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Mission Gurukul





An artist's impression of the newly built Geeta Vaidik Gram.

Keeping Alive the Gurukul Tradition

To the uninitiated, Shri Muktananda Sanskrit Maha Vidyalaya (SMSMV) doesn't sound like a place which could produce doctors, engineers, software programmers or future MBAs. Rather the name gives the impression that those graduating from the facility will likely be out of sync with the world of today with an education that could be of little to no practical relevance in the current times.

It is a perception battle that those running the school are faced with every day and by now have gotten completely accustomed to. The "what's the use?" question is one of the first ones asked by those who hear of the place. All too familiar with the concern, the faculty members respond to the query smilingly with polite references to the many success stories the school has seen over the years.



Geeta Vaidik Gram - a campus with a 16,000 sq. ft. school building, students' hostel and accommodation for the faculty.

It isn't that the medium of instruction at SMSMV is Sanskrit – a language that's nearly extinct – that makes it unique or the fact that it is a residential school nestled inside the ashram of a spiritual organization. What makes SMSMV special is that it is a Vaidik school imparting education on its students in the age-old "gurukul" tradition.

An initiative of Shanti Mandir – founded on the principles of universal peace and knowledge – SMSMV aims to revive interest in the philosophies of Vedanta and promote the virtues of Vaidik studies and wisdom contained within our ancient scriptures. Besides making quality education accessible to those from economically challenging backgrounds, its stated mission is to promote the use of such knowledge to create a contemporary society in which traditional values can find relevance and guide people to lead more fulfilling, contended lives.

L&T's Group Executive Chairman

Mr. A.M. Naik who has made it his life's mission to promote education and spread of knowledge, particularly among the poorer and marginalised sections of the society in his native Gujarat finds common cause with SMSMV's goals and identifying with its mission, has sponsored the building of an entire campus through Naik Charitable Trust, his personal charity.

Called Geeta Vaidik Gram (after AMN's wife Mrs. Geetaben Naik), the newly built educational campus, located within the Shanti Mandir Ashram at village Magod, Valsad in Gujarat, is built to house the school's current 125 (plus future 100 students), who reside at the ashram, its faculty members and support staff helping keep alive the august "gurukul" way of life.

From airy and spacious classrooms which make the most of natural light to fully equipped science labs, an up-to-date computer lab and a well-stocked library, the school building offers its students a most perfect atmosphere to pursue Vaidik studies. A modern building in every way

imaginable, the only deviation from an infrastructure point of view are the traditional low-slung Indian study tables filling the classrooms.

According to the school authorities these tables are in line with the Vaidik norms of pedagogy. The students have to squat on the classroom floor in order to use them. To an outsider it may seem a bit extreme, an unnecessary continuation of dated tradition but there's a pretty good reason for it. Sitting on the floor requires keeping a straight spine and forces one to keep shoulders pushed back and relaxed, resulting in good posture. Besides it also helps with blood circulation and is said to strengthen the lower back and other muscles.

In addition to the school building, Geeta Vaidik Gram consists of a fully-furnished accommodation for its qualified Vaidik (teachers) and their families and a Chhatralaya - a hostel large enough to house 225 students.

SMSMV currently offers courses



The Chatralaya (student's hostel) can house 225 students.

for Madhyamik (secondary school) recognised by the Government of Gujarat, Shastri (graduate) degree and Acharya (post graduate) degree recognised by the Somnath University. Though its student body consists of children from nearly all corners of the country, a bulk of them come from states including Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra.

Enrolled in Prathama I, equivalent of Std. IX, the students, sometime as young as 13-14 years, are offered everything for free including travel expenses, accommodation, food and clothing. In addition to the syllabus (including math and sciences) approved by the Gandhinagar Board and Gujarat University, the students are taught Vaidik subjects including Sanskrit and Vedanta. Besides, they are also trained in music and yoga to keep their education rounded and holistic.

The students lead a highly disciplined and regimented life on the campus.

Designed to instil virtues of learning and hard work, their day is filled with a number of activities. Waking up at 4.00 am in the morning, the students after dispensing with the Nityakarma, offer prayers to the deity. They follow this with an intense session of Yoga and Swadhyaya which is then followed by breakfast. Meals at the Ashram are a truly communal experience as everyone eats together in a large, open dining hall, shaded by lush green trees.

The school starts at 8.30 am and remains in session till 4.00 pm in the evening. The classes are conducted like any other school with pupils learning a variety of subjects which form a part of their syllabus. The Acharyas lay a considerable emphasis on interactivity and encourage open discussions on relevant topics.

Sandhyavandan, one of the most sacred Vaidik rituals is performed at dusk. As the students recite Vaidik hymns, their melodious chants fill the Ashram air with

a kind of spirituality quite indescribable. The ritual is usually followed by a Pravachan and then dinner, again in the open dining area. The day comes to an end post an hour-long self-study or Swadhyaya session after dinner. During Swadhyaya students reflect on the day's teachings and prepare for school the next day.

The word Sanskriti, meaning culture is derived from Sanskrit, the language now largely forgotten by the Indian mainstream. SMSMV's efforts at keeping alive this important part of our cultural identity can use all the help it can get. And preservation of this cultural heritage is exactly what inspired Mr. Naik to take up the cause of Geeta Vaidik Gram.

By expanding SMSMV's facilities, he through the Naik Charitable Trust has helped ensure continuation of this unique effort which combines Vaidik teachings with subjects relevant to modern life to make educated future citizens who stand to spread the light of civilization in all



Mrs. and Mr. A.M. Naik, and Mahamandleshwar Swami Nityanand Saraswati and Mahamadleshwar Swami Vishveshwaranand Giri ji Maharaj at the inauguration of the school building at Geeta Vaidik Gram.

corners of the world.

At the inauguration of the Geeta Vaidik Gram, Mr. Naik noted that the Vaidik School is very close to his heart because it is doing something that is incredibly important. The quest for modernity, he said has made us increasingly distant from our roots and that there's an urgent need for us to hold on to our values and preserve our great heritage.

"The school adds an important dimension to our overall efforts at imparting education. Our Vedas not only contain vast treasures of knowledge within them but can also offer answers which we seek as a society today," he says.

Shri Swami Nityananda Saraswati, Head of Shanti Mandir views Mr. Naik's contribution as ample proof of his staying true to his deep roots. "Despite having accomplished all that one could hope

for as a business leader in the world outside, Mr. Naik keeps coming back to his native Gujarat to support causes of larger public good. His focus on education, skill development, and healthcare through his trusts caters to some of our most pressing needs as a society and we hope to continue our association with him in future as well," he notes.

SMSMV is as rare as it is unique, in that it is attempting something that is truly remarkable. While most would find the idea of a Vaidik education in accordance with the nearly extinct "Gurkul" tradition passé, a closer appraisal of SMSMV's objectives reveals the urgency of its mission.

At a time when academic institutions have repurposed themselves to mass-producing graduates who can be readily absorbed into the market, SMSMV's focus

is on imparting an education untouched by occupational concerns. It aims to produce well-rounded individuals with a higher worldview – youngsters who aren't burdened by a basest need to seize an identity that's defined by a mere job.

This is not to say that SMSMV discourages occupational pursuits among its pupils or the education it offers doesn't equip them to meet the demands of the job market. No. It simply means that those graduating from the facility are more rooted in the values once synonymous with our rich past and ideals that represent the best of humanity and universality.

Ever the idealist, Mr. A.M. Naik believes in the justness of SMSMV's cause and has promised to do all that he can to aid the Gurkul in its small but ambitious mission.

Shanti Mandir – Dedicated to Public Service

The Shree Muktananda Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya offering free Vaidik education currently to over 125 students along with free accommodation at its hostel is only one of the three major initiatives of larger public good currently run by Shanti Mandir. Staying true to its tag of an international spiritual non-profit with “May All Beings Be Content” as its guiding principle, the organization runs two other projects of social welfare which are impacting the lives of many living in the vicinity of the Ashram and those who visit the ashram from various parts of India as well as distant places like Australia Mexico, Argentina, America, Europe and elsewhere.

Shanti Arogya Mandir

Shanti Arogya Mandir is a project under which Shanti Mandir devotes resources towards the medical welfare of those residing in the villages surrounding the ashram. Under Shanti Arogya Mandir, two projects viz., a mobile health clinic and eye-care camp have been run for the last 15+ years. Covering the length of twelve villages surrounding the ashram at Magod, the mobile health clinic and dispensary brings primary medical healthcare to people's doorsteps. On average some 100 people benefit from the facility every day. Bridging a vital gap in rural healthcare, the mobile clinic makes it possible for the poor to access quality medical assistance for free. Shanti Arogya Mandir has also been organizing free eye-care camps minimum twice a year since 1998 in the areas surrounding its ashram in Kankhal. At these camps, patients with a variety of vision related ailments are treated at no cost. Thanks to the camp, thousands of poor, needy folks have undergone successful cataract surgery with Intra-Ocular Lens implantation and regained the gift of vision. The ashram also provides free of cost Pre and Post surgery services.

Shanti Hastkala



Shanti Hastkala is a project for economic upliftment of the rural poor through employment generation. Intended mainly for the women residing in the villages neighboring the ashram,

the NGO teaches women simple handicraft skills and helps them develop income-generation opportunities. The women learn to make handcrafted textiles including kurta-kurties, bags, jholas, skirts, wraps, curtains, quilts, soft home furnishings, free of chemical incense, and a range of organic pickles, chutneys, jams, etc., at a centre located within the Shanti Mandir Ashram. Once trained under the watchful supervision of experts, these women either work on their own or produce a variety of products which are exhibited and sold by the NGO. A unique platform, Shanti Hastkala not only helps improve the quality of life for the village women but also helps them gain financial independence and self-confidence. Proceeds from the sale of the products help support the artisans continue to practice their skills as well as fund other services including the comprehensive healthcare programmes run by Shanti Mandir.

Punarnava



A fairly recent addition to the Shanti Mandir Ashram, Punarnava is an integrated centre for physical and emotional wellbeing of those suffering from a variety of distresses. Punarnava which mean rejuvenation combines the disciplines of Ayurveda (Panchkarma), Naturopathy, Psychotherapy and Allopathy to treat patients at this residential facility. One of a kind, it is the first centre to offer this comprehensive approach to treatment. Advances in science were intended to enrich our lives with health and peace but instead we have found more diseases and increased emotional unrest. This is a clear indication of the fact that we in our bid to progress and prosper have neglected something vital. Punarnava aims to find that's amiss and treat its patients from all aspects of health- physical, emotional, social and spiritual. At the facility patients are counselled during personalized interactive sessions on diet management, lifestyle modification, yoga, and stress management through psychotherapy, meditation and relaxation. Shanti Mandir's picturesque natural surroundings and calm and inspiring milieu, make Punarnava an ideal place for visitors to regain their emotional centre.