

Annual Report on the work of the
Ali S. K. Memorial Society for the Children
for the year 2004-05

1. Introduction

The past financial year was a very eventful year for the Ali S. K. Memorial Society for the Children (ASKMSC). The construction of the second home for street children could eventually commence and at the end of the year only minor pieces of work remained before the first children could move in. This means the ASKMSC will now be able to accommodate and help more children in the future and the second phase of our project is finally accomplished.

2. Activities:

(i) General – Traditionally the beginning of every accounting year is marked by the admission of our children to school. With education being one of our main objectives the year started on a very successful note as most of our children were able to shift to excellent new schools and with the admission of the youngest member of our “family” Ravi Yadav to the kindergarten section of Apollos’ Academy for the first time all our 27 children attended school regularly. Another great success in the field of education was the promise by Himali Boarding School in Kurseong to sponsor three of our children and at the beginning of March 2005 Subhashish Mondal, Sourav Dey and Vicky Roy were admitted to this excellent school in Darjeeling District.

The first quarter of the year saw some important developments towards the construction of our second building. The long awaited amalgamation of the two plots of land designated for the new building was finally granted by the Building Department of Kolkata Municipal Corporation at the beginning of June. Meanwhile in the month of May a required soil test had been done and eventually all the papers required for the submission of our building plan with the KMC for sanctioning were complete. Still it took some time before construction could commence as the plan was held up in the KMC and had to be modified by our architect in the month of July. But in the first week of August the plan was sanctioned and work commenced on 6 August 2004. After such a long wait for the paperwork to be done the construction of the new building itself went on quite fast and the new house was almost ready for use at the end of the financial year. The sanctioning of our plan also meant a change of address for the ASKMSC from 17, East Road to 17 A, East Road.

The annual inspection for the extension of our licence to run a home for street children took place again in the month of June and the Directorate of Social Welfare granted extension in the month of August.

Also in the month of August we lost one of our four legged

friends. Donald, our dog died of an infection and the children were very sad about it, but due to the ongoing construction getting a new dog was not considered, despite the kids' wish. While the poor dog had to die our house cat Josephine developed very well and became an integral part of the family.

Last year the previously introduced group system had been modified to further improve the situation in the home. This implied that more teachers had to be hired and so Mr. Mukunda Kayal and Mrs. Sandhya Dey joined the staff in August and September 2004. This increased the number of teaching staff to five of whom two teachers permanently stayed in the home while the other three came for eight hours in the afternoon. By the end of the year the ASKMSC employed a total of 14 people of whom 9 were full time employees and 5 part timers.

Like in the previous year our co-operation with other organisations working in the field of street children such as CINI-Asha, Sanglaap, OFFER, etc was once again dominated by sending cases to them as we were not able to take in new children. Further to this we attended a workshop organised by CINI-Asha in August 2004 and one by Sanglaap in December 2004. There was also a lot of co-operation with NGOs in the field of football such as SEED, Don Bosco or PBKOJP Boy's Home. The NGO Agargati sponsored a three days football camp for our children in a village in March 2005. We also managed to establish contacts with the Indian Football Association IFA. Besides football matches with our children and visits on the occasion of birthdays, etc. the boys of PBKOJP Boy's Home performed a little theatre play in our house in the month of August 2004. This helped to intensify the already good relationship of our boys with the boys of PBKOJP Boy's Home.

This year too some foreign delegations came to visit our project, amongst them a frequent visitor, Dr. Toni Pizzocco, president of the Italian organisation "Sudtiroler Arzte fur die Dritte Welt". He came with his wife and two more doctors for a three day visit in October 2004. Another frequent visitor, Bernhard Pfister, vice-president of the German organisation "Aktion Lebenshilfe fur Indiens Strassenkinder e. V." came with a group in February/March 2005 for a two weeks stay.

Besides visitors from donor organisation we also kept on getting frequent visits from people who just wanted to see the project or wanted to contribute as volunteers. One of them, the French junior football coach Mr. Michel Sauvestre, had already volunteered in the previous year by coaching our children in football and had decided to make this a regular event in the future. He therefore came again for three weeks in the month of July 2004. Together with him we decided to run the ASKMSC as a football academy and introduced our idea to the Indian Football Association. An Indian coach was hired and Balak Samiti Club kindly offered their playground for regular training sessions. On Mr. Sauvestre's next visit in February/March 2005 our children had already improved a

lot due to the intensive training they had enjoyed.

Even though we have put a lot of emphasis on football in the last year there was no lack in other activities, mainly in the fields of sport, music and art. Besides those activities, which are part of the weekly routine like Yoga, gymnastics, drawing, theatre, dance, Tabla lessons, handicrafts, cooking classes, etc., the children enjoyed extracurricular activities and also an excursion to the Darjeeling hills again.

(ii) Problems faced by us – In the previous year a group system had been introduced with about five children in each group according to the children's school classes and with a strict daily routine for each group separately. The aim was to avoid any gaps in the routine, so that the children would either study or have activities in order to get the destructive energy of our children under control. While this system improved the situation quite a lot it still had some drawbacks. Since each teacher would teach all groups in accordance with the weekly routine none of the teachers would feel responsible for the cleanliness of the children or of the class rooms. We therefore decided to appoint one teacher for each group who would be with the group everyday after school until dinner and who would teach all the subjects of that group as well as supervise them during their activities. This way a certain teacher could be made accountable for any faults or wrongdoings of his or her group. In order to make it easier to identify to which group a child belonged we assigned a colour to each group and gave each child of a group a set of four jerseys and shorts of that colour with the name of the child written on the back of the jersey. The group teachers were told to make sure that the children are always dressed neat and clean and that they would change their clothes regularly. Each group also got a class room assigned for which it was responsible. All these measures had the desired results and things went very smooth in the first months of the financial year. But with the commencement of the construction of our second building at the beginning of August we faced a lot of social stress amongst the children due to lack of space and subsequent overpopulation of our first home. As the first house was already full beyond capacity before construction began things got even worse when the boys had to vacate one ground floor room, which had to be used to store sacks of cement and other things to protect those materials against the rains of the ongoing rainy season. With so many children packed in such a small space they started to become aggressive and quarrelled amongst themselves and with their teachers. It was not for long that tension was so high that some children were unhappy with their stay in the project and not even four weeks into construction the first boy, Ajar Sheik, ran away after a minor row with a member of the staff. After a long period of calm in the house a problem we used to have in the beginning with children who were fresh from the street and had initial difficulties to adjust to a life in an institution

all in a sudden reoccurred, though for a different reason. Ajgar's case reminded the other children again about the option to run away and now almost all boys threatened to run away at any occasion or dispute. Particularly our oldest boy, Pappu Sheikh, who began to become very moody and unruly due to the onset of puberty, seemed to be the next in line to run away. He eventually ran away, but unlike Ajgar returned to us after a period of three days on the streets. Unfortunately his behaviour became even worse after this incident and moreover he tried to get other children to follow his example. It was very difficult for us to motivate him to carry on with his studies and at the end of the school year he failed his class.

Throughout these difficult times our child psychologist Mrs. Sangita Bhattacharya could not do anything to improve the situation and we therefore decided to end her contract with the end of the accounting year.

Another problem was Shibu's learning disability and short span of attention. After two years in a regular school it has become apparent now that he cannot continue there. We will have to send him to a good school for children with special needs.

Problems we faced regarding the required amalgamation of two of our plots for the construction of our second building could eventually be sorted out at the beginning of June, but after submitting the plan for sanctioning it became apparent that here, too, we would have to be patient as KMC initially sent back the plan to us demanding certain changes.

Throughout the construction we encountered complains from our neighbours as well as attacks and threats across the boundary, but we were eventually successful in completing the building without any major hold-ups.

(iii) Education – Already at the end of the previous financial year we were eventually able to admit almost all of our children to English medium schools of high standard. In the month of April 2004 only the admission of the youngest child Ravi Yadav was still remaining and we decided to get him admitted to the kindergarten section of Apollos' Academy. This meant that for the first time all of our children went to school and the house remained mainly empty in the morning. With the beginning of the new school year the children now attended the following schools and classes:

Ram Mohan Mission school:

Class III: Suraj Dhopi.

Nava Nalanda School:

Class III: Ajgar Sheikh, Sudhir Dhopi.

Class II: Qutubuddin Sheikh.

Class I: Ashim Mondal, Khokan Halder.
Nursery I: Sourav Dey.

A. K. Ghosh Memorial School:

Class III: Pappu Sheikh

Class II: Biswajit Sikdar, Kishore Halder, Chattu Shau, Raju Chakraborty, Jagannath Das, Pradip Das, Pintu Das.

Class I: Gour Halder, Somnath Mistri, Subhasish Mandal, Suman Deb, Vicky Sharma.

Kindergarten II: Banti Sharma, Prabir Adhikari, Sanu Singh, Vicky Ray.

Apollos' Academy:

Nursery II: Shibu Dey, Bubai Yadav.

Kindergarten: Ravi Yadav.

Most of the children adjusted well to their new schools and despite the much higher standard of those schools in comparison to Apollos' Academy some ended at the top of their respective classes again by the end of the year. One exception was Pappu. He already had difficulties in Apollos' Academy and the problems carried on in his new school. It seems that it will be better for him if we can find a Bengali medium school for him that also offers vocational training side by side. Another child with learning difficulties was once again Shibu. Despite his enormous overall improvement in the years with us his suffering from learning disability and ADS makes it impossible to further send him to a mainstream school. We have therefore decided to look around for a good school for children with special needs in the coming year.

The ongoing construction of our second building gave us a lead in a new direction. The fact that we spent a lot of money and had to overcome a lot of problems to build two homes for street children to eventually be able to help a total of maybe 50 to 60 destitute children made us think. How could we possibly help many more children without having to buy more expensive land and without having to build more houses with all the paperwork and troubles involved and at the same time ensure that these many more children would still get food, shelter and a quality education as per our objectives? What if we would approach some of the many existing and excellent boarding schools in Darjeeling District to take in former street children? So we decided we would give it a try and visit some of the boarding schools in Kurseong during our stay in Makaibari Tea Estate in the month of November. Fortunately the first person we spoke to in Kurseong, Mr. Robbindra Subba, Director of Himali Boarding School did not only offer to take in and sponsor three of our children right away, but he also happened to be the Director of the local school association and promised to support us if we would like to raise

the issue in a meeting of the association to get other schools to follow his example. But we decided to first wait and see how three of our boys would fare in Himali Boarding School in the coming school year. We therefore got the following three boys admitted at the beginning of March 2005:

Class III: Subhasish Mandal.

Class I: Vicky Ray.

Nursery: Sourav Dey.

As Subhasish had been the topper of class I in A. K. Ghosh Memorial School we got him admitted to class III instead of class II in Himali Boarding School. This change gives him the chance to be in a class according to his age group. It remains to be seen how he will master this change in the coming year.

(iv) Medical – While there was no serious health related problems in the last year, we could not really see a positive effect or improvement of the children by the counselling of our child-psychologist Mrs. Sangita Bhattacharya. This was somewhat disappointing for us and according to our opinion it was entirely due to Mrs. Bhattacharya's approach. We therefore decided not to extend her contract beyond the end of the accounting year.

Dr. Mandal continued with his monthly check-ups and recorded a good state of health of our children as well as a normal gain in weight and height throughout the year. Dr. Toni Pizzocco president of the Italian NGO "Sudtiroler Arzte fur die Dritte Welt" and two other Italian doctors could also convince themselves about the good state of health of our children during their visit in October. But to improve the situation for Pappu and Ravi who both suffer from Asthma they recommended the purchase of a nebulizer.

In the month of August 2004 the Lions Club of Calcutta Kankurgachhi organized a free eye check-up for all our children. Besides Vicky Sharma who already had glasses only Pappu was found to need glasses. All other children had normal vision.

At the end of the year it became apparent that Sourav Dey's Ventricular Septal Defect would require heart surgery to solve the problem. It was therefore decided to do the necessary operation during his long school holidays in winter 05/06.

(v) Sports and related Activities – After eventually being able to admit our children to good English medium schools of higher standards we fast noticed that even those schools focused only on studies. Within our institution we had a strong wish right from the start to balance this shortcoming of the Indian education system by offering art, music and sports. But this year saw a major step forward in the field of sports.

We thought that the advantage of an institution like ours would be the fact that our children are always present. They live together

under one roof with nobody behind to hold them back from sports for fear about their studies or future, if not us! We therefore decided to run our home for former street children like a football academy with the high aim of contributing to the improvement of the standard of Indian football, which is very poor. This is amongst many other reasons, because there is no football academy for children under 12 years in the entire country. The French youth coach Mr. Michel Sauvestre immediately promised support. We then introduced our organization and our ideas about the development of Indian football to the secretary of the Indian Football Association Mr. Subrata Dutta in a letter in July 2004 and later discussed our plans personally with him in his office. Soon after Mr. Dutta acknowledged our efforts in a letter and expressed his hope for a long term relationship. Since Mr. Sauvestre could coach our children only 2-3 weeks twice a year we were in need of a local coach. Subir Ghosh a former member of the Indian national team who lives in the neighbourhood offered to do the job free of charge. Since we needed weekly 3 days of training schools were informed in writing that besides the weekly holidays Saturday and Sunday on one school day the children would not be able to attend classes. After initial hesitations all schools agreed to support our cause and since in-house teachers are permanently available to help the children with their homework and studies they could easily make up for the lost day in school. Besides the three weekly training sessions there is an hour of football specific gymnastics once a week. The children are also given the opportunity to play football any time during their free time. In addition to this Mr. Sauvestre came for a three weeks visit in July 2004 to coach our boys and once again for two weeks at the end of February 2005. During this last visit we managed to organize a football camp in the small village of Kalikata/Rashpur near Amta on invitation of the local NGO Agragati. We were allowed to use the hostel and the playground of Agragati free of charge and the children had a really great time! They enjoyed an intensive training in a relaxed atmosphere with their beloved football coach 'Michel Uncle'. With so much enthusiasm shown by our children it is our aim now for the future to systematically build up a strong and technically skilled team and to support and develop young talents amongst our children. But this does not mean that other physical activities are neglected now. Yoga for example has become well established within the last year and of course there are still the usual sports and games such as cricket, badminton, volleyball and athletics.

(vi) Leisure, Arts & Music – In their free time the children have nowadays a lot of activities to chose from and a few more have been added last year. With the end of the construction of the second building the children have got a spacious new 'games room' where a volunteer is always available to play all kinds of games with them. There they can also listen to music, watch a movie, read a book, sing or paint, do handicrafts or enjoy other

creative activities under the guidance of our volunteers. But unlike the previous years not all the children want to participate in all the activities on offer. While football, drawing lessons and acting are enjoyed by practically all the children not everybody wants to learn a musical instrument such as Tabla or guitar. Two of our children have chosen to join a dance school nearby where they go twice a week for classes. While we do give them the choice when it comes to learning a musical instrument or attending a dance school, some activities such as Yoga or cooking classes are compulsory for all the children.

(vii) Birthday – This year, too, we celebrate the “birthday” of our children on 19 November to commemorate the day the first ten children moved in on 19 November 2000. The usual football tournament in the morning was enjoyed by staff, members and children alike and the all time favourite game ‘treasure hunt’ after lunch kept the children searching for more than an hour to find their treasure after criss-crossing all around Santoshpur. There were more group games in the afternoon and the winning team in aggregate was awarded a cup in the evening, when friends and guests had gathered on the rooftop terrace to witness the cutting of the birthday cake. After that our children sang some songs, recited some poems and performed a theatre play to entertain their guests. The day ended with an excellent dinner, which everybody enjoyed.

(viii) Meals – The children are served mainly rice, dal and vegetables for the main meals. Sometimes roti is given instead of rice for dinner. There is one day per week where fish is offered and one day with meat for lunch. Otherwise soja is a regular source of proteins. Milk and cereals are given in the morning and we also continue to supply the children with fruits for the daily snack break at 5 o’clock.

(ix) Excursions – With the construction of our second building in full swing from the beginning of August there has been not as many excursions as in the previous years. Some children went out in small groups with our volunteers to visit places like the Birla Planetarium or Victoria Memorial. But this year too there was some outings with all the children to amusement parks such as Fun City and for the second time we were invited to spend a week in Makaibari Tea Estate in the month of November. This trip in particular was enjoyed by the children as well as the staff and is planned to be a regular event every year. The annual picnic also took place, although this time in February instead of December. A football camp with our French visiting coach took place in Rashpur near Amta from 27.02.05 to 02.03.05 on the invitation of the NGO Agragati.

(x) Volunteers – The number of volunteers local or foreign has increased in the last year and there was no shortage of help of any

kind. Besides the regular support with homework, studies and activities mainly done by our foreign volunteers, there had also been two visits of the French football coach Mr. Sauvestre again in July 2004 and in February/March 2005. There was also a “Waldorf School” teacher from Germany who organized non-figurative and abstract drawing competitions as well as handicraft workshops over the winter months.

3. Finances:

The financial situation of the society was quite sound in the past year as the construction of the second building was already financed in advance by the Italian NGO “Sudtiroler Arzte fur die Dritte Welt” together with the regional government of their Italian state on one part and the German NGO “Aktion Lebenshilfe fur Indiens Strassenkinder e. V.” on the other part. The Italian organisation had already transferred part of the money granted by their regional government at the end of the previous accounting year and they will send the balance as soon as our final report and documentation of the construction is submitted with their state government.

This year we also got some financial support from the British organisation “A.S.K. Children’s’ Trust” again. Further to this the German NGO continued to arrange personal sponsors for our children as well as regular contributions for maintenance and up-keep.

Besides the annual membership fees of the members we also received some local donations again in the last year. On several occasions people would sponsor a meal for the children and a visiting NRI sponsored a trip to an amusement park called ‘Fun City’. In the month of November the owner of the Makaibari Tea Estate for the second time sponsored a week of stay in his tea garden for all our kids.

4. Outlook:

With the second building ready to move in it is certainly the first priority in the coming months to admit more street children and other children in need to give them a home. This should be done one by one for better integration of the new cases.

After the successful admission of three of our children to a prestigious boarding school in Darjeeling District it is also planned in the future to approach more boarding schools in the hills to admit and sponsor former street children. We hope this way we will be able to help more street children to get food, shelter and education.

Now that the first and second phase of the project is complete another priority will be to find suitable land for the third and last phase of the project a campus in the countryside for bio-dynamic farming, recreation and also to give some more children a home in the future.