

## **Prajna Vihar School Reports 1993 - 2000**

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### **1993 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

The Pragma Vihar school is a wonderful success. Ninety children attend it now with an additional intake of thirty this year (1993). We donated \$1,860.00 which is nearly one third of the budget for the year ... congratulations! The standard of education is improving and a new teacher has been hired. Also, administration duties are now being taken care of by an Indian employee. This year a feeding program is being initiated for the children ... one meal per week and some vitamin tablets daily. The present school building with construction of mud brick and thatched roof will probably only last one more year. This form of construction, common to India, unfortunately has a limited life due to the impact of the monsoon season. Rebuilding the school will be an expensive hurdle for the future but for now everything is going extremely well.

#### **Lives changed**

The change in the lives of the children is so marked ... from poor, directionless children to smiling, happy and motivated beings. One can honestly say their lives have changed for the better. An observation made by a visitor was that the manner in which they greet Westerners has changed ... from a thrust of "Hallo ... 1 Rupee?" to simple warm communication of "Hallo ... what is your name?"

#### **Retreatants Visit**

A visit to the school was organised for participants of the yearly meditation retreat. The guests were able to see the very basic conditions by which the children learn and the children were delighted to display some new skills ... performance of a song and dance learnt at school and, for some, practice speaking a few English phrases. A moving experience was had by all! As a result, three new committee members were recruited from the Brisbane contingent and a volunteer work party of young men and women from different countries of the world devoted a couple of hours to the physical labour of digging trenches and moving soil around the school. There was much display of blistered hands thereafter.

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### **1994 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

#### **Visiting the school**

After the yearly meditation retreat in Bodhgaya we were invited to visit the Pragma Vihar school.

We were told that the school building was about a five minute walk from town and seeing as the surrounding countryside is relatively flat, I expected to identify the building quite easily, once reaching the open paddyfields. This however was not to be the case and it soon became clear that my preconceived western ideas of what the building might look like were completely wrong. There was nothing that resembled a school other than a few mudbrick houses scattered around the fields, one of which had the children waiting patiently outside for our arrival.

As we approached the humble little building, we were greeted with a warm "Namaste" which is a traditional greeting of respect. Without too much delay the children began their song and dance show which they had apparently been rehearsing for months. They were dressed in their best clothes for the big occasion ... and barefoot. The attention soon drew twenty or so nearby

village children who sat at a distance and watched on with envy as the school kids demonstrated some of the fruits of their education.

After the entertainment, we were offered chai and biscuits and we were free to inspect the building which by western standards would only have accommodated a quarter of these kids. Both staff and pupils at times showed a few nerves, as this was their major fund raiser for the year and would obviously have a significant bearing on the directions the school hoped to take.

It was a warming experience to see these children so enthused and truly appreciative of their humble facilities which would no doubt make a difference to theirs and others lives. We take a lot for granted in the West and to be able to see through this can be a real treasure in our daily activities and ultimately in life itself.

With much appreciation  
Paul Cheketri

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### **1995 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

I returned from Bodh Gaya earlier this month (March). I was delighted with developments there for Pragya Vihar School. I came away with the sense that the school and the committee is on a very solid footing. Firstly the two storey building will be complete by April, including electricity and fans. A short documentary about the school is being put together by a director from Sweden and will be used to help promote projects in the village.

The teachers are doing a wonderful job. The children are bright, creative and intelligent. We raised \$3000 (US) on our two fund-raising days as well as witnessing a wonderful demonstration of arts and music from the school children. Some of the influential local figures of Bodh Gaya have become very supportive. The success of the school has meant that some middle class families wait to send their children to the school. We have formulated a questionnaire to ensure that the children do come from the very poorest families.

It is never far from our minds that Bodh Gaya is the poorest part of India. Poverty, violence, corruption and day to day struggle are a feature of daily life in the area. Co-operation, practical support and inter-religious understanding contribute to the welfare, security and harmony of the people of the region. The Chief of Police recently told me that there are many terrorists, dacoits, armed gangs, Maoist activists and even self proclaimed independent regions in and around Bodh Gaya. Yet local people do wish to work together. A key factor is the education of children and the upliftment of women.

Burmese Bhante, the Abbot of the Burmese Vihara, has done a marvellous job in overseeing the project. The committee has drawn up some clear guidelines for the children, who will number about 200. Next year we may invite a number of westerners to go to the surrounding villagers of Bodh Gaya to spend some days there, to listen and to share. It may be the first step to form a team of volunteers. There is a real spirit of inter-religious co-operation and understanding, which I believe to be a very significant statement in India, the land of such diversity of religious faiths.

Christopher Titmuss  
Gaia House  
Devon, England  
March 1995

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## 1996 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL

During each year newsletters are sent to us from the Pragya Vihar School. One particularly inspired us and we wish to share excerpts as our main report. The youngest teacher Rashida Katun, who lives right opposite the school was asked to write about the school.

*"Since April 1995 I am employed at P.V. School. Teaching here is like being transported back into the lap of my childhood. The innocence and open love of the children make me believe that here is real life. When I was asked to write about the school, I thought why non. Let's ask the children too. They all responded with such enthusiasm and began to write."*

*"My name is Kalpana Kumari, and I study here since 1990. I like the teachers and the way they teach. Later I want to be a teacher and open a school in my village, because all people there are illiterate. When the school is closed for holiday, I am not happy to stay at home. The school is there to get education, and from that comes one's own happiness."*

Dayanand (class 6) wrote: *"Before we were studying in a small hut, but now we are so fortunate to study in such a big building and learn so many good things. If we look back we see improvement in ourselves. We behave well with each other. In moral class we are taught how we can become good human beings."*

He also included a poem writing about the school as *"a storehouse of the sweet smell of love."*

Abdul Wajid, the new science teacher wrote: *"I am very touched by the love and discipline of the children. They all want to lay a foundation for a happy life."*

In Sumitra Devi's view it is: *"...Especially the cultural activities like drawing, singing, dancing & poetry which have contributed a lot to the mental development of the children."*

Sister Sheela and Sister Cecily: *"We are happy indeed to express our gratitude towards each one of you for your sincere support which you render the P.V. School. When we look at the children, we are thrilled to see their cheerfulness, self-confidence, creativity, eagerness to gain knowledge, cleanliness, responsibility & leadership qualities, and their zeal in learning about the various cultures of our country and the world at large."*

For those of you who may not be aware, the Pragya Vihar School is of inter-religious character, where both on the teaching staff and on the committee, Catholic nuns, Buddhist monks, Hindus and Muslims and non-religious are working together.

The children attending also come from various secular traditions and mostly from the lower castes.

At the half-yearly exam time, which stretched over six days, 245 children turned up. The average attendance at the school is about 200 out of 260 children enrolled from nursery up to class six. Often it is illness or domestic problems that prevent children coming.

Pam Grayson  
for BDA

## LATEST BULLETIN FROM PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL

275 children are enrolled for 7 classes and approximately 250-260 show up day after day. This year no students have fallen seriously ill despite a now contained up-river cholera outbreak which saw the death of locals. In January 1997 an 8th class is planned providing we have the space and, we hope, the funds to support more students. Building work resumed in June after

the summer monsoon season. The upper classrooms were needed to spread sand for plastering so teaching was done on two shifts. As a result more children took up home study work (the dreaded homework has reached the East!) but it is a rewarding result to know that home support exists. This will help dreams to be realised.

Building work completion with all paint work inside and out, is due around now. Final cost figures are yet unknown but hopefully a sizeable donation from a Swiss benefactor group will greatly assist. School land was monsoon inundated, destroying most flowerbeds and some tree planting, so there is a plan to raise funds to repair a dead end canal behind the school. This would also allow crops raising on adjoining land.

Pragya Vihar School

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## 1997 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL

Dear Friends,

I have just returned from yet another Indian adventure ... the land of chai and curries ... where some of the best and worst examples of humanity exist. Fortunately, we are interested and associated with truly good expressions of life.

The Pragya Vihar school building ... a two storey really "pukha" looking place ... nearly overwhelmed me. I actually thought someone had built a hotel in front of our school! It's a great example of what a consistent effort and a little money can do in the third world. Furniture is sparse and the gardens are very young, but still there is this feeling of permanence and solidness which has enthused quite a few of the locals as well as visitors.

The children ... with the latest intake of over 400 .. look and behave with dignity and assurance that touches the heart. I felt grateful to be part of this project and to have made a small mark on our planet of something truly good. The teachers, caretakers and committee of the school are in great spirits. They are all committed to helping the children and this care ... above the job ... is what seems to give the school a positive feeling that is commented on by many. A few older children are now talented enough to consider secondary education and we are looking at ways to achieve that.

Yours

Eoin Liebchen-Meades  
BDA committee member

## THOUGHTS FROM THE STUDENTS

In February of this year (1997) a small library was opened for the children. It contains more than three hundred titles and new books and tapes are being added regularly. The library is very popular with the children who often complain that they can only take home one book at a time.

Sanjay, class 8, had this to say: *"The library is on the second floor and in it are chairs and a table and cupboards. We can sit there and read in peace. Some children talk in the library which disturbs those who want to read. There are books about many different subjects. This is the only place where we can still our hunger for knowledge. Books are our friends, they light up the darkness of ignorance. The library is like a temple in which the goddess of learning lives, and as long as we stay there in silence, so long we live in the world of knowledge, inspiration and joy."*

Arun, also in class 8, writes: *"From reading books we can attain such knowledge so that we can improve our character. In the books of our library we don't find anything that leads us onto wrong ways. We choose to read about good things which we try to practice in our life. The same thing we read in the books we also hear from our teachers. Reading opens our heart and develops life."*

Sangeeta, class 6, writes: *"When I feel happy I am unable to explain how happy I am. It seems that in moments of small joys we can find a larger happiness. I also feel happy when I make effort and pass exam, or when something that was lost or had disappeared comes back again. When we have a guest at home we feel happy, and we celebrate our festivals with much joy. We cannot hold happiness but we can feel it and experience it. When we feel angry we say many angry words. Even when then someone speaks good we find something bad in it. I get angry with myself when I lose something. In anger we can beat and abuse someone. When I am angry my body begins to shake and tremble. In anger a person poisons or drowns himself or kills someone. So anger is very dangerous. I don't like anger at all."*

Sommanti, class 8: *"In our school were several friends who left school some months ago. In our class was a girl Chandra, she also left school. If again she came to school I would be so happy! But no-one can prevent such coming and going. There are several reasons. On our social level we see that the parents marry off the children at a very young age. At 12 or 13 they make their children leave the school and don't allow them, the girls, to go out anywhere special. So girls cannot follow their wish and continue studies; mostly this happens with girls only. Because in the village many people are illiterate, they often not only waste their own lives but also spoil the lives of others. So girls are forced to leave the school."*

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## **1998 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

### **Support for Further Education**

We are very happy to report that 15 out of 16 children who left Prajna Vihar School have decided to go onto further education. The committee for the school wished to encourage the children to continue their education after they had finished their 8th school year.

But obviously the decision rested with the parents and children themselves. This means that 15 children will now attend other schools beyond 8th year.

The children did not need any encouragement. They spend a lot of time collecting information about the different schools, the standard of the schools, the number of children in each class and quality of teaching.

The school of choice for the boys is in the grounds of the nearby Magath University. This school offers only space to children from more privileged families. Eleven boys have enrolled in the school confident that they can manage to find the monthly fee of \$3.50 (US). Four girls from the Prajna Vihar School now study in a girls only higher education school nearby. As Harijians (lower caste), they are entitled to half-yearly national stipends to cover costs of attending the school.

The Prajna Vihar School paid for all the registration and schoolbooks and for the month until the summer holidays. The school has also set up regular extra tuition for them to help with a smooth transition.

The teachers at the Prajna Vihar School and committee are delighted with the determination of these teenagers to continue their process of learning. In future, it will make a significant difference to the economy of their villages. We must not forget that these children come from the poorest families of Bodhgaya.

The second major development at the Prajna Vihar School concerns the new addition of two new classrooms plus four new toilets. Now the biggest school in Bodhgaya, there are more than 360 children going daily to the school. One of the main problems for the school is during the monsoon season when the grounds around the school flood due to the torrential daily rainstorms.

It was decided to build a raised walkway to enable the children to reach school in the monsoon period. The walkway will include small bridge across the nearby flow of water.

We have 11 teachers and two assistant teachers to take care of the children. Early this year, 55 new children were admitted into the school into two new classes. The school continues its careful selection process to admit children from the poorest families. The teachers went in pairs to the nearby hamlets to see first hand the domestic situation and explain to parents the school's criteria for selection.

But the school needs more land. We have approached the owners of the neighbouring land but the asking prices are not realistic at all even though the school is the only potential buyer. We know that if we show too much interest in the land, the price will go up!

The school continues to run on the basis of free education for the poorest children on a comprehensive and practical education and expansion of the arts. The school is 100% reliant upon the kindness of people around the world. A huge thank-you from all of the children.

Thomas Jost  
Pragna Vihar Committee Member

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## **1999 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

On my last visit In January 1992, the Pragna Vihar School was a mere handful of students in a hired tent, in the corner of a fallow field on loan. The only furniture was a sack on the bare ground; the curriculum was ad hoc. In mid- December 1998, I arrived at an impressive three-storey building, thronged with well- dressed smiling children, who were eager to practise their limited English on me. The only outstretched hands belonged to those who wanted to hold mine. This was in sharp contrast to the outstretched hands of children around the temple complex. They had come to attend the final assembly for the year, the great occasion where the highest achievers received an award. Being received as guest of honour, I was given the task of giving out the prizes - a report card and a bar of soap - a delightfully humbling experience. The feeling of having contributed, in a small way, to such a successful endeavour, overshadowed all but a few of my personal achievements, as a teacher of 20 years, here in Australia.

## **THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

As of January this year the total number of students enrolled is 350 from nursery (age 5-7 years) to year 8. The current enrolment policy selects only one child from the poorest of families in which both parents (if two parents exist) are functionally illiterate. A teacher currently gives graduates from the last two years tuition, in their own self-study, in the evenings each day. There are currently 23 students in year 9 and 12 students in year 10. However, this is quite unsatisfactory as students do not get official qualifications for this study. There are 12 teachers and 2 non-teachers on staff. Teachers are paid about \$60.00 per month with the three sisters on staff being 'paid' by their order.

## **THE CURRICULUM**

Currently the subjects taught are Hindi, English, Maths, Science, Social Studies, Geography, Sanskrit, Moral Science (presumably some form of comparative religion), General Knowledge and Civics. The school is open from Monday to Saturday and runs from 8.55am - 5.00pm in the winter and 6.55am - 11.45am in the summer with a meal break of 45 minutes. There are a few extra curriculum activities, which include quizzes, singing, drawing, poetry and dance, etc. More formally, a music teacher is brought in who teaches tabla and harmonium to a group of about 23 students. 116 students from years 6 - 8 are involved with Toru Mkra (Friends of the Trees) and are engaged in planting trees, an environmental consciousness in the Bodhgaya region. Also, extra classes are organised in drawing, stitching and other handicrafts, for the poorest children. (How much poorer can they get?)

## **THE BUILDING**

Over the last year, two new classrooms have been added to the top of the building and four toilet cubicles have been added behind the building. These were kept locked while I was there because 'the children had to be educated in how to use them'. Although the school is located a mere 10 minutes walk from the centre of Bodhgaya, it is surrounded by fields and presumably these were the only toilets to date. These building projects complete the possible development at the existing site.

## **A NEW SCHOOL**

Because of the needs of the continuing students and the ever present pressure to increase the school's enrolment, a decision was made at the schools AGM to buy cheaper land on the other side of Bodhgaya, to start a new middle school to cater for years 7 - 10. This is the most significant development since we started raising money for the project. The projected costs are somewhat alarming - \$68,000.00 for the building alone, but as someone at the AGM said, "we can do it the way we built this school - the Indian way. We can start again with a mud hut, if we have to." Suddenly, I am brought back, once again, to the realisation that when you have the right people, the right intention, the costs are not important. A way will be found, after all a school is primarily a community, not simply a pile of bricks - so different from our habitual way of thinking here. As I write this, the words of Paul Kelly keep arising - "From little things, big things grow".

Keith O'Neill

## **LETTER FROM THE SCHOOL (17/05/99)**

Dear BDA Committee Members,

Greetings from the sisters, teachers and students of Bodhgaya. Hope these few lines may find you fine. Since many months have passed we have not given any news from here. Summer has begun and we have to give early our summer vacation. Children have finished their half-yearly examination. From 11th of May up to 20th of June we have our summer vacation. We are planning to re-open our school on 21st of June.

This year we have various activities in the school. This time our students have attended various competitions. They got a medal and certificate for each item. Among 87 schools and colleges, our students stood first in group dance, second in group song and light vocal too. It was very nice and a good experience for the children.

Secondly, we had our parents meeting. Around 275 parents participated in it. Students had beautiful cultural programs. Parents were given snacks and tea. They were given time to speak about the school, the activities, etc. They were very happy to see the progress of their children.

Ex students are continuing their study in many private and Government schools. Some of them are doing well. Some of them have left their studies. They are supporting their family; working in small shops and other ways. Some of them are trying their best to study in good schools, but it is not possible to put them due to some reasons. Especially our school is not registered. Yet they are finding their own way for their higher education.

Burmese Bhante has given fans for the school and two more new rooms also are now completed. For the students it is quite a relief in this terrific heat.

We are planning to have millennium celebrations in the month of December. Hope you are able to join with us. Now let me wind up here with lots of prayerful regards for your successful work. Thanking you for your great support.

Yours sincerely,

Sr. M. Anjali SRA.

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## **2000 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

Last year's articles on the school as reported by our committee member Keith O'Neill who visited Bodhgaya were very expansive and full of the spirit of Bodhgaya and the school. This year our report is more basic and a little scant. Keith visited Bodhgaya again in November en route to the U.K. and other destinations, and has said that so far as news of the school goes not much has changed. It seems the growth that has taken place over the years has plateaued out and this could be expected as the growth since inception has been impressive. There are a few success stories such as the continued success of the cultural program resulting in the dance team winning a competition involving nearly 100 schools in the area. Education, including the cultural program and dance, is vital to the essence of the students and local community. Prior to the students' introduction to the school, the illiteracy and hard life of these very poor resulted in a lack of knowledge of their inherent culture and of the dance and music which we, who have a connection to India, regard as so very rich.

Enrolment last year was 350, and some 400 presently attend the school, with 354 students sitting the annual exams in December. Some failed these end of year exams, and consequently have not progressed to the next grade. This is a twofold conundrum. The failure is sad for the students who have to surmount immense hardships just to regularly attend school and bring some energy to their place of learning. Considering these hardships it would not be an easy decision to refuse progression to the next grade and risk demoralizing the student, but the school's 'integrity approach' could be more beneficial to long term growth and value setting of the students by reinforcing the need to reach the set standard. I'm sure we can all relate to the level of personal satisfaction we feel when we discipline ourselves and overcome a failure. To simply 'turn a blind eye' to the exam failures could lead to higher and more entrenched levels of failure for these students throughout life. The school is looking at the feasibility of building a high school, which would allow the more capable students to continue education to a higher standard. We will keep you informed of progress. Last year's expenditure for the running of the present school was around \$16,000 and the budget for 2000 will be higher.

**PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

I took the afternoon off one of the retreats to go to the AGM where all the news was aired. It was an amazingly low-key affair, which could be compared with a village pigeon fancier's society AGM here, in rural Essex. Not much to report on the school as things seem to be running very smoothly and without great incident.

The high point of the meeting was when chai & gulab jamuns came around. I think Thomas has sent you the AGM minutes to which there is little to add. The most surprising news to me was that any further expansion of the school, including land purchases, seems to have been put on hold until the trust has been formed which ensures the school's legitimacy. Apparently the Bandaris in Delhi are seeing to that and all being well it may be complete by July or August.

Keith O'Neill