

## AN OVERVIEW OF MY VISIT TO INDIA



### Blessings

I have just returned from a very inspiring and productive trip to India. Although I usually go to India once a year from the beginning of February until mid-March, this year I decided to return in October as well for about eighteen days.

My visit occurred during Navaratri. This was meaningful for both the ashram family in Varanasi and me, because I had not observed Navaratri in India for the last 12 years. After Navaratri, a new wave of enthusiasm rose in the Ashram that catapulted many new initiatives.

### 1. Formation of *Panchratnas* or “Five Gems” Creating Future Leaders

Five young men who were already involved with the day-to-day operations of Bal Ashram, were selected to actively run and oversee the smooth functioning of the ashram. Each *Panchratna* has strengths in certain areas and has already been involved in various functional roles within the ashram. They will work together as a team and will be the future leadership of Bal Ashram. This young, vibrant and talented team will be mentored, both individually and as a group, from two professionals from Mumbai. The *Panchratnas* will be supported in developing their leadership by Ms. Urja Shah, a social activist and educationist from Mumbai who runs a philanthropic community development project of her own. They will also receive guidance and management oversight from Dr. Ashish Singh, a native of Varanasi, who currently serves as Assistant Professor in the School of Management at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mumbai. Both mentors will visit the ashram regularly or sponsor the *Panchratnas* for further leadership development in Mumbai and other appropriate institutes.



During the visit, a new manual that describes each team member’s role and responsibilities and that establishes a system of regular cross-checking was created and implemented. Additionally, a

streamlined and transparent accounting system for each functional area of the ashram was set in motion. The *Panchratnas* will consult with each other on a daily basis, participate in weekly team meetings, and monthly meetings with the ashram committee.

## 2. Establishment of Eight Work Groups

Working teams were established for each specific wing of the ashram organization over and above the establishment of the *Panchratnas*, the main action team for the ashram, and the Advisory Committee, consisting of elders and prior managers. Each working team consists of 5 to 8 members from the ashram and the local community, and is charged with managing the affairs for their specific wing. A designated coordinator from each team will report at the ashram's monthly meeting. A transparent accounting system for each wing was put in place and a purchasing committee was established

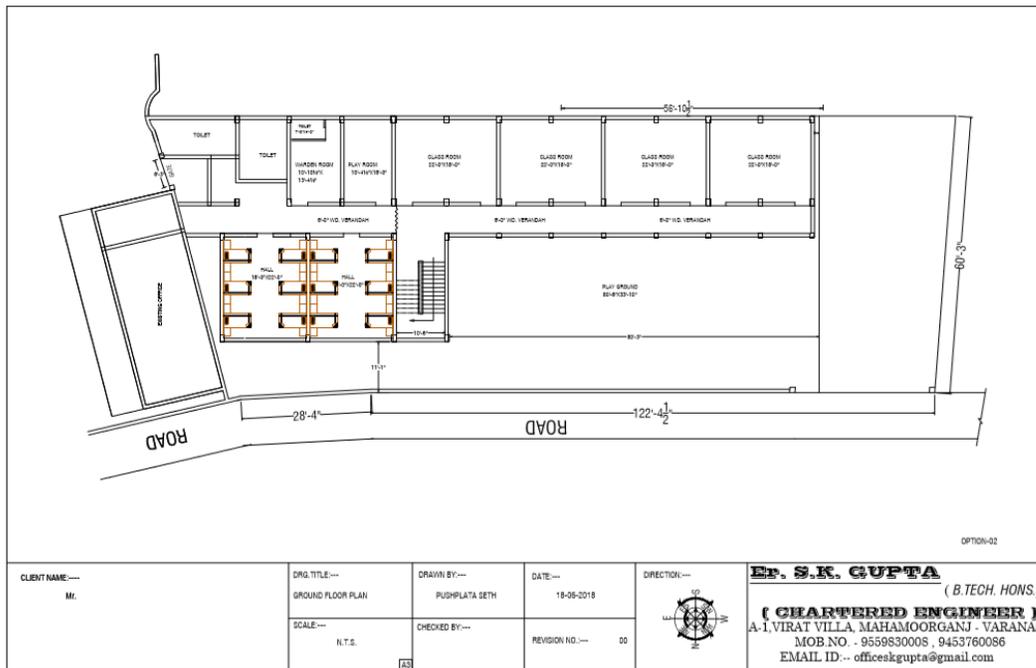
- General Action Team: (*Panchratnas*)
- Advisory Committee: Senior Ashram Leadership
- Amrit Sagar Team: Eco Farm
- Anjali School Team
- Bal Ashram Action Team
- Project Shakti Action Team: Women's Empowerment Program
- Vision Varanasi Action Team: Eye Hospital
- Yoga Education Action Team

## 3. Re-creation of the River Front Garden

Following the flood season from August to September, the bank of the Ganga River in front of Bal Ashram often loses its shape and vegetation. During my visit this year, we enhanced the landscape by creating two wide terraces of flat land using a tractor and with the help of the boys and the ashram team. Now flowers can be planted, children can play, and the ashram can have yoga and martial arts classes overlooking the river. This will be the only green strip on the river bank in the whole city, and will be a very pleasant sight for the visitors on boats. Although we anticipate that we will need to keep this up each year, the terracing is an inexpensive way to beautify our land and maintain the integrity of the river bank. We hope it will inspire the rest of the city.



#### 4. Planned Dormitory for Resident Boys along with Anjali School



During this trip, I also met with a group of architects to discuss the construction of a new secure dormitory for the boys. In accordance with new government regulations, this is to remain separate from the public portions of the ashram. We plan for the dormitory to be situated on the top floor of a two-story building, directly above the school’s administrative offices, with direct access from a stairway situated next to the ashram’s main office. The new dormitory design will also address our ongoing concern of moving the boys’ sleeping areas to a safe zone above the potential flood levels.

#### 5. Rebuilding the Anjali School



The Anjali School has grown leaps and bounds over the years. What started as a daycare center for a handful of street children, now educates over 200 children from poor homes from LKG to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The existing school building consists of a thin brick wall and a galvanized metal roof. It was constructed to serve for the short-term, using minimal funds, as we did not anticipate the growth of the school. As a result of the dramatic growth in our student population due to the success of the educational program offered at the

Anjali School, there is a need to establish a permanent school building. This construction need and aligns well with the design and construction requirements of the boy's dormitory.

Our architect has designed a building that will accommodate separate and secure school classrooms and administrative offices on the ground floor, while placing the boys' dormitory on the top floor. The potential for flooding of the classrooms is less of a concern, as schools are closed during the flood season. Further, constructing the dormitory on the second floor is more economical than building on the ground floor.



## 6. Amrit Sagar - Eco Farm Development

The Eco Farm is located directly across the river from Bal Ashram, and is a vital source of milk and vegetables for the ashram and the girls' dormitories. It serves as a beautiful and serene space outside of the city for the school children and visitors. Currently the Eco Farm consists of the following units:

- Dairy
- Bio-gas plant
- Solar modules
- Vermiculture program i.e., earthworm composting
- Organic vegetable garden
- Mature fruit trees
- Temple
- Outdoor seating areas & housing for the team living there.

For the first time since its creation, we have been able to consolidate the various pieces of our property into one large square of land. Now we can truly create a master plan for the development of the Eco Farm that incorporates and develops our existing elements and structures.

The first phase of the project will be constructing a fence around the property to protect it from the wild animals that roam the area, destroy the gardens and threaten our farm animals.

## 7. Amrit Sagar -Eco Farm Extension

During this trip we acquired two acres of agricultural land that lies adjacent to my share of my family's farm. This is located approximately 30 miles from Varanasi in a beautiful rural setting. Now Bal Ashram has 7 acres of land for the cultivation of grain and lentils which will be a direct source of food for both our boys' and girls' hostels.

In addition to growing crops to make our hostels self-sustainable, we envision constructing a few eco-friendly huts as a rural retreat place for the children and guests in a beautiful natural setting away from the pollution of the city.



Now that I am back in Sonoma, I am looking forward to the continued growth and development of these initiatives through the ashram teams in Varanasi and Sonoma. We are all dedicated to the ongoing ability of the Sonoma Ashram Foundation to reach and care for people in need. The boys and girls that we support are growing into fine individuals who we hold close in our hearts. I am filled with love and appreciation for all our friends who have supported our projects over the years. It is gratifying to see the saplings that we have planted are now turning into beautiful shade-providing fruit trees.

Thank you for being a part of this journey.

With Love,

Babaji

Sonoma, CA  
29<sup>th</sup> October, 2018