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SonoMa Ashram

## News from Bal Ashram

Varanasi, October 2008

Dear Friends,

The extreme heat and rains have passed, and the level of River Ganga is slowly going back to normal. Since the weather has improved, we have been spending more and more time working in the garden and beautifying the Ashram grounds.

When River Ganga recedes, She leaves a lot of mud and plastic on the river banks. The children and staff have worked diligently to clean it all up. Our next step is to prepare the terracing along the river bank for our vegetable and decorative gardens. Inside the Ashram compound, the gardens and grounds are taking new shape too. Bal Ashram is becoming more and more welcoming, a real oasis!



*Group work to level the ground in front of the kitchen and prepare it for grass, flowers and new trees. Here we are taking turns sliding on the wooden board!*



*The team of younger children is also very efficient and full of energy; here you can see from left to right - **Suraj, Shiva, Deepak & Bhanu** - engaged in moving an old papaya tree.*



*Darshan hut, where Babaji receives guests, and new temple in the background.*

Here is the result after a few weeks: a beautiful green grassy area with new plants and a row of ashok trees (not visible in the picture) next to the kitchen. We're discovering a great variety of wonderful trees, rich with religious and historical symbolism and exceptional healing properties. While waiting for the future Eco-Park project across the river from Bal Ashram, we are focusing our efforts now on the Ashram grounds - improving the cleanliness, aesthetics and care of the environment.

Potted plants and flowers decorate many corners of the Ashram - in the gardens, under the porches and in the rooms. And thanks to the arrival of an "excellent" team of Italian volunteers, these new projects are progressing rapidly.

Chiara and Giulia, two students of the University of Indian Studies in Venice, joined us at the beginning of the month. Another volunteer named Chiara from Venice (who we met at one of the events organized by the Anjali Association, our non-profit Association in Italy) is also here. And another Giulia, from Padua, is also here – Giulia is a long-time student of Babaji and has been volunteering at Bal Ashram since it first started.



*Chiara and Giulia are engaged in painting flowerpots on the second floor, where the rooms for volunteers, meditation hall, and guest kitchen are located.*



*Above: Chiara and Giulia: all the pots in the garden have been decorated too.*

*Right: Mishraji and Kashi are finding a spot in the garden to place the pots.*



Mishraji (in the picture above) is a precious new presence in the Ashram. He has been living here for three months as a volunteer, working everyday with enthusiasm and commitment. He came “by chance” to fill in for our cook, Raju, while he was on a 10-day break. But from the day he arrived, he never left. He’s always giving his skilled help in the kitchen. He’s also a tremendous help in the gardens and with the children. Hemant, Bal Ashram’s yoga teacher, has moved to Bangalore to complete a 3-year course in yoga studies at the Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana.



*Giulia, also very skilled in the kitchen, has been filling in for Raju while he is away.*



*Chiara organizes group games with the children of Bal Ashram and Anjali School every afternoon.*

## Anjali School

Anjali school is a new alternative school within the compound of Bal Ashram for children from the nearby slums. We have been beautifying this new space with garden projects and murals making it more welcoming and joyful for the children.



This is area outside the nursery class where the youngest children receive their education. Previously a feeding trough for the cows, and then a temporary storage for garbage and recycling, it has now become a big and beautiful flower pot, colorfully painted. The children care for the plants themselves. Climbing plants have been planted in the empty spaces and will climb up along the ropes to create a natural wall of leaves.

Under the artistic direction of Giulia, the nursery class shines with new shapes and colors.



*Beginning and development of the mural. It not finished yet: they're still working on it. A little piece everyday with everybody's collaboration.*

The children of Anjali School are doing well. They have all been assigned to their appropriate class after being tested by the teachers. The classrooms of the school are used in the afternoon by the Bal Ashram children for homework time. Anjali School teachers Raju and Sudhakar assist them with their studies, and spontaneously, many children from Anjali School join the group. After homework time, all the children participate in outdoor games.



*Afternoon homework: Bal Ashram and Anjali School children together*



*Games after studying: upside down on the bar!*

In addition to the educational curriculum, we are also dedicating some time to teach personal hygiene and health care to the children. With the help of volunteers and teachers, the children, divided into age groups, learn about the parts of their bodies and how to clean themselves while taking a shower. In this activity, we also have an opportunity to see if they need any medical care.



*Chiara and Sudhakar: shower*



*Kamla and Chiara: giving medications*



With this picture of the Bal Ashram musketeers, armed with toy windmills, we say goodbye.

*Namaste,*

Kamla and Loknath  
*Bal Ashram, Varanasi*