

## VIHAAN - Stop the baby girl's feticide and infanticide in India.

Since 2005 the Government of India has been allocating large amounts to the improvement of roads (a lot remains to be done, for instance we spent five hours to cover the 250 km between Agra and Delhi whereas it is foreseen to take 100 minutes with a highway supposed to be realized soon), water reservoirs in the villages and health. The Government has received considerable sums from international organizations but does not transfer them to local NGOs which have no other choice but to turn to private donators, UNICEF which till recently were supporting VIHAAN directly are now transferring this money to the Government but VIHAAN is not getting any of it any longer with the result that some projects have had to be suspended (kindergarten etc.).

Health care in the 28 Indian states is free of charge but of poor quality with a demotivated staff and difficult to reach, due to the inefficiency of the road system. Old beliefs, healers and ignorance are an obstacle. The existing contraception program (pills, condoms, and sterilisation) is efficient and also free, but unfortunately hardly utilized.

Doctor Meeta whom we met 18 months ago introduced Happy Kids to this project in which she is taking an active part.

The association VIHAAN was funded in 1993 by Doctor Kumkum Srivastava (in Sanskrit Kumkum means "early morning" and also designates the red dot on the forehead). Her goal is to support child development in Rajasthan, to promote their right to education, to their participation in social life, to health, and in short to a better life.

Contrary to our action in Chennai directed at limited numbers in the slum, this project is aimed at remote regions, particularly vast, hard to reach, and ignored by NGOS!

Early on Mrs. Kumkum realized that the task was enormous and could not be limited to one sector. She is therefore dividing Rajasthan into 7 districts with various activities in each district.

Her team, based in Jaipur, (4 million inhabitants), is made up of five persons and criss-crosses the State (except the accountant) to establish the first contacts. As a matter of fact, prior to developing a project, the local authorities need to be convinced of its validity. Once it is done one needs to gain the confidence of villagers who are attached to their old traditions and to awaken their curiosity so that they wish to come to the meetings. Meetings are then arranged, musicians and puppeteers stage the themes to be presented, viz. the banning of gender selection prior to or at birth, the consequences of such a selection in their future everyday life, an appropriate nutrition programme during the pregnancy, the proper celebration of a girl's birth, the abiding to the law which prohibits wedding prior to 18 years of age, domestic nonviolence, and the education of girls. Then the representatives of VIHAAN give the required explanations and answer the questions.

Finally, (about three months later) a structure is installed by VIHAAN, made up of a mixed committee representing the various entities of the community.

The tasks of this committee, made up of 15 to 20 members, which meets monthly with VIHAAN's staff, are the following:

- Stress the effects, mid-term and long-term, of gender selection and promote the value of girls in society.
- take measures to promote a girl's status overall, how to celebrate a girl's birth, improve the care given to girls and mothers, educate the girls, explain that the death ritual (final rites) for a family member should not be limited to males, encourage wedding without a dowry, congratulate the couples who make (free) use of contraceptive methods after having had two kids.
- Challenge the poor treatment of girls which has existed for several thousand of years.
- Facilitate the contact, through VIHAAN's team with Rajasthan's women and children department.

Happy Kids is financing 2 districts holding 10 villages each. The first one (Jaipur, Block Phagi) is 1h30 away from town and the second one (Sawaimadhopour, Block Khandar) next to the famous Ranthambhore tigers' sanctuary is 5 hours by road from Jaipur.

Mrs. Kumkum had arranged the visit of a village in each of the two districts.

The first village in the Jaipur area is already in its 6<sup>th</sup> year of the program and the results are convincing:

- No more wedding before 18.
- Due to the village school having a poor level, a volunteer teacher from VIHAAN is coming every day from Jaipur. Her capabilities and her charisma made the number of pupils increase from 50 to 132 (79 girls and 53 boys). She knows each child well, meets every family at their home and has clearly established a trustful relationship with children and parents.
- a teenager girl explains that she takes the bus daily to Jaipur to study (more than 2 hours each way)
- Another one, Lali, introduced by the teacher, obtained a class prize for all-round standard and INR 5'000. - (which is the equivalent of CHF 230.-. In comparison a woman gets a monthly salary of INR 1'500. - as a housemaid). Lali intends to become a doctor.
- A third one recently underwent a heart operation which cost INR 150'000. - (about CHF 6'900.-). A few years back, for a girl, the parents would not have incurred such a debt and would have let her die.
- The sewing machines bought with happy Kids' funds are allowing the girls to learn how to sew and to manufacture clothing. When Dr. Meeta asked "when may I come to have a dress made for me, in 3, 6 months or a year?" the answer was. "in three months"

The meeting was wonderful. About thirty pupils were waiting for us; six of them were using sewing machines. Drs. Kumkum and Meeta reiterated the goal of the process and asked them some questions. Very soon the dialog started and many questions were exchanged. Then, in another room, we met with the mothers who were less shy and were curious about our families and clothing. They were very inquisitive and less bashful than the doctors who apparently did not translate all their questions!

The village visited in the second district started with the program at the beginning of the year thanks to Happy Kids financing. Contacts have been established with the authorities and the process to promote a certain level of trust has started. We arrived at mid-day. All the school children were present together with some parents (mothers on one side, fathers on the other, and babies sitting in between). Three girls welcomed us with a song. The authorities were all present and the headmaster, after the welcome ceremony (flowers and red dot on the forehead with a grain of rice) stressed the importance of the girl in the society (a society without girls cannot function), her right to education and to health and further mentioned that his own daughters were studying. For the time being, in this village, pupils can take courses until they are 15 or 16 as there are no higher classes here.

Then the puppet show started, inducing several women to stay on who were about to leave (thus this technique is working well). The show depicts a man and a pregnant woman who says that she has to go to the doctor to find out the baby's gender. The doctor recommends to the husband to take good care of his wife during her pregnancy and the husband inquires about the baby's gender. The doctor answers that it is forbidden (unfortunately in reality many doctors are ready to proceed with a scan just for a quick fee). The children laughed a lot during the show, and then one of the puppeteers came in front of the curtain and in a long speech hammered home the same messages.

Then two other participants dressed up and staged a play about weddings prior to the age of 18, now forbidden but still occurring in the villages.

This day was quite different from the previous one in the sense that the whole village was present.

In both villages the VIHAAN team has painted on buildings almost everywhere in the village some slogans in Hindi signed "VIHAAN" and "Happy Kids" reading "give your daughter an education and her life will be successful" or "no early wedding, avoid a disaster" or still "celebrate the birth of a girl".

To this day to have a girl is considered as a curse and one breaks a terracotta pot at her birth to ward off bad luck.

In summary it can be said that, even now, girls remain unwanted because the dowry (even though it has been prohibited since a long time) still remains costly and also because of the Indian tradition about reincarnation. To get a future better life, the soul at the time of cremation needs to leave the body and these final rites can only be completed by close family male members so in short only a son can set a soul free, not a daughter.

Over 5 years VIHAAN helped save 400 girls which may appear meagre considering that about 7'000 are missing every day in the tally of births. But ... it is still 400 small lives! And the wind of change is gathering momentum. In the village that has been followed during 6 years one can feel the change of mentality, slowly but surely mindsets are being overturned.

A problem has arisen i.e. the need to remunerate the various participants such as the sewing mistress, the teachers etc. It is the only mean to ensure a certain level of quality as voluntary work is not yet inscribed in Indian mentalities. One has to invest in the women's workforce. Presently the Government of India is paying INR 950. - Monthly to a person working half time in its social program aiming at establishing a connection between the villagers and the Government. It seems ideal in theory but in reality it is far from easy to organize. This is why it is important to have a social assistant from the association who starts and follows the program.

Dr. Meeta, when she meets with women, will always ask them to lift their veil. They are not Muslims but in Rajasthan it is a tradition going back to the Mogul invasions when women were hiding their beauty to avoid abduction. Then it became a tool in men's hands to subdue their wives and hide her from other men's eyes.

When we asked them permission to take a picture, they would shyly lift their veil but once shown the picture they would take the veil off and ask for another snapshot!

I was surprised by the extent of the active participation of men to this program and the gap between people can be wide: men with a high degree of awareness of girls' and women's condition and women totally enslaved. All the thankless duties, physically heavy work (building, roads, fields) are effected by women whereas men keep shops, are taxi or rickshaw drivers, working in the hotel industry (waiters, servants).

The change dynamics is on its way thanks to the emergence of mutual trust. Stereotypes are gradually giving way.

The task is huge and traditions are very cumbersome but the successful rescue of the dancing bears along the roads in the Agra area has shown that, in spite of a 300 year old tradition, such a custom could be eradicated and people educated.

I therefore remain confident and do hope to be in position to maintain our support to this project.