



## SUMMER NEWSLETTER ISSUE 35 – June 2014

### VRI NEWS

The Chair and I have been working diligently to update the VRI website and it is now giving promising results. We have moved up from Page 6 to Page 3. We will continue to update the site and hopefully, our rating will keep improving.

It would be a big help to this work if recent volunteers could send us brief quotations summing up their experiences at APK and any good photos that they took while there.

### AMARPURKASHI NEWS

- The road linking the main highway to the degree college has been resurfaced.
- All the paths inside the college campus have also been raised and properly surfaced.
- This work was paid from discretionary funds given to the local member of the Legislative Assembly, Haji Mohammed Irfan by the state government.
- With funds from VRI, the playground, verandah and classroom floors of the primary school have been completely resurfaced.
- The annual examinations at the college and secondary school have now finished. Both institutions were appointed exam centres for other schools and colleges.
- Altogether 2825 students took their exams at our degree college and 1049 appeared for the secondary school board exams.



Work in progress to resurface the playground of the primary school

### Update on Pollution

- The biggest paper factory which had three production units is now completely shut down. The owners apparently could not pay back huge bank loans that they took out so the banks are auctioning off the factory and land. All the staff and casual labourers have been dismissed.
- However, a second paper factory just one kilometre upstream of the Aril River is still working and causing pollution in the area although not as much as before. The owners have had a number of restrictions put on them although they do not always follow them!
- The campaign against pollution has been suspended for the time being.

### Update on the Illegal Occupation of Land

- For a long time, despite many complaints to local officers and the police, nothing was done.
- Eventually, we decided to complain to the highest levels of the government administration and police.
- This, together with many letters written by our supporters in the U.K., finally brought some results. The culprits were called to the police station and officially warned.
- As a result, most of the land has now been cleared.
- However, a few individuals are still illegally using a corner of the land, making dung cakes and stacking them there and tying their cattle to the trees.

- We are hopeful that the police will soon remove them.

### **Sadbhavna Vidyapeet – the new Eco-Harmony Project at APK**

The land where the brick kiln was situated has now been levelled.

1, 112 poplar and 1,562 eucalyptus saplings have been planted. Between the poplar trees, spaces of 12 feet have been left. These are being used to plant other crops including local varieties of bananas and menthol.

Two volunteers recently out at APK wrote about this new project. Their article is given here.



Volunteers Hannah and Florence with Dr Roopesh Misra, project manager, at the new Eco-Harmony site.

### **Bold Beginnings**

Today the Sadbhavna Eco Harmony project is a bit of a building site. Half the old brick kiln is still *in situ* and there is a great deal of rubble about, but the beginnings of new growth are evident too. Seedlings have been planted, the ground is being ploughed and new shoots are popping up. The new shoots will grow into trees, symbolic of the small beginnings of this project which has such big ambitions for the future of rural populations. These ambitions are for a new type of university that will equip local people with knowledge and experience to use their land productively and sustainably. It will draw on the expertise, interests and resources existing in rural India and give

hands-on practical experience of farming sustainably with a zero waste policy. As the population of India pushes past 1.2 billion, the importance of sustainable farming and livelihoods for landless and small landowners in rural areas has never been more evident. The Sadbhavna Eco Harmony project will include experiments in saving and storing water, finding uses for organic matter through composting, solar energy, agro-forestry and organic farming methods.

The Sadbhavna Eco Harmony project is being led by Mukat Singh of Amarpurkashi. He has over 42 years' experience working to improve the lives of people in and around his home village, and has come to recognise a number of problems that Sadbhavna Eco Harmony hopes to address. He has set up a primary school, inter college, degree college and health centers, as well as running a variety of awareness programmes and designing and teaching a post-graduate course in Rural Resource Management. Although these projects have been successful, particularly in increasing the percentage of females enrolling (nearly 50% of the Gramodaya Degree College's 2000 students are female), Mukat has become disenchanted with India's education system in general.

He has seen how the education system in rural India is not equipping young people with the skills they need to live productive lives in their home environments. There is a real problem of young people migrating from villages to towns and cities to try to find work – often unsuccessfully. This system over-promises and under-delivers, creating unrealistic expectations. Mukat Singh has observed this situation over many years and believes that it is critical that new ways of learning are developed that encourage an entrepreneurial spirit, forward-thinking and commitment. These should be developed through learning in a creative and research-driven environment that requires active participation and the opportunity to gain hands-on experience that students can confidently use in their everyday lives.

At the moment the education system in India is not practical, it is often not useful and students drop out or have bad attendance. Teachers often do not make students' time productive

and the continuous repetition of phrases does not allow creative, logical or rational thinking. The challenge for this new project is to develop a way to teach that is practical, productive and promotes respect for the environment and an understanding of the importance of sustainability. Students who have not succeeded at regular universities will be invited to the new project and instead of paying money to come and learn, there will be internships that provide educational opportunities in exchange for work at the site.

The project aims are threefold. The major aim is to provide a learning environment for local people for whom traditional education has failed, to gain new skills that will help them provide for themselves and their families. The second is to overcome the problem of the rural-urban migration of young people by providing skills for sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. The third is to experiment with new methods of sustainable living and farming that can provide an example to landowners and organizations across the country.

To achieve these daunting aims, the project team has devised, through consultation with local people and experts, a number of methods and systems. Many of these are still in the design stage but a few are outlined below.

Poplar trees have been planted throughout the site because they are fast growing and will provide an income within five years. Harvesting poplar is high yield but not labour-intensive, so produces a good return on investment. In between rows of poplar, a native Indian variety of banana will be grown, and eucalyptus plants have been planted in a ring around each field. The soil's fertility will be enhanced through the use of compost in all these areas.

Part of the zero waste plan will include making full use of human waste. A design is in progress for compost toilets and a water management system that will be the first of its kind.

A lending scheme of goats and cows will allow local people to take an animal and pay back in kind when they can. This scheme will give people a new income source, opening up new possibilities for them and their families.

First and foremost, students at Sadbhavna will be encouraged in their personal development. They will be given the confidence to express themselves clearly through developing their capacity for logical thought and creativity – skills that are seldom encouraged in traditional schools and colleges in India. Alongside these skills, students will gain a practical understanding of issues of sustainability and productivity, fully understanding what they are doing and why, and have their own opinions (formed through experience) about what they are doing each day. This has practical implications for the sustainability of their own land, having a knock-on effect on surrounding areas. For example, at the moment farm land produces three crops a year, but farmers are not putting anything back into the soil, so fertility declines year on year. At the project, students will learn about improving soil fertility and the dangers of over-farming making land unsustainable in the long term.

This project has a long road ahead of it, and many specifics are still to be decided. It is an expensive endeavor that will require a great deal of investment of both time and money. To realize the project's dreams will require input from specialist advisors and experts, as well as the full support of local people. It will be difficult at first for people to understand the benefits of Sadbhavna as a place to learn, as it goes against the grain of expectations and priorities in education, taking the focus away from book learning and rankings, to the development of personal skills and attributes. It will be interesting to see where the project is in five years' time. There are a lot of obstacles to overcome but early signs are good and suggest that the land will be productive and provide a safe learning space for future generations, inspiring them to keep sustainability at the heart of all they do.

(Hannah Clarke and Florence O'Connor, volunteers in March 2014)

### **Review of “The Lunchbox”**

This slight but delightful film was a welcome change from the garish, rather vulgar movies that Bollywood is churning out nowadays.

The simple plot revolves round two lunch boxes that look similar and one day are delivered to the wrong people. This leads gradually to a touching relationship between an unhappy young housewife whose husband is cheating on her and a lonely widower who is about to retire.

The two never actually meet although they come close! The ending is realistic but poignant. Not a lot happens in the course of the film and it is quite slow-moving. However, it holds your attention, partly because the acting is so brilliant that it's hard to believe you are watching actors. It is almost like watching a slice of real life. Indeed, one of the fascinations of the film is the glimpses it gives into the lives of very ordinary people – the sad young woman with her daily round of cooking, cleaning, shopping and washing and the widower with his routine work as a claims accountant in an insurance firm who is facing retirement with no family to enjoy it with.

The film won an audience award at Cannes and a Best Film nomination at the London Film Festival. It is directed by Ritesh Batra and stars Irrfan Khan and Nimrat Kaur.

### **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

The Annual General Meeting of VRI will take place at 12 Eastleigh Avenue, South Harrow on **Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> August at 1pm.**

All members and supporters are welcome.

*If you have an idea for an article or something you wish to submit yourself, such as a book/film review or a recipe, please get in touch with Jyoti, details below.*

Volunteers for Rural India (formerly IVCS)

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