



International Women's Day Celebration by Vatsalya

March 8th, 2016

A Report

The start

International Women's Day at Vatsalya this year had an exuberance that we had never witnessed before. Women dressed in the brightest of colours, their saris bordered with gold and silver lace, their faces shining and electrified with a vivaciousness that would make the sheen of gold look dull! The way they entered the big hall, their gait, the sparkle in their eyes, their confidence and anticipation about the exciting things that would happen during the course of the day were palpable. They greeted each other warmly, hugged the children, waved joyfully to us sitting at the far end of the hall. Every now and then, we would hear a loud burst of laughter from them as they cheerfully and very audibly made a remark about one another, teasing, cajoling and clapping in appreciation of jokes and comments made. It looked as if they had won the world over and as if they were concerned about nothing whatever today, except their resolve to make the most of their life and live it to its core, generously sharing the ecstasy and the bliss they felt in their hearts. Suddenly, I felt I was in another century, so powerful was the atmosphere, as they all seemed suffused with a mood of *joie de vivre*.

The Idea

The idea this year was to celebrate, celebrate in the truest and fullest sense of the word; and so we decided to change the entire course of the day. We deleted a few things from the usual IWD program organised every year and added some new activities. We did away with the health and medical check-up that normally consumed several hours. And did any one miss it? Absolutely not. In fact we realized no one even needed it, all the women looked so fit and healthy! The time thus saved was happily devoted to dancing with the deafening wild rural music. (Yes, there is such a category. Try driving behind a tractor at night and you will know what we are referring to).

We also changed the venue this year to Pushkar. That made it a real outing for all the women, as they were either from Jaipur or Ajmer. We had left enough time for them to

visit the ancient Brahma Temple and the holy shrine of Ajmer Sharif which made them immensely happy. Our official program ended at 3pm, but while we reached our homes around 8 pm, the last group of women didn't get home until about 11.30 at night. They visited sites and shopped until the group leaders physically dragged them out of the shops and put them on the bus. They had been saving for the occasion and wanted to buy things to remember the day by. And many of them took a holy dip in the Pushkar Sarovar. They really had a ball! We checked with them afterwards as to how their family members, especially their men folk, their husbands, their fathers and brothers reacted to their late night jaunt. We were assured that they all took it quite coolly. "My father smiled as he opened the door for me at around 11pm...", "My husband asked me if I had had a good time...", "My mother blessed me and hugged me as I reached home. She was waiting on the main road where I had told her the bus would drop me..." Two or three years ago, they could not even have imagined such composed behaviour from their family members in such a scenario.

I must mention here that the drivers of the private buses we hired were all so very nice and decent. They made sure that they dropped the ladies at a junction where someone was waiting to pick them up. When in some cases there was no one, they took the phone number of the auto rickshaw drivers and warned them to make sure that the ladies reached home safely. They happily contributed to making sure that the women had a great time that day. Their duties finished at 7pm but they remained in their driving seats till midnight.

There was also a funny incident: one of the women got separated from the group that visited the Dargaah Sharif. Being a new entrant, she did not have the mobile number of anyone in her group. So she called her husband in Jaipur, who called our office in Ajmer. They then called the training coordinator who was on her way back to Jaipur, who called the leader of the group that was shopping somewhere near Dargaah, who finally connected with our lady waiting at the Ajmer train station where she had wandered off. Whoever said mobile phones were a nuisance?

The Journey

We often felt, when we talked with our artisans, apprentices or fresh trainees that their idea of empowerment was limited to the point of them earning some money every month. For them, being able to work or being allowed to work and having a bank account was enough liberation. And to those who could spend their earnings as they wished, it was like the ultimate freedom. It was obvious that their world was limited to what they could do as an individual person to bring some extra benefits to their personal lives. Of course, that is the beginning, but we decided to show them the larger picture: how their power increases when they combine their efforts; how they impact the market, both locally and globally; how the quality of the products they made could make a

business successful or otherwise; how they could improve their quality of life by increasing their earnings and how they could contribute to the wellbeing of society as a whole. We wanted to make them understand the great significance of their role in development.

A 30-minute power-point presentation was made to them which they listened to with undivided attention. The slide-show included pictures from our first-ever skill-building programme for women in 2008, where ten to twelve of them began learning how to make beaded jewellery in the dim light of a solar lamp. Today, there are over three hundred women who have been trained by us in various skills such as Kantha work, Wood Block Printing, Patwa work and stitching. They make more than fifty different types of product using these skills and earn anything between Rs. 3000 to Rs. 12000 per month. With their earnings, they are sending their daughters to college, helping their sons start small businesses and have built their own houses. Through the slide-show, they were also introduced to the international market where their products are so much appreciated by people around the world. This was quite inspiring for them, as many of them, who work from home, had no idea as to how all their beautiful hand-made products found their way to the USA, Australia and Europe. The Fashion Show organized in Kentucky of their Kantha products, and their soft toys displayed in a toy store in Amsterdam especially impressed and delighted them. The women later expressed their gratitude with awe and admiration at how their modest little skills were making their way to far-off countries whose names they were hearing for the first time. For most of them, the boundaries of the world finished at the border of their villages and to learn a little bit of basic geography and discover how they crossed the vast oceans to these far-away places made them both surprised and delighted. They clearly had a new understanding of how big their little cooperative had become, and could be in the future!

The Awards

These women work hard and some work very hard. Some work to make an extra income and others work to make sure that they make outstanding and accomplished artisans and their products are of the highest quality. They seldom are absent, they never lose focus, they inspire others, and they fight injustice and unfairness with a calm determination. While everyone receives a special gift on Women's Day, we select those who are out of the ordinary in their skill and their resolve to end the cycle of poverty and exploitation for themselves and their children. The following artisans were chosen to be honoured with cash rewards:

1. Saroj (Rs. 11,000)
2. Oma (Rs. 5100)
3. Khusnuma (Rs. 5100)

4. Lakshmi (Rs. 5100)
5. Shweta (Rs. 5100)
6. Hashmi (Rs. 5100)
7. Naziya (Rs. 5100)
8. Maqsuda (Rs. 5100)
9. AshaRajiya (Rs. 5100)
10. Meera (Rs. 5100)

The artisans shared their life stories as they received their cash awards. They all had a story that would never fail to touch your heart but some truly inspire you. One of them said “I leave my four little daughters behind to come and work here. The youngest is 6 months old.... ” Another confided that she was determined to beat all the odds to make a life for herself so that she would never have to suffer because of lack of money. One of them went into great detail as to how, prior to her involvement with the Vatsalya programme, she had never known any happiness or peace of mind. “I was married at the age of fifteen and then was abandoned by my husband at sixteen with a child in my lap. I went to live with my mother and was responsible for her, my younger sister and my little son. It wasn’t easy and I was forced to do wrong things, which led to another cycle of abuse and exploitation beginning for me that lasted a couple of years. It was then that I was approached by Vatsalya to enrol in a skill-building programme. Even that wasn’t easy, as my past life kept intruding on my attempt to start a new and dignified life. But I settled down slowly and gradually.” Today she is one of the best and most hard-working of our artisans. With her earnings she sends her son to a good school, saves for her sister’s marriage and covers the medical expenses of her mother, who suffers from cancer.

The award ceremony, while making everyone happy for the recognition it gave to all, also had a very sobering effect on us all. For many, it was the first time that they had shared the details of their personal lives in such a large group and yet there was no fear of being judged or misunderstood. There was a great feeling of solidarity. And what an impressive gathering it was! Out of a total of three hundred and forty-five women enrolled with us, one hundred and seventy-five artisans attended the March 8th celebration and seventy-five newly-registered trainees were there too. Ninety-five of our registered artisans could not come due to family commitments. For those who did not come, our senior artisan Kamla had a message: she was hospitalised for a mild stroke or heart attack just ten days earlier and yet there she was, not willing to miss the celebration at any cost.

The Orange Belt Girls of Vatsalya!

After a brief fifteen-minute break for samosa and chai, fifteen young children from Vatsalya performed a Karate session in front of the gathering. Nine of these fifteen

children were girls, aged ten to sixteen. They have been learning Karate for some time and the coach comes once a week, but under the supervision of one of the senior boys, they practice daily. Within eight months, they have moved up from White Belt to Yellow Belt to Orange Belt. The way they are progressing, there is no doubt some of them will achieve a Black Belt within two years. They presented a stunning performance of their skill, in a group as well as individually. By the end of their twenty-minute session, everyone in the large gathering was in awe of them and was able to appreciate the value and need for such a skill that enhances the sense of self-esteem as well as security. A woman was heard saying “If the children of an Ashram can do this, imagine what we could do for our children. And we don’t do it: what a shame!”

Time to speak your mind

The expression of thoughts and feelings is something that requires a lot of courage. A lot of behavioural and mental issues could be solved if only one knew how to give words or expression to what goes on in the heart and mind. Stating your facts in an appropriate manner is a matter of practice. We organized a twenty-minute workshop in groups of fifteen to twenty women led by an educated representative who could write. The women were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the following:

1. What changes happened in their lives after they joined Vatsalya?
2. What did they expect from us to progress more?
3. What are the major challenges of their lives?
4. What support do they expect from men in general?
5. What challenges do they face from men in general?
6. What are the major challenges of adolescent girls?
7. What are the major challenges of adolescent boys?
8. What are the major issues plaguing the world today?

They brainstormed for over twenty minutes on these topics in their respective groups. The charts were filled up with colourful writings and there was quite a competition among the women to register their views. Some of the salient points put down collectively were as follows:

1. We feel free and motivated to live life with a new approach. We now have the capability to fulfil our dreams.
2. We want continuous work. A gap in it disturbs our family budget and savings are spent when we don’t have work.
3. There are many of us who are not allowed to work. It takes a lot of effort and long years of trying to convince our family members to let us go out and work. They do not value the role of education which is what we can contribute to if we earn.

4. From the men in general we expect understanding and respect for all the hard work we do. Some of us feel that we could work even harder if only our men folk had a supportive attitude towards us.
5. Domestic violence and alcoholism were reported to be the two major challenges faced by women from the men in general.
6. Gender discrimination was felt by the adolescent girls to be the biggest challenge. It not only deprived them of good education but also made them quite unsafe.
7. A high level of antisocial behaviour and lack of focus on a future career was reported to be the major challenge of adolescent boys. It was also said that youth today was easily lured by bad things in order to get quick success.
8. In the section about the major world problems, we had expected relative ignorance and that's what came out. The group remained focused on the issues such as child marriage, domestic violence, unemployment, the caste system, gender discrimination and so on. Some of these problems are prevalent the world over; however, it can easily be concluded that the focus of these women was India. No one had heard about the refugee crisis in Europe or the Tsunami in Japan or the earthquake in Christ Church. This group work was aimed especially at enabling the development and leadership activities to progress. Having a holistic worldview definitely helps one's perspective of life and happiness. So, accordingly, we will include relevant activities going forward for these women.

At the end of the group work and before dispersing, we made two announcements to invite participants to enrol for the following:

1. The Australian High Commission sponsored Organic Farming Project at Achrol
2. Azad Foundation sponsored Woman On Wheels project in Jaipur

Several hands were raised showing willingness for both. We will be following up on enrolling eligible candidates for these projects in coming days.

The Dance

As soon as the group work was over, the DJ was asked to play the music at its loudest pitch and he gladly obliged. It was very obvious from his face that he had never before seen such a gathering of women. All this time, they were serious, quiet and listening. Some were shy and nervous. And now, as soon as the music began to play, they transformed into bundles of energy. They were bold and boisterous, jubilant and carefree, dancing with ecstasy in high spirits. Their joyful and exuberant inner selves were suddenly all out and free. Everyone danced to their heart's content for over one-and-a-half hours! It seemed they could go on dancing until midnight, but we had other things on the agenda for the rest of the day. I noticed that the DJ operator did not waste a moment packing up his equipment after the food was announced. He was almost

relieved not to be surrounded by the women who continued to demand their favourite songs!

The Meal

At three o'clock a sumptuous meal of Dal-Bati-Choorma was served. All the men served and all the women ate first. Even in our modern homes in India, we women always feed our men first. In families with a healthier system, we eat together. But it almost never happens that women eat first, leaving their men waiting! But for this meal, the men not only served the women, they served them lovingly, happily insisting on them eating enough and more, in the true tradition of Indian hospitality.

The Expedition!

After enjoying their meal, the groups of women headed to their respective destinations, the stories of which we have already shared above. There is no denying that they made the most of everything: the time in hand, the total freedom, the feeling of safety and security of being with resourceful friends, a bus all to themselves with dedicated drivers, money in their pockets and high spirits! When our staff were trying to check up on their whereabouts at around 11.30 that night, one of the young artisans replied thus: "For the first time in my life, I am outside my home at this hour. I cannot describe how pleasant the cool breeze feels and how elated I feel strolling on the highway, all by myself, feeling safe and contented...!"

Recommendations

Being on the organisers' side, I can say on behalf of everyone that we all felt really inspired and motivated by being with these women. Every moment we spent with them and every penny spent on the function was so very worth-while. It is a very humbling feeling one gets, when one realises that being educated and having money is only one miniscule aspect of being happy or feeling liberated. Freedom is so much a state of mind. The external milieu does have its impact but these women, without any doubt, overcome all the restrictions and laugh and dance so freely, throwing back their heads with their arms flung out in their joy. Not many of us could do that if we could not read or write, if we had to toil hard from four in the morning to ten at night, if we had little money, if we lived in mud houses without water or electricity, if our men were alcoholic, if our daughters could not get education, if our sons could not get employment, if domestic violence was an everyday thing for us, and most importantly, if no one was there to ask how you are feeling. Being able to do that for these women is nothing less than a blessing for us, here at Vatsalya.

We have two heartfelt requests and strong recommendations from our partners and supporters:

1. Such events should be more frequent, for they develop a remarkable sense of solidarity and empowerment in women. They may not be on such a large scale but big enough to allow them to come together and have an enriching and relaxing time.
2. With every training program/centre, there must be provision of a crèche. It's hard for artisans to leave their little ones behind as there may not be any help available, and bringing them along puts the small children at different types of risk. We know of certain women who give small doses of opium to their children so that they remain asleep while they are away or at work. What a tragic solution they resort to, ignorantly and hopelessly! A crèche could be a perfect solution.

Grateful acknowledgements

The IWD function was funded by the following partners in vision and action:

1. Anchal, USA
2. Anoothi US, USA
3. Artisans of Fashion, Australia
4. Ripples of Hope, USA

The skill building program for women is supported by the following partners:

1. Anchal, USA
2. Anoothi US, USA
3. Artisans of Fashion, Australia
4. Australian High Commission, New Delhi
5. Didi Foundation, the Netherlands
6. EXIM Bank of India
7. I-Partner, India
8. Open Eyes Project, Spain
9. Ripples of Hope, USA

Visuals

While we had hired a local photographer to cover the event, Mr. Praveen representing the Artisans of Fashion, Australia and Ms. Mary Khuvung from I-Partner, India did some amazing photography of the event. As a result we have over 500 beautiful photos running into 7-8GB. We are attaching a link for you; just click to view these.

<https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0By6tqt6gSdSURUF1RVdja3FYZ1U&usp=sharing>