

Sanctuary and Learning space

The Arsha Vidya Sampradaya coordinated and organised a meeting on "Projects on Dharma by the Arsha Vidya Teachers" on 7th January 2022. One of the projects shared was the Sanctuary and learning space at Har Mandir, in Madikeri, Coorg, Karnataka. The gist of the sharing is as follows.

The word *dharma*, as in many words in Samskrutam, can have varied meanings. Pujya Swamiji Dayananda Saraswati has talked immensely and explicitly about *dharma* as that which holds, *dharma* as duty and what needs to be done, *dharma* as values, *dharma's* inherent quality /characteristics, and *dharma* as religion. The clarity Pujya Swamiji brought made us, the pan-Indian makers of the learning space in Coorg, Karnataka, focus on a *dhārmik* space.

With this inspiration, Har Mandir, the Sanctuary and Learning Space emerged in 2019, under the auspices of Swamini Swatmabodhanandaji, with 22 children, as a free-residential school, strongly grounded on the principles of Vegetarianism and pedagogy.

Har Mandir is a registered primary school, to be affiliated to CBSE, with 75 children today, - about 40 children staying in the school vatika and 30 as day scholars. The children are mostly 1st generation learners, migrant laborers' children, children whose parents have not completed schooling/higher education, very poor farmers children, or children of single parents. But these children cannot access private school education. Government schools are an option for them, yet the aspiration of parents to get a private school, English medium school, and affordable school gets taken care of with Har Mandir for them.

The children are taken care of by 2 Mothers, 7 Educators and 4 Helpers. The Mother's are trained nurses and are getting trained on khadi, yoga and knitting to take over as core educators for children above 9 years. The educators are local, primarily trained holistically by the Swami Vivekananda Training Institute, Mysuru, giving a good basic grounding, from where we (re)educate them with exposures to tailor made topics like circle time, thematic planning, karadi path, etc.

The early years Stage, called *prārambha*, takes care of children from 4 years to 9 years. Kannada is the medium of instruction (in the early years) and English is sprinkled generously in the environment along with abundant interaction with

nature in its pristine form, farming, cow rearing and milking, abundant movement and hand work and traditional/local music and dance. Pedagogy is driven by art, craft, concrete, 1st hand sensorial experiences, stories, yoga, to cover the learning outcomes, needed for the domains - physical, emotional, social, personal, language and Cognitive.

"Food on the planet is vegetarian" is the slogan that drives nutrition and food in Har Mandir.

Prayer fuels the dawn, the day, the dusk and the dark. For sustaining what the children are exposed to, technology is used extensively for photo documentation, for making short and crisp community videos exposing them to not only the activities in the school, but also educative videos on how to stay calm during pandemics, pranayama, prayer, etc., are posted frequently.

Learning partners who have supported us unconditionally so far are -

- Arsha Vidya Gurukulam,
- Dr Dennis - Social worker in SVYM,
- Ms Hema Shankar - the Yoga Educator,
- Dr Balasubramaniam Chief of SVYM and his dynamic team,
- Ms Maria Nachiappan - the reptile specialist,
- Ms Bharati Mohan, the puppet trainer,
- Ms Saleela Patkar - the social worker,
- Dr Ram Kumar, Agastya Foundation,
- Ms Rani Appiah - the 1st Principal
- Nithya Shanti - the young and dynamic spiritual Guru,
- Ms Preethi Balan - the Mindfulness coach, Ms Avni Varia - the khadi trainer,
- Mr Sandeep

and the generous donors in Smt and Shri Sarasa Iyer, Smt Dhanalakshmi Nair, Mr Dominic Bascarino, Ms Deepa, Ms Sujata, Mr Gurmat Maneet Singh, Mr Uvais.

- Report by Radhika Srinivas