

“The Change is Here – Already!”

The International Women's Day at Vatsalya

Sponsored by Anoothi-US and Anchal Project, USA

It's only February and we are already getting phone calls and messages from the women:

“What is the plan this year on IWD?”

They already want to start preparing for a journey of 2-5 hours, want to decide what they will wear, want to advise us about the program on the IWD and make their sweet small wishes known to us, regarding the menu, sports, gifts and awards, etc. ...:) They don't want to miss anything and want to make sure that they have a memorable day filled with joyful reunion, learning and growing!

On March 8th, Vatsalya campus in Achrol is all ready to welcome over 200 Anoothi women who are members of Self-Help Groups created by Vatsalya.

Welcoming the Anoothi Women!

Until about 5-6 years ago, the Anoothi women could only say their names timidly, in barely audible voices, could not imagine venturing beyond the four walls of their homes, let alone as far as the end of their village boundary. They knew only one life, that of submission, ignorance and abject poverty. Today, not only do they speak their minds in a loud and confident voice, they have learnt also to dream and have the COURAGE to follow their dreams! They have learnt to collaborate in a development process that has changed the way they look at themselves. Slowly and gradually, the skill training that was imparted to these women empowered them economically as well. Today, these Anoothi artisans earn anything between Rs. 3000 to 8000 per month working from home. Their Kantha products and Patwa jewelry are appreciated and admired the world over (Anchal Project, USA and Anoothi-US are their biggest admirers!). Anoothi women today, from complete dependence a few years ago, have made their way to a life of dignity and independence. Not only are they able to support themselves, they pay the school fees of their children, cover the medical bills of their ailing parents and parents-in-law and some of them even support their total living costs if their husbands are unable to work due to illness. Our proud achievement is to see their glowing faces, beaming with joy as they confidently walk with their heads held high!

Medical and Health Check-up

At about 11am, they began arriving, adorned in jewelry, very bright and colorful Sarees, Kurtas and Odhnis. Children accompany them, some mere 3-month-old babies, safely tucked in their mothers' arms, wrapped in pink and blue cotton fabrics... The women are escorted straight to the health and medical check-up area where a team of doctors from the National Institute of Medical Sciences comprising an ENT Specialist, a Gynecologist, a Pediatrician and a General Physician are ready to

examine and assist them. When the check up is done, they proceed to 'buy' medicines at the medicine counter. Their expenditure on medicine will be reimbursed back to them during the monthly meetings in the following days. This is done with the hope that they will consume the medicines they purchased themselves.

The Martial Art Expert

Next on the agenda this IWD is a Self-Defense Workshop, something we have been wanting to do for a long time, and something the Anoothi women demanded last year during the IWD function and the subsequent deliberations. Richa Gaur, an amazing and inspiring young girl, is our resource person – a world champion and winner of half a dozen gold medals! Her father very proudly tells us how Richa, who discovered her passion when she was barely 10, pursued it in spite of the initial dismay and disapproval of her parents. They belong to a conservative section of Indian society where a girl is expected to learn to 'behave' in a certain way only and must invest her time and energy in learning cooking and other household chores. But soon, Richa's father told us, they knew there was no stopping her and as loving parents they decided to support her 'strange' passion. In the last decade, Richa, who comes from a small neighborhood of Jaipur, has made her presence known in the international arena of the Martial Arts. Not only has she several awards and recognitions to her credit, she has trained thousands of young girls, women and police personnel through her Martial Arts Academy. Richa; this inspiring girl, is just 20!

The Self defense Workshop

The Self defense session begins after the refreshments at about 1pm. Richa invites volunteers to participate and learn it first-hand. We have 12 people, whose ages range from 10 (Shivanshi of Vatsalya Udayan) to 62 (Lada Mai of Shampura village) as enthusiastic participants. The next one and a half hours are spent with Richa showing them different tricks and techniques of self defense and attack. The participant volunteers take their turns playing an attacker and then learning to defend themselves when attacked. We all watch and learn, awed and inspired, feeling delighted and strong, cheering and encouraging as they perform some of the moves perfectly and then all laugh joyfully when some awkward mistake makes a participant fall flat on the ground. After about 80 minutes of the session, we hear some noises: the children are fidgeting and getting restless. So we decide to stop there and Richa invites 10-12 persons for a special 15-20 minute exclusive session.

The Ambush!

As the large group of about 200+ women and children began dispersing and the small group with Richa was getting ready for another brief training session, we noticed some commotion again, this time with some alarming cries. We turned and saw some honey bees hovering over and around us.

Our initial reaction was to ignore them and stay calm so as to let them fly away to wherever they were going. But soon we noticed that there were hundreds of them, actually attacking us. Everyone panicked and ran for cover but before we could reach any safe place, many of us were stung by angry bees. For the next hour, our only means of communication was talking to each other on our mobile phones from our safe hidings. Everyone was trying to call, trying to find out who was where, who was bitten, what was needed to be done and so on. We were removing the stings from the hands, head, face and neck of persons who were bitten severely in several different places. It was quite painful for some. After about 30 minutes, a team of our Vatsalya Udayan children decided to handle the bees and the staff took charge of taking the victims to hospital.

It was an unimaginable chaos, one we were not prepared for. We have lived with those beehives for years but they have never troubled us before. Later we were told that it was a migratory swarm that was on its way to somewhere and was perhaps attracted by the overpowering smell of perfume given off by the gathering. Nevertheless, after one hour, as some of us were still sitting in a room, trying to assess the situation, we heard loud DJ Music: the women were back! Everyone was back and dancing, even those who had been stung by as many as two dozen bees! They all left after a sumptuous meal of Dal-Bati-Choorma at about 4.30pm.

Another adventure waiting en route

One of the public transport buses that were taking these women home to Ajmer was stopped by an angry private bus owner. He was apparently upset at the loss of business, since women get to travel FREE on March 8th following government orders. The driver of the private bus not only stopped the bus in which our women were traveling, he pulled the driver out of the bus and began beating him up. Seeing this, Anoothi women got down and told the driver to behave himself or else be ready for the consequences. This man could never have imagined what was about to come when he hurled abuse at the women and threatened them. Not that we endorse violence, but this driver asked for it and was given a nice thrashing by our women. They also told him that he had chosen the wrong day and the wrong bus to show off his attitude! Having settled the matter, they boarded the bus again, but there was more to come. This rowdy fellow telephoned some more hooligans like himself and, after the bus had travelled 15 km, it was stopped again by 20 men. They surrounded the bus and began shouting and threatening our women. And again, all our women, except those with small children, got down from the bus and beat up all those drunkard, ill-mannered, abusing ruffians. Shocked and surprised, it did not take more than a few minutes for them to call it quits and vanish! Anoothi women could not believe their luck that they would get an (unwanted and undesirable) opportunity to try their self defense skills learnt just a few hours previously. Not only did they get just that, they came out winners! However unfortunate the incidence was, it surely is remarkable how our women learn and internalize the learning. No wonder the strength of Anoothi women has grown from 15 to 250 in just a couple of years...

The final confrontation

The grateful bus driver, who was supposed to drop them somewhere in the city, drove 10 extra miles and dropped our women right outside the Jaipur bus station. Triumphant and proud of their ability to practise what they had learnt, the Anoothi women were eager now to reach home. But there was yet another hurdle: the window clerk refused to give them free passes! It was obvious that he did not want to lose his share of the profits from the sale of tickets that day and so was giving tickets only to men. Tired, angry and bee-stung, the Anoothi women demanded to speak with the manager. And a few minutes later, the manager personally escorted them all to an empty bus and ordered the driver to take them home!

Our final thoughts

Looking back at the March 8th of 2014, we have mixed thoughts: those firstly of a happy reunion, learning a remarkable new skill and achieving some outstanding results! Regarding the driver-bashing episodes, there is a little sadness: why it is so difficult to share life gracefully and gratefully?

We do wish to let our readers know that most of the women who were bitten by bees have completely recovered except for a few of them, who continue to be under medical observation. The doctors are taking good care of them and have assured us that they will be absolutely fine in a day or two. Anoothi India has decided to reward some of the women for their courage and boldness in taking the lead in defending their rights and protecting other women and their children. Two of the Vatsalya children have already been rewarded: Shivam, aged 12, and Rohit, aged 14! When everyone was panicking during the bee attack, they were carrying the small children to safe places. They were later patrolling the campus, making sure that everyone was inside and also later, reporting victims to the medical assistance team. They then lit fires at several places to create smoke, which made it possible for all the women not only to have their lunch in peace, but also to dance a few steps to Bollywood songs before leaving!

Thank you for your time and for being there for us, as always...