we last visited three years ago, Bal Ashram has evolved from a promising start as a home for abandoned kids into a thriving, multi-armed social service project that Babaji envisions as an inspiring model for Benares and beyond. (Please scroll down for additional recent photos)



Over the past few years Bal Ashram's older boys have grown from playful teenagers into increasingly responsible young men, exhibiting a mature comportment that only my most foolish antics as a photographer were able to breach. Left to right they are Ramesh, Sudhanshu and Viswanath,



Visiting American students from Global College and Princeton University describing to Babaji their proposal for a Bal Ashram gray water treatment system that would cleanse water prior to use in the ashram's garden or discharge into the Ganges River.



Left: Babaji sitting in Bal Ashram's darshan hut, where he spends much of each day meeting with visitors, children and staff. Right: 7-year-old Amit greeting the Bal Ashram calf. In the background the ashram's lush, terraced gardens descend down to the Ganges River.



Left: Bal Ashram food has become more tasty and nutritious since the arrival of new cook, Pyareji. Right: My wife, Marcie, holding Bal Ashram's youngest resident, Indra.



Afternoon homework time for the Bal Ashram children. In the foreground Soham is working on math word-problems posed in English.



The delights and wonders of life in India are unending. Here Bal Ashram staff member Mishraji performs *puja* with flower garlands, incense and sweets to welcome a new motorcycle safely into the ashram community.



The Bal Ashram *sangha* (spiritual community) gathered in the temple for evening worship.

Namaste!