

Gilly and Chris Wiscarson's experience during their December 2012 visit to Udaipur

LETTING KIDS BE KIDS

In a room half the size of a garage sit 20 kids under the supervision of kindergarten teacher and her assistant. With the kids safe, the mums can work in the fields to provide food, fodder and firewood. The kids are carefully watched. Half are malnourished, and their one good meal a day builds a healthy body and a healthy mind. Charts on the wall show how the kids are growing and, where there needs to be special help, be it loving or feeding. We have a miracle in the making with the village children being prepared to move on to junior school able to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. When the kids grow up and leave the village, they have more options than picking cotton in Gujarat or becoming Slum Dogs in Delhi. They may not get a university education but they can read and write Hindi and that has a very real value in getting them to work. Seva Mandir's role in training the teachers and providing high protein nourishment is seminal.



Cooking lunch for 20 kids

THE POWER OF WOMEN

Husband, tired of wife, kicks her out of her home and accuses her of being a witch. That's not a somewhere-over-the-rainbow type witch but one perceived to be a real life caster of spells. It is bad bad bad to be a witch in Rajasthan.

As a result of Seva Mandir's doing, there exists a village committee to whom the abused woman can protest. But that's not easy for the poor woman to do alone. The committee, being even handed, summons the husband to give his account. After all, most men would not want to live with a witch. The giveaway, though, is when the husband said to the committee "don't let the women's group get involved". *Why not?* Because the women's group will demand evidence that is fair to women, and they will represent the abused to make sure that justice is truly delivered in a male dominated society.

Seva Mandir has given village women a voice by convening, facilitating and training those willing to be moderators and leaders.

Husbands who abuse their wives better watch out.

JABHLA VILLAGE - DIGGING FOR SURVIVAL

Imagine being at the top of a 2000 feet high mountain. That's four times higher than the London Eye. Once upon a time, the mountains were covered in forest rejuvenated by monsoon rains. After decades of pillage for firewood and fodder, what we have left is a mountain range of dust, eroded each year as the monsoon washes the dust away, leaving bare rock.

This moonscape is home to 600 houses scattered over an area the size of Manchester. Under the facilitation of Seva Mandir, the villagers dig trenches around the mountain two feet deep and two feet wide so they look like giant paddy fields. When the monsoon comes, instead of the water flowing down the mountain at enormous velocity (the words of the villagers) taking all in its path, the trenches reduce the water's velocity and hold it on the mountain to breath new agricultural life in to the village. Men and women work digging the trenches over a three year programme of recovery. Then, they can grow enough produce, not only for their own needs but to sell on to other communities, thereby making their own village self sustainable.



Digging trenches for life

Seva Mandir is the gateway to the village for Government funding to support the refertilisation of the land. What Government don't do is manage the project, and it falls to Seva Mandir to put in place the village governance, provide the engineering training on where and how to dig the trenches, and what crops will grow best on the refertilised land. *Seva Mandir is to the villages as water is to the crops.*

THE VOICE OF SEVA MANDIR

The television and newspapers were full of the tragic Delhi bus rape and murder. There were two very contrasting emotional responses: uproar against the perpetrators and the environment which allows such atrocities; and the crass, but headline making, statements of those (mainly men) which somehow seem to justify gender discrimination even in its most brutal form.

It takes a rape, a murder, of a young woman in Delhi to bring the world's attention to the shocking plight of women in modern India. There are a million reasons: too few police; too few women police; too many corrupt police; ineffective laws; slow court processes; too few judges. Worst of all, it's the culture where women are second class citizens. Whatever, whatever, whatever! Seva Mandir, working across 600 villages and 350,000 people in rural Rajasthan, gets things right from the very beginning. Girl kids are treated the same as boy kids; village committees must have their fair share of women representatives; men who abuse women are condemned by their community and will not escape the full force of the law.

Yes, the Indian Government should deal with the symptoms. But only by eliminating the cause, as Seva Mandir does in Southern Rajasthan, will the gender catastrophe be solved.