

SUMMER NEWSLETTER ISSUE 33

News from Amarpurkashi

- **Optometrists' Visit**

From 21st to 28th February, 2013, we were fortunate to have five young optometrists, all of Indian origin, visit Amarpurkashi and volunteer their services.

They came well prepared with all the necessary equipment for testing both the health and the vision of the eyes of the students in the primary and junior high schools. On Sunday when the schools were closed, they made themselves available for local villagers.

They carried out their work in a very professional manner and left behind details of the people they had tested. They also raised money before their trip so that those who needed glasses or treatment would be able to get it. Poverty would not stand in their way.

At present, schools are closed for the long summer break but as soon as they re-open in July, all those identified by the optometrists will get their eyes treated and/or glasses made.



One positive sign of the progress that has been made in Amarpurkashi and surrounding villages is that, unlike twenty years ago when a volunteer nurse checked all the students, now the optometrists found that most students' eyes were healthy and the main problems were simply that they needed glasses for long or short sightedness. This improvement has undoubtedly been helped by the vitamin programme for primary school students that the nurse set up and which continues to this day.

- **Women's Meeting**

In the aftermath of the horrific rape and murder of a young medical student in Delhi, the police were much more active in creating support structures for local women. As a result, a senior police officer came to talk to the B.Ed. students of the Gramodaya College and told them of a helpline that they could phone for free.

The next day, 27th February, there was a meeting of female students and local village women in the college campus. Buses were hired to bring students from schools in Bilari and Akroli. Two self-defence groups also came, one from Chandausi and the other from Meerut.



Over 2,000 people attended the meeting. The B.Ed. students overnight prepared a short but very moving drama showing the plight of an abused woman. Both self-defence groups demonstrated their skills and showed that women too could learn self-defence. There were also some colourful and entertaining dances from college students.

The meeting ended with several rousing speeches from those who are actively involved in helping village women to lead happy, productive lives, free of harassment.



Two volunteers join in an energetic folk dance

• **An Exciting New Project**

On 2nd and 3rd March, the Gramodaya College hosted a national workshop which looked at a new proposal for sustainable rural development. Mukat Singh told participants some of his ideas for providing training, demonstrations and entrepreneurial skills to rural students and villagers. He received wholehearted support from all those present.

There will be a follow-up workshop in London on 29th June which will discuss this new project further. Anyone interested in attending should email Jyoti.

• **A Voice from the Past**

I went to Amarpurkashi in the summer of 1973 when I was nineteen and stayed for about two and a half months. I am not sure how I heard about the project but I remember meeting someone in London from an organisation called Intermediate Technology, who had informal links with Mukat and the project. I took the initiative and wrote to Mukat directly. The plan was that I would work with the children in the school, which at that time had just been built, and was for juniors only. I was to teach English and what we termed 'creative activities'.

Mukat and Jyoti met me at Delhi airport. I was overwhelmed by the hubbub, the heat and the strangeness, and wanted to retreat to a quiet place away from it all. The modes of transport became progressively smaller in scale as we went first to Moradabad by train, then to Bilari by taxi and from there to the village in a bicycle rickshaw. I felt badly for the rickshaw man, sweating and straining.

I remember falling asleep on a *charpoy* soon after arriving in the village, in the middle of the room in Mukat's house, feeling very exposed and struggling to cope with it all. The feeling was intensified on waking up to find myself surrounded by lots of people looking at me and discussing this new presence. It was my first experience of a very different world in which western assumptions about private space do not apply. I remember after I had found my feet I still had the occasional urge to take a walk on my own in the fields. Villagers were baffled by this insanity, not least because of the danger posed by snakes. Looking back I think my stay profoundly altered my bourgeois view that individual 'space' is somehow an imperative in life.

It took time for me to adjust to this environment, but I have a sense that Mukat and Jyoti were very good at observing and getting a feel of what we could do together. I could have been a complete write-off, and they knew more or less nothing about me, but they seemed to spot what I was about and it was not long before I was going into the school to teach English. I was probably very nervous, but I have no recollection of that. The classroom was completely bare, without even a table, though there may have been a stool. The children sat on the floor. They were immediately friendly and receptive. Sometimes we had classes under the mango trees at the front.

The creative activities component was by far the most interesting and fun. I had brought a case full of art materials and they were very excited and open to drawing and painting. I remember the eagerness with which they made images without ever having previously

had the materials to do so. But most exciting to them was a small reel-to-reel tape recorder that I had brought ('tape lickorder' as they called it), and there was endless joy and amusement as well as astonishment at being able to record songs, spoken material and any other silly stuff they wanted to put onto tape! I was aware of the many other components of the project, but did not contribute directly to them. Mukat would be holding meetings and was generally busy in and outside the village. My own focus was in the school where I felt I could be of some use. The children were keen to take me to their villages as a guest, and there were numerous expeditions which usually involved a mango and guava tasting session with their families. The fruits were brought out in increasing order of deliciousness and my reactions were monitored for signs of ever greater appreciation. I did not have to fake anything as they always were amazingly tasty.

I remember making good friends with some of the villagers, and because I was an outsider, the conventions about who it was and was not appropriate to mix with socially and caste-wise seemed to be less strict. I became quite friendly with Mukat's male Muslim servant who looked after his buffalo and livestock, and who once took me to Bilari market. However I could see that such an outing was complicated and compromising for him so it was probably just a one-off. I also became a friend of Pan Singh, a close neighbour in the village who cannot have been much older than me but who already had three children, and a then fourth who was born whilst I was there. He took me to the local town where we went to the cinema to see Hindi films, a truly extraordinary experience. The audience would be on their feet waving their fists at the villains, falling madly in love with the heroines and generally suspending their disbelief. He also took me to visit some town friends and I was made aware of the huge differences between urban and village lives.

I remember the long hot wait for the monsoon to come, filled with anxiety about the harvest. An edgy boredom pervaded the

village. A novel, written in verse form, was half-sung, half-chanted by a male villager, the same melody (I can still hear it) applied to every line; it seemed to go on for days. It was apparently naughty and the women were embarrassed or pretended to be, whilst the men sat around smoking and listening. Then eventually the rains came, and gushed through the village in torrents. Everyone was happy and relieved. A call came that a snake was being washed along the narrow street and Mukat stood in his doorway with a big pole poised above his head peering into the rushing stream. Eventually the stick came crashing down and he hoisted a huge bright green snake on the end of it. What a hero!

The project was in its infancy at the time. A volunteer shortly before me, Stephen McLelland, had been loved and appreciated, but it was still relatively new to have people coming to work as volunteers. Mukat and Jyoti were fighting huge odds in attempting to introduce radical practices and thinking to this very deprived and entrenched community. There was suspicion and resistance to change from the locals who had never been in a position to organise themselves to tackle their own poverty and oppression. They did, though, put themselves behind what Mukat was trying to do, presumably at some risk to themselves. But if they had some resistance to change, this was nothing compared to the corruption and hostility of local bureaucrats and officials, who saw the project as a threat to their time-honoured practices of bribery and exploitation. I was in awe of Mukat's courage and apparent fearlessness in taking on these forces.

This was a profound experience for me, and one that has stayed with me. After forty years without contact, I was discussing it recently with a friend, and then at his suggestion I looked up Amarpurkashi on the internet. There it was. So I contacted Jyoti, heard back very quickly, and a week later I was with Mukat and Jyoti in Harrow, reminiscing about the time we had spent and discussing the intervening period and the massive

developments that have taken place. It was great to see them.

I am very fortunate and honoured to have known them and been given this experience, and I am hugely grateful.

Finally, it must be emphasised that this model of working co-operatively is of the highest importance and relevance in these times, just as it was then.

John Glyn

News from VRI

• UCL Presentation

On 5th February, two VRI trustees, Lizzie Monks (pv from January 2010) and Nayan Shukla (pv from 1988), gave a presentation to students from University College London.

Although the audience was small, they were most appreciative of the presentation, showed a keen interest in our volunteering scheme and asked lots of questions. Unfortunately, undergraduates are only available in the summer when our scheme does not operate. We will in future present to final year students.

• Volunteers

In February, VRI sent two new volunteers to Amarpurkashi – Dr Rachel Breen from Liverpool and Dr Tracy Marshall from Leeds. They both settled in very well and did some excellent work in the primary school, teaching conversational English to the teachers.



• Hari's Recipe for Soya Chunks

1. Place the soya chunks in a Pyrex bowl or similar container and pour boiling water over them. Remember that soya chunks double in size when rehydrated.
2. Leave to soak for 1 hour. If the chunks are very large, cut them to the required size.
3. Pour the juice of half a lemon over the chunks and wash them several times.
4. Alternatively, you can marinate them in natural yogurt for ten or fifteen minutes.
5. The chunks are then ready to be curried with the usual spices or simply made with a tin of chopped tomatoes and a generous tablespoon of tomato puree. Add salt at the end.
6. Soy sauce makes another tasty addition.
7. If you like your food hot, add some garam masala.
8. Serve with chapattis or pitta bread.

• Coming Events

• Saturday 29th June 2pm – 5pm

At The Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Workshop on “Pro-poor Sustainable Development”.

Contact Jyoti at enquiries@vri-online.org.uk to book your place.

• Sunday 4th August 1.30pm – 4pm

Annual General Meeting of VRI at 12 Eastleigh Avenue, South Harrow HA2 0UF.

All welcome. There will be an annual report of all the programmes currently going on at Amarpurkashi as well as the Chair's Report on VRI.

Don't forget to use CAF to renew your membership or make donations.

Volunteers for Rural India (formerly IVCS)

www.vri-online.org.uk

E-mail: enquiries@vri-online.org.uk

Registered charity number: 285872