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Nairobi's Garden of Children

Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj

Some creative minds have conspired to devise a novel solution to the problem faced by people of Indian origin living in other countries as to how to preserve their culture and religion. The concept of Shishukunj was developed at Karachi (now in Pakistan) in 1941. In Kenya, the first Kalaniketan Shishukunj was started in 1955, and a second some years later. The aim of Shishukunj, which means a "garden of children," is to advance Indian culture and religion among children and young people, to instruct them in the principles of discipline, loyalty and good citizenship and to relieve poverty, distress and sickness among children.

Shishukunj is based on Mahatma Gandhi's principles and was developed by Harji Somaiya. He was a school teacher at Gandhi's Sharda Mandir institution in Karachi.

In Nairobi, Indubhai D. J. Davey is the soul behind the operations. He is also a founder member of the original Karachi Shishukunj. According to him, children between the ages of 6 to 14 come to the center every Sunday morning.

On a typical Sunday, children arrive at 8.30am and play on the grounds for 30 minutes. At 9:00am, they adjourn to the hall for prayer and to sing bhajans. This is followed by ten minutes of talk prepared by one of a team of trained speakers. These speakers are usually young, about 20 years of age, because children identify better with them. The talks are aimed to teach moral values through culture and anecdotes from the lives of great historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Vivekananda, Guru Nanak, etc.

After the talks, there are games and a snack. Then children once again gather in the hall and an assembly (Bal Sabha) is held. Children present their stories, songs, etc., highlighting cultural and moral values. Volunteer leaders also participate. The program ends at noon.

During holidays, camps are held, sponsored by the parents. During week days, art classes in different disciplines such as music, dance and painting are conducted. One evening is for each subject every week, so that the children are not overburdened. They can carry on with their normal school activities, but still have an opportunity to learn about their religion and culture.

The Bangalore Plan

Mr. Rajanikant B. Acharya thinks that establishing such centers and carrying out holiday activities is not enough. He says, "The taste of pudding lies in eating." To him, talking about Indian culture and Hindu religion is one thing, and being in India is totally different. So that the children get first-hand experience of what India really is, the people of Indian origin in Kenya and other countries have decided to establish a center at Bangalore in India where children from all over the world can go during their summer vacations and gain in-depth knowledge about their country of origin. They shall learn through art, music, history and interaction with the traditions. Just staying in India and being with other children from all parts of the world in itself will be a unique and rewarding learning experience.

According to Mr. Acharya, this concept has been well received by the parents. It is yet at a "dream stage," but achievable. "The Bangalore project belongs to all those parents who are concerned about their young children. It is up to the parents to contribute towards the formation of this center by contributing their services financially or in any other way they feel proper," he said. There is an artist's concept of the center [above left] and international interest, but no time frame.

Address: Kalaniketan Shishukunj, PO Box 10301, Nairobi, Kenya.

Bangalore project: Mr. Rameshbhai M. Desai, coordinator of Shishukunj

International, 98 Chaplin Road, London, NW2 5PR, UK.

Kenyans Love this Brother-and-Sister Musical Team

By Prabha Prabhakar Bhardwaj

Avni (age 12) and Sachin Dave (15) have won the hearts of Kenyans of all creeds and color with their delightful renderings of popular Indian and African tunes on piano and synthesizers. In the course of their short musical career they have raised tens of thousands of dollars for local charities. Lately Avni has begun singing also, which she does comfortably in three languages-Hindi, English and Kiswahili.

On 8th of July, they went to Uganda and played for the local charities. Their great moment was a free performance for children of poor families, who never before had a chance to enjoy such an event.

By the time Sachin was six, the family recorded a cassette of 12 tunes which was distributed to friends. An offer came to sell the songs commercially, but the children's grandfather, an exponent of classical music, advised otherwise. He said, "You are naturally gifted and should use this gift for spreading a message of goodwill, to help the needy and to contribute towards the betterment of the lives of people who were less fortunate. As it is God's gift to you, you should never use it for personal gain." From 1990 a series of cassettes have been produced in conjunction with charities such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, UNICEF and Giants.

Sachin and Avni have not yet performed in India, the country of their origin. They feel very strong ties with their culture and religion. They have been brought up as Hindus and are proud of being Hindus. Otherwise, they are total Kenyans and most of their work to date has been for the charities of this continent. In the future they aspire to be global citizens and perform on all continents and contribute towards charities in each country. Their mother shelved her career as a banker to be their informal manager.

To keep up with studies, they schedule their musical activities on school holidays. Sachin wants to study business and accounting and go into business on

his own. Avni wants to be an advocate.

Sachin appeals to all the young persons of the world, "If you are talented, you must come forward and volunteer your special ability for helping the needy. I feel there is a very great satisfaction in contributing freely for the needy what special gifts one is endowed with."