

Sustainable Development and Gender Equality: Progress for the Rama Foundation's work in India

The need to provide sustainable change is an ongoing challenge within international development. Short term development projects can be extremely beneficial at times, yet in order for benefits to be meaningful they have to last beyond the time boundaries of one project. The locally based Rama Foundation is well aware of this fact in the work they do to supporting children from the ostracised communities of lepers near Rishikesh, India. When I recently met with Balbir and Sunita Datta, who are involved in running the Rama Foundation, they were accompanied by Chris Laing, an experienced teacher who is now a regular volunteer for the Rama Foundation. Keen to share the increasing impact of the Rama Foundation's work Chris, Balbir and Sunita explained the latest progress that had been made in improving education for the often excluded children of lepers in India.

Effective Volunteering

The Rama Foundation was founded in Cambridge in 2006, and has since then been partnered with an organisation in India called Divya Prem Sewa Mission (DPSM). The main aim of DPSM is to provide support and treatment to those suffering with leprosy. Yet DPSM also provides schooling for over 200 children from leper communities, who are excluded due to their parent's condition, in spite of not having leprosy themselves. The Rama Foundation works to support the DPSM schooling by providing resources, training and teaching volunteers to DPSM.



Above: Chris giving a teacher training session at DPSM residential school. Photo courtesy of the Rama Foundation.

The Rama Foundation takes trained teachers as volunteers from the UK to help at the DPSM residential school. Chris Laing first travelled to India as a volunteer with the Rama Foundation in February 2009 for two weeks. On her return visit, in November 2009, she stayed for a month. Chris is a trained teacher and has many years of experience working with children, so she is an asset to the Rama Foundation's support of DPSM.

The Rama Foundation has facilitated over a dozen teaching volunteers at DPSM over the past three years, and many of these volunteers make return trips. The main responsibility of volunteers is to give English lessons, both teaching the children and training the teachers. "I really noticed the progression" comments Chris, about her most recent trip, "the teachers were keener to work with me and many of the

children remembered my name". Chris felt that she could help the children to progress more effectively having built a foundation of work during her first visit.

This type of continuity is very important to the Rama Foundation's work. "I see placements as a string of beads, all connected to one another" says Balbir. This imagery demonstrates the practical reality: most Rama Foundation volunteers make repeated visits to help the DPSM project in India, plus each teaching volunteer is now being asked to produce a handover pack for the next to arrive. Chris pointed out that this really helped her to judge the development of the kids she was teaching, and gave more structure to the lessons she gave to both the children and the teachers.

The Rama Foundation's volunteers don't get involved in only structured lessons however. Chris spent her time making learning fun for the children: from the colourful books that she took with her, to the 86 musical instruments that were bought for the children at DPSM on Chris' suggestion. These instruments were put to good use when there was a Christmas party at the DPSM residential school hostel during Chris' visit.

But what about the girls?

Amongst all the learning fun and games though, there is an underlying problem that has troubled Balbir and Sunita since they began providing placements at the DPSM school in India. Balbir explains that "every volunteer that has come here with us has asked the same question: where are all the girls?" DPSM provides help for over 200 young boys from families which are affected by leprosy, but there are many young girls in these families who are currently not being given the same opportunities as their male relatives.

There have been repeated requests from these families to find a way to accommodate the girls and provide them with an education too. The problem which the Rama Foundation has faced is that there is no capacity at DPSM to cater for girls as well as boys. Therefore during Balbir and Sunita's most recent three month stay in India, from November 2009 until February 2010 they made it a priority to come up with another solution.

The alternative settled on was to find other partner organisations in the area around Haridwar and Rishikesh, close by to Rama Foundation's existing partner DPSM. They searched for organisations which were already providing educational and supportive facilities to disadvantaged girls and boys in the area. It was hoped that through connecting with these kinds of organisations the Rama Foundation could find a place for the girls of lepers, which are currently not catered for by any organisation in the area. Balbir and Sunita then went about building relationships with three such organisations in particular: Mother Miracle, Nirmal Ashram Gyan Daan Academy (NGA), and Ramana's Garden. As a result of building relationships with these organisations amazing progress has been made.

At Ramana's Garden 75 boys and girls are currently housed and there is a long waiting list, but the founder of this organisation, Dr. Prabhavati Dwabha, said she would take four children from the leper communities which the Rama Foundation is helping to support through DPSM, so long as they were girls. As you can imagine Balbir and Sunita were overjoyed by this, and although it was a challenge to choose just four girls for places at Ramana's Garden, there is a distinct feeling that these four places are only the beginning. They are also working alongside Mother Miracle to set up a Pilot scheme to take five or six girls from the leper communities in to this school.



Above: Durga Kumari, one of the girls who got a place at Ramana's Garden. Photo courtesy of Rama Foundation.

The Rama Foundation is progressing in its aim to support the children from excluded communities of lepers in India. They are establishing ways to include the girls in the education system. They are also strengthening the services they already provide to the DPSM residential school, by planning to move in to provision of vocational training, as well as teaching English for the children of leper communities. "We want them to think about what they could do, not the limits of what they should do" Balbir and Sunita say. Through this work the Rama Foundation is helping children to overcome a very difficult start in life. It is no wonder that volunteers from the UK, such as Chris, would like to travel back again to help with this process.

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