



VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME 2017



VEERAYATAN
compassion in action



This edition of the Veerayatan newsletter describes the experience of the participants in the inaugural Veerayatan Volunteer Programme 2017 which took place with the blessings of Acharya Shri Chandanaji Maharaj between 29 July and 10 August 2017 in the serene and lush setting of the Veerayatan campus at Rajgir in Bihar. Fourteen youths of varying ages between 14 and 20 - predominantly Jain and of Indian origin - came from England, Kenya, Dubai and USA to participate in the ten days of activities that had been planned with the aim of giving the youth opportunities to:

- Give selfless service to the local people of Bihar – both children and adults – Bihar being one of the poorest and most backward states in India
- See first-hand the work of Veerayatan and the difference it is making to the lives of people in Bihar through the practice of compassion in action
- Develop deeper understanding of the Jain religion
- Make friends with all the volunteers from various parts of the world
- Develop skills such as teaching skills, public speaking skills, language skills, time management skills, and team working.
- Develop deeper appreciation of, and gratitude for, the opportunities the volunteers themselves have had in their own lives
- See the difficult life led by the rural communities in this part of India and understand the importance of education to transform lives

The programme would not have been possible without the support and time given by the sadhvijis and support staff resident at the Veerayatan Rajgir campus and the Pawapuri campus and the excellent organisation of the facilities made available to the volunteers.



How did the volunteers benefit from taking part in the Volunteer Programme?

Friendships

Volunteers formed friendships not only with each other but with the children at school and with people with the Rajgir campus. Here are some comments from the volunteers:

‘One of the best parts of the trip was the friends I made as previously I was nervous but I almost instantly befriended everyone. It was a major factor to why I was able to enjoy this trip.’

‘My experience at Veerayatan was great. I built relationships with Indian students that I never would have been able to form without the experience that is volunteering. The school children loved hearing about America and my own culture the very same way that I loved to hear about their lives and their culture.’

‘..... and spending some of the afternoons painting little pots with Vaishnavi was amusing and showed me how terrible my Hindi is’

Appreciating their own Lives

As a result of the experiences they had on the trip, the volunteers themselves reflected that they were grateful for all they had in their lives including good education, a healthy diet, and a family who had been supportive and given them a wonderful start in their lives. One of the volunteers also commented that he applauded the vision and foresight of Acharya Shriji in opening the schools at Pawapuri and Lachchuar in Bihar as otherwise he had seen, on the route to a sightseeing trip to Bodhgaya, how these rural communities lived in great poverty and would continue in an endless cycle where generation after generation would live their entire lives - from birth to youth to parenthood to old age - within the confines of a few hundred kilometres and never get an education to widen their horizons. Here are some comments from the volunteers:

‘From the things we’ve seen, we’ve all learnt to be more grateful for our everyday lives, as one thing we might take for granted, one other child may not have. For example, when we drive to the school, we see children with no stable housing, clothes or food.’

‘The event that affected me greatly during this trip was during the drive to Bodh Gaya seeing people from the lowest caste in India living in straw huts surrounded by waste. This was a very thought provoking moment which made us all realise how lucky we are and how we take the smallest things for granted.’



Undertaking seva and giving selflessly

The volunteers got to appreciate the meaning of seva and giving selflessly. Many volunteers commented on how hard Acharya Shriji has worked as they saw the beautiful surroundings of the campus at Rajgir and the school at Pawapuri. Not only this but they were extremely impressed with the standard of the schools and the hospitals. They learnt the importance of ensuring that if you do something, ensure you do it very well!

‘..... walking around the Veerayatan campus and school has made it clear that Acharya Chandanaji’s vision of “compassion in action” is a reality. From nothing on this land to a fully functioning school, hospital and community of religious practice is truly amazing. The continuous expansion of Veerayatan to other states and countries has taught me that there is no such thing as an end to seva. What made this experience even more special was the fact that we were in the birthplace of Mahavir Bhagwan.’

‘I was thoroughly impressed by the professionalism of both the hospital and the school. Both were smoothly run and operated and appeared to be very efficient at their use of resources to service output. Clearly this can be traced to the fact that the people working there believe in what they’re doing and the overall goal of Veerayatan. Everyone has been openly friendly and kind and I truly believe in Veerayatan’s goals and methods of reaching them.’

'Taking part in this Veerayatan camp has been a great opportunity for me to learn about Acharya Shriji's amazing work. From the school in Pawapuri to the eye hospital in the Rajgir campus, I've witnessed the true embodiment of seva, shiksha and sadhana. I loved teaching at the school and seeing how eager all the students were to learn, especially the Harikeshiya School students. Even with a language barrier, their commitment to their education was very inspiring. The eye hospital also exceeded my expectations through its efficiency and dedication to helping everyone and as many people they can. Every doctor and staff member I've talked to have been so enthusiastic in their work and seva that they no longer view it as just a job.'

The value of education

The volunteers appreciated the value of education through the work Veerayatan is doing, from what they saw around and through teaching and communicating with the students. Here are some of their comments:

'... I now understand the incredible vision of Acharya Shri Chandanaji Maharaj. As we were driving to Bodhgaya, amidst the beautiful surroundings, there were these small villages just made from mud. I saw a grandfather and a little boy and I thought to myself that this little child's life will be no different from the life of his grandfather. And this is when I really understood the vision of Acharya Shriji in changing this vicious cycle! Until now I had heard about the great work of Acharya Shriji but today her work has impacted on me...'

'... The fact that they (students from Harikeshiya school) came from such difficult childhoods when compared to ours, with children as young as 5 taking time off school to work in rice paddies to get an income for their family, whilst being able to keep a big smile on their faces was inspiring. Their eagerness to learn was humbling and the rate at which they caught on and understood what we taught is impressive.'

'I feel there is a lot of potential for the students to move up in life and gain a better education. What I especially liked was the promotion of education for women which in Bihar is rare and is allowing them to succeed as well.'

'As I walked round the class asking children what they would like to do in the future, I heard a variety incredible answers, one being: "I would like to be a software engineer, as I would like to create new technology in the agricultural field because farmers throughout India struggle very much." Majority of these children chose careers with the intention to give back to the community in one way or another. What a positive way to use the education given to us!'

'Doing dancing and singing with the children at the Harikeshiya School was heart warming, seeing the energy and eagerness they had to be a part of the activities was unbelievable and has taught me to appreciate the moment as it comes.'

Spiritual learning

During the 10 days volunteers did spiritual learning with Sadhanaji Maharaj and Sampragyaji Maharaj. They had many questions and doubts about the Jain religion and philosophy. The sadhvijis were able to answer questions in an understandable way. The volunteers were amazed with the modern interpretation of Mahavir Bhagwan's teachings and were taken back with some of the knowledge which they had not heard before.

'After having left for university abroad, I have lost touch with both the spiritual and seva practice of Jainism. This week has been important for me in terms of reconnecting with Jainism. Sadhviji's talks have been key in reminding me of important concepts of Jainism previously learnt and given me a chance to ask questions of doubt.'

'I was inspired by the modern take on Jainism that the Sadhvijis had, as well as the emphasis on looking at most aspects of the religion in a positive light. For example, instead of talking about not doing this and that with regards to ahimsa, we should make an effort to help others and make a difference.'

Sightseeing opportunities

The hard work of the volunteers was intermingled with some sightseeing which included a trek to Vaibhargiri Hill overlooking the Veerayatan campus where there are some auspicious temples on the very soil where Lord Mahavir once roamed. An outing to Bodhgaya, the most auspicious pilgrimage site for Buddhists, really captivated the volunteers – not just the beautiful temples at Bodhgaya including an eighty foot high statue of Lord Buddha, but also the beautiful scenery on the route there and back where the volunteers witnessed how poverty stricken the rural population can be living in mud huts long distances from any facilities. A visit to the ruins of the ancient Nalanda university, the foremost centre of learning between the 7th and 12th centuries AD, and to local Jain sites near Rajgir steeped in Jain history were also rewarding trips for the volunteers.



So what did the typical day look like?

- 5:30 am: Wake up early and be ready to enjoy the break of the new day
- 6:30 am: A session on understanding Jain philosophy with Sadhvi Sadhanaji Maharaj
- 8:00 am: Breakfast
- 9:15am: Then about half hour drive to the Veerayatan School at Pawapuri
- 10:00am: Volunteers teach children for the next three hours



- 1.00 pm: Finish Teaching
- 1:30pm: Returning to the campus
- 2:00pm: Lunch
- 2:30 pm: Short Rest or do artwork
- 4:00 pm: Some work in the eye hospital
- 5:30 pm: Early evening session on life skills delivered by Sadhvi Sampragyaji Maharaj
- 6:30 pm: Dinner together
- 7:15 pm: Bhakti and aarti at the Parshva Jinalya temple on the campus site
- Daily reflection session on how the day had gone and what had particularly made an impression on each participant followed by meditation (time permitting)
- Time to socialise as well as work on the group project which had been set for all.

Despite the hot and humid weather the volunteers were up and ready for each challenging day with each person looking forward to those activities which gave them most fulfilment. Hard work but very fulfilling!

Serving the People of Bihar - Blossoming of Compassion in Action



Many youth of today have a deep passion to give back to society and one of the main attractions of the Volunteer Programme was that they were able to undertake seva activities at the schools and eye hospital run by Veerayatan in Bihar. Veerayatan has an established school at Pawapuri, the town where Lord Mahavir achieved liberation, known as Tirthankar Mahavir Vidya Mandir ('TMVM'). At TMVM over fourteen hundred students from the age of 5 to 18 are receiving quality academic education incorporating value based learning. A second school, known as Harikeshiya School, has opened this year on the same site as TMVM with a first intake of about 100 young children from one of the poorest communities known as the Mushahar, who are the first generation in that community to receive any sort of formal education.

The volunteers arrived at TMVM on the first day to some quizzical looks from the students in the classes. The volunteers looked Indian but spoke little or no Hindi! As it became clear that the volunteers were Indian but from overseas, the excitement levels amongst all the students increased. The volunteers spent quality time at both Pawapuri schools. When taking classes where they were able, notwithstanding language barriers, to interact with the children of all age groups. The teaching they delivered included the practice of spoken English to develop this much needed skill; sessions on ambition and drive to motivate children to learn and reach their full potential; giving a glimpse of life in the volunteers' own countries to the enquiring minds of the local children by showing them pictures, describing daily routines and talking about famous people and sites in their own countries; reading stories; teaching young children to do jigsaw puzzles which they had never seen before; teaching through singing, dancing and colouring; and also delivering sessions on the importance of hand hygiene and showing the correct way to wash hands. Some children with learning difficulties were also identified and a special programme of yoga, meditation, and games to develop patience and concentration was then used to help them develop. Very quickly deep bonds grew between the volunteers and the children at the school, so much so that both looked forward eagerly to the next day's activities and each teaching session would end with wide smiles on the faces of both volunteers and the children as each had gained immensely from the time spent together.

The volunteers gained some good insights into the lives of students. They commented that they were surprised by the fact that TMVM was extremely well run and the standard of education was very high. They were impressed with the standard of the spoken English among the senior students and the quality of the teachers in general. At a debate conducted in English on whether the nuclear family or the extended family is better, the students from TMVM were able to passionately and without hesitation counter the arguments raised by the volunteers. The volunteers also saw that the good values which were being imbibed as part of the education was turning the students into better citizens of the world. A number of students, who were asked to describe how they imagined their lives to be in ten years time, saw themselves as pursuing careers where they could help society such as working for justice for the poor as lawyers, safeguarding the poor as part of the police force, becoming a Chief Minister to bring social change, opening a home to look after old people and forming an NGO for stray dogs. The volunteers also saw how well girls were doing in their academic education at TMVM but at the same time the challenges they faced in pursuing their education and careers in a hostile environment where local communities had not changed their views on the empowerment of women and threatened the girls with violence and intimidation for wanting education.

For the young children of Harikeshiya School the time spent with the volunteers was particularly special as this was the first time in their lives they had received attention from such volunteers and they really valued that. After a shy start they soon became eager to learn and participate in all the activities the volunteers did with them, showing a real talent to learn quickly and appreciate what was being done for them and rewarding the volunteers with enormous affection and smiles in return. It was tremendous to observe the amount of energy which the volunteers were putting into their teaching - when introducing the children to jigsaw puzzles the volunteers really made use of whatever limited Hindi vocabulary they knew to help the young children construct the puzzle and then to ask them questions about what they saw on the picture they had put together. For these children life is very difficult as their parents earn very little money and spend much of their time working and so are unable to motivate or teach their children as they themselves have not been educated.





The other opportunity for giving selfless service for the volunteers was to help the eye doctors who worked at the Netra Jyoti Eye Hospital which has been running for over thirty years within the grounds of the Veerayatan Rajgir campus. This hospital delivers state of the art eye care and has made a real impact in Bihar in treating cataracts, which is the most common eye ailment facing the local communities. As part of the Volunteer Programme the volunteers attended the outpatients clinic and assisted the doctors in carrying out eye tests and diagnosing what treatment was required if any; they observed the carrying out of cataract operations; they spoke to the doctors about the range of work they did and why they wanted to work at Veerayatan; they helped with the serving of food to the patients and spoke to some patients about their experiences. In doing so they were able to appreciate that the gift of sight was most precious and that Veerayatan was doing valuable work for the local community in helping restore eyesight for minimum charge. One patient described how he had heard of the hospital from his work colleagues and how much gratitude he had at the way he had been treated by the doctors and that the restoration of his eyesight would allow him to continue with his work which would otherwise have not been possible and the resulting impact that would have had on his family.

The Unsung Heroes

During the volunteer programme, volunteers quickly observed the dedication of the staff working at Veerayatan – ranging from the professional working as a teacher or a doctor, to those sweeping the roads and guarding the Rajgir campus. Here are some of the insights on what motivates these individuals as elicited by the volunteers when talking to them:

Jitendra Kumar (Security guard at Veerayatan Rajgir campus): a kind-hearted and hardworking man working at Veerayatan for the last 3 years who spends most of his day making sure we are all safe within the Veerayatan campus. You will always find him walking around the campus, despite the weather, checking if everything is safe and that there are no problems. When asked how Veerayatan and Acharya Shriji has helped him, he responded that she inspired him to be a better person and to always do good and try his best.

Nagendra Kumar (Cleaner at the Veerayatan campus): a kind-hearted man with a constant smile who grew up in a town near Rajgir. A few years ago Nagendra Kumar contracted meningitis. This condition, along with living in poor conditions, added to his daily struggles of fighting to provide a good life for his family, consisting of his wife and 2 children. However, Acharya Shriji took it in her own hands to help this man by treating his condition, as well as giving him a job and an opportunity to create a more stable life for his family. His eyes lit up as he movingly explained that for him that Acharya Shriji is like 'Bhagwan', she is the reason he is alive today, and that he loves doing his job. He appreciated the fact that we the volunteers spoke to him as he has not experienced this before! We were impressed to see that even after going through so many struggles, he always had such a big smile on his face and was always grateful for what he has.



Shankarbhai (Laundryman for the guests): works extremely hard to create a better life for his children. Every morning, he would wait by our rooms to receive any clothes that needed to be washed and returned any that we had given the previous day. When asked about his job and his life, his response was honest and inspiring. He replied saying he loves what he does because he gets to work at Veerayatan, and gets to be close to the work of Acharya Shriji, who inspires him.

Manojbhai (Principal of Tirthankar Mahavir Vidya Mandir at Pawapuri): dedicated principal of the school, with an intense wish for each and every child to progress well through the school and beyond. To him education is not just about getting good grades, but creativity, sports and music is also equally important and that every child gets an opportunity to be involved in these. Manojbhai is particularly passionate in promoting the education of girls which is a big step forward for Bihar. We saw girls, as prefects,

running the school, organising our teaching commitments and also taking part in a debate – on the subject of is nuclear family better than combined family? – against us the volunteers and they spoke so eloquently in English and debated so well. All credit to Manojbhai who is a father figure for all at the school. Our sincere thanks to Manojbhai for giving us an opportunity to be with the children and for also spending time with us, telling us about the impact the school is making to the lives of the children and the local community.

Ajaybhai (Driver who was with us on all the days): an all rounder equally comfortable driving a tractor, a bus or a small car! A quietly spoken man who has dedicated his life for Veerayatan. He would come to pick us up, drive us for 45 minutes to the school everyday and also took us sightseeing – encouraging us to come out from the air conditioned and comfortable bus to see some amazing ancient sights in the hot and humid conditions outside. But we are grateful for his encouragement, otherwise we would not have known the history of Rajgir. In India Raksha Bhandhan day is a holiday so that people can visit their sisters. Ajaybhai did not go and visit his sister but instead took us sightseeing – thank you Ajaybhai for this!

Varunbhai (Chief Medical Officer of the eye hospital): Having just come out from the operating theatres, he, without hesitation, invited all of us to his office for a chat. With immense dedication and compassion, he told us about the work of the eye hospital and the successful work being carried out. And with so much humility, he told us that it is all because of the blessings of Acharya Shri Chandanaji Maharaj and Gurudev Shri Amar Muniji Maharaj. He has been working in this hospital for the past 14 years and for him this is more than just work, it is part of his very life and he is fully committed to the work of Veerayatan. During the eye camps which take place around the time of Acharya Shriji's birthday at the end of January each year, he with the other doctors spends all their time tirelessly performing operations – and this is no exaggeration!



For more information and for further details, please visit www.veerayatan.org

To receive future editions of this newsletter please register by scrolling to the bottom of our homepage at www.veerayatan.org.