

## Vande MaataraM! Vande MaataraM!



Two hundred girls assembled for prayer at 10am in this AIM for Seva Girls' school in a little village, Khategaon , in the heart of India , Madhya Pradesh! About 12 teachers stand attentively around while the girls reverentially sing the beautiful prayer in praise of Mother India in clear, high pitched voices. At the end ' Bharat Mata ki Jai' is repeated thrice. A teacher reads out the headlines from the local Hindi newspaper – which includes news of the visit of CM Modi to Indore for the global investment summit, a clip about circulation of fake currency notes and weather forecast for the day. Girls disperse and go to their respective class rooms to begin the journey from unknown to known.

I had always wanted to visit a chatralaya in the northern belt and so eagerly accepted the invitation to visit Chatralaya cum School in Khategaon by Swami Aiswaryanandaji and Acharya Navneetji – who tirelessly

promote the 'Aim-for-Seva' vision of Parama Pujya Swami Dayanandaji by making education accessible and available for children all over the Hindi belt - in UP, Uttarakhand, MP. In Khategaon which is 3 hours away from Indore – there is a

three storey school building nearing completion, an existing old school building constructed with curved arches of Maharashtrian style, two buses which collect teachers and students from nearby villages , a guesthouse of VIP standard, a goshaala with 13 native cows, a double storey chatralaya building which is home to 80 resident girls mostly from Vindhyaachala region including 18 girls from Tripura.

Set amidst green maize fields under the vast open sky – it is a luxury to experience sunrise, sunsets and full moon casting its light all around. It is magical. The body relaxes, mind expands and one is filled with awe at the reality of a simple and profound way of life.

Acharyaji had already briefed me that the main purpose of my visit would be to interact with school teachers who came from 'simple background with a limited

vision' and who could perhaps be challenged to think more creatively , more scientifically! So I drew up a tentative plan of talks – Japa, Puja, Sadhana – these were important , I thought to inspire anyone to creativity – but Acharyaji said firmly 'one hour of Puja, japa etc per day is enough for anyone. Think of interactive topics like – effective communication, goals important for family, society and country etc . Get them to THINK! That's the main goal of your visit.



Empowered by this new sense of direction – I planned the new topics – communication, role of values in shaping the child, definition of success, use of technology in education etc. What followed was a series of informative and delightful exchanges amongst us. These young women are from orthodox backgrounds, live in joint families and perform their duties as daughters, wives, mothers, sisters and now as teachers they openly shared their personal struggles, dreams and ambitions.

I had communicated to them about Swamiji's definition of a teacher - one who is not a professional - rather a ROLE MODEL that makes the institution great. Each of them shared their means of creative communication to make the student understand. They had many questions and doubts and were curious to know more about deeper significance of our scriptures and knowledge of meditation. And we enjoyed light sessions of humor and deep insights about life. Truly – 'sharing is twice learning' and this was 'Empowerment of women' in a unique way leaving us with no option but to think. Thanks to Acharyaji – who literally 'shakes' everyone who meets

him out of his/her passive learning mode into a dynamic, unconventional way of thinking.

Swami Aishwaryanandaji is a unique blend of seva, bhakti and jnaanam and it is a wonder how he remains so unruffled and cheerful amidst his countless appointments and frequent travels. In him – one can see both the strictness of a father and the softness of a mother so necessary for the healthy growth of a child. Kumbha, the charming girl from Tripura told me ' Whenever Swamiji ( Aiswaryananda) comes here , I feel my mother and father have come!' The teachers were inspired by personal life stories of Swamiji who further clarified their doubts on duties vs right and encouraged them to start 'rishhi yagna' through pursuits of knowledge.

Anil Bhai who has graciously donated the family property to Aim for Seva is a strong presence here and whose life is inspired by Gandhian values.

Now the girls living in the chatralaya – are truly its Prana! They wake up early, dosuryanamaskara and Yoga followed

by bhajans, meditation and special prayers for health of Pujya Swamiji whom they are very eager to meet . I too joined these sessions and learnt to chant the 'NarmadaashtakaM'. I shared with them – super brain Yoga, tips on spoken English , mental maths meditations, Hanuman Chalisa, games and stories which always attracted pin drop silence and faces glowing with expectation.

On Valmiki Jayanti day we took time to discover the precious lessons from the classic Ramayana. When I asked them – what their personal ambition in life was – most of them said – they wanted to become a teacher and teach poor children. After a simple breakfast of Poha and Chai – they go to school. I had the unique opportunity to teach English to classes 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. But I found to my apprehension – the English lesson was on 'hockey'! Hockey is the national sport. However I knew nothing more about it. I managed to engage their attention and enjoyed the temporary role of the English teacher.

The next day I was to address the 10<sup>th</sup> std girls and found the lesson to be taught was on 'Basketball'!! Once bitten, twice shy! I requested the principal for a change of topic and she graciously permitted me to select a lesson which was an extract from the autobiography of

ex-president Abdul Kalam. Again it was a great experience to watch the faces light up with some bit of knowledge of life.

Here in Khategaon - there is a smart digital classroom where one can see the best use of modern technology. I learnt all about 'Haemoglobin' - the iron- protein , daily

requirements, the Hindi equivalents of WBC, RBC, definition of blood pressure etc.

On Purnima day – Swamiji had organized a visit for Narmada –darshan , about 10 km away. Narmada Devi flows here – calmly – unlike the gushing Ganga Ma in the north. And since She comes down from mountains, trees and bushes – the waters are warm. It is believed - the merit one obtains from a Ganga Snaanam is gained here by a mere darshanam (sight) of NarmadeDevi. We lit a lamp, prayed for Pujya Swamiji's excellent health, visited the ancient Siva temple of Pandava times and after a brief halt at the equally inspiring Aims Boys Hostel in Nimaavar nearby, we returned back to Khategaon.

I left Khategaon feeling rejuvenated and deeply nourished with the sound of Narmadaashtakam still ringing in my mind and sweet Saanchi pedhas melting in the mouth.

As it is rightly said “ There is greater joy in feeding (giving) than eating (consuming). Pujya Swamiji is a living embodiment of this truth and who is constantly inspiring us to live a life of maximum contribution. With none of the hustle and bustle of city life, the pollution, the noise, Internet facility, modern luxuries like TV , refrigerator etc – a visit to Khategaon is truly a 'MUST' on the list of places to explore and be enriched by. Where the wealth and potential of nation lies and where the mind is free from fear!

Satgurunaath Mahaaraaj ki Jai! Narmade Mata ki Jai! Bharat Mata ki Jai!

*SwamimiSumatmananda*