

Chaparda – a must visit Yatra place

Chaparda – a Yatra place? I hear you all say. We've all heard of Palitana, Samedshikhar, Shatrunjay, Girnar... but Chaparda?? Well, in my opinion, Chaparda is another one to add to your list. Let me try and tell you why.

Chaparda near Junagadh is the base of BEHT and contains several of its projects. Many of us, directly, or indirectly, have supported BEHT over the years - be it via direct donations or through their sponsored swims in the early days, to participating in sponsored walks, concerts, mehfilis, or even the recent Kilimanjaro expeditions. Well, if you recognize yourself amongst these numerous well-wishers and supporters, and you wonder where your money went, I hope that the following gives you some idea.

Our previous visit to Chaparda had been in 2001 when BEHT as a charity was in its infancy and Chaparda had a boarding school for only around 50 boys. At the time we met Bapu, the inspiration behind all the projects:, a young enthusiastic, visionary swamiji who said that in the future he wanted to have an organic farm, dairy farming and a cow shelter, so that the community could be self-sustained and children could grow up to be good citizens.

Visiting it again after 12 years, was a truly uplifting experience. Chaparda is a thriving community and now educates around 1500 children who are all residential boarders, both boys and girls, with many

coming from orphaned or very poor families. There is also a blind school, an old people's home (yes even in India, there is a dire need for such facilities as the extended family structure is breaking down); a large dairy farm, where milk, butter and cream for the community are produced; an organic farm where we tasted the freshest cucumbers and peppers. Solar panels provide all the hot water required, and methane from cows' dung is turned into gas for cooking. The school is a Gujarati medium school and provides education up to the age of 18; English is taught as a foreign language but Chaparda now also has degree level courses in computer science, engineering, and education. As per the national requirement, the medium for all higher level education is English – a huge challenge for students and teachers alike to ensure that the gap is bridged. An English medium school has just been started this year. Chaparda now also has a fully functioning state of the art hospital, serving not only its immediate community but all of the surrounding villages as well.



All this is the vision of one man – Swami Muktanandji, or “Bapu” as he is affectionately known. Bapu himself is illiterate – he can read Gujarati, but he cannot write it and he cannot speak or read English. And yet he recognized very early on



that the way out of poverty is through education. He does not believe in building yet more temples – according to him, India has enough temples; for him, the environment, the children and the schools are temples. He wants to provide children with opportunity and to turn them into responsible citizens – the children all have to help out in the farms, the dairy farms, the kitchens as well as with the cleanliness of the school and its compounds.

We stayed with Bapu at the ashram in Chaparda for 5 days, visiting all the above facilities and meeting with the teachers and students at the schools, the patients and doctors at the hospital, and the elderly at the vradhashram (old people's sanctuary)

The facilities at the ashram are very comfortable – overseas guests are housed either at the Chaparda Ashram or in the guest wing at Brahmanand close to where the school is located.

After an early morning walk, we would all go to the main centre Brahmaand to have a typical Gujarati breakfast. After breakfast,

Bapu would give a discourse – he would be sitting on a hindola (a swing) and discuss either his visions for the future, or give a brief history of his past. We also listened to a wonderful flute player, a very talented musician who used to work in the film industry but finds much more fulfillment playing for Bapu.

The first couple of days we visited all the various schools, colleges, farms, dairy farm, blind school and the hospital. Everywhere we went, we were received with a lot of interest and respect. The teachers/students/doctors took time out of their schedules to meet with us and explain everything to us. The blind school put on a special impromptu concert for us – it was so moving to hear such talented singers and musicians perform with such spirit.

One day, we were invited to the school for the morning assembly – it was a special assembly to

acknowledge all the various pupil prizewinners who had won or come runners-up in various state or national/ international level competitions such as football, basketball, yoga, English, athletics etc. Winning these competitions means receiving prize monies as well, and all these monies are credited directly to the child's account.

We also visited Savarkundla – a town about 60 kms away from Chaparda, where Bapu supports 3 schools in the slum areas. The children are from the poorest backgrounds and are given free schooling as well as a snack. The children are from the ages of 5 to 9. These schools were by far my favourite. In one school, the children, all 43 of them, were sat on the floor, squashed together in a room no bigger than

your average dining room. The children were all so cute and innocent, so enthusiastic and eager to learn, so clever and bright and confident. One of the little girls told us a story about a goat in Gujarati and we all had tears in our eyes. She just reminded me



of what my mum would probably have looked like at that age and the kind of school she would have attended.

In the evenings, back at the ashram, Bapu would sit in one of the canopied areas on a hindola, one of the students or helpers would have got the fire going - it was really chilly at night and first thing in the morning. He would again give a discourse, ask about your day and then talk about that topic or other things. He always managed to weave some words of wisdom, some life lessons and spirituality into his discourses. It was remarkable, how during the course of that period, he managed to dispel your doubts, or managed to answer your internal questions, almost as if he was reading your mind!

For someone who has not had a formal education, Bapu is very clever, astute man, who is acutely

aware of every detail of all the projects that he oversees. He keeps saying he is semi-retired and his Management Team deal with the day to day operations but he is briefed daily on every aspect and his ability to absorb and retain information is truly remarkable. His latest vision is Ananddhara – the supporting and uplifting of 30 villages around Chaparda. The government schools are run down in these villages and he has offered to provide help with rebuilding and refurbishing these schools, whilst letting the government pay the running costs. He wants to educate the villagers on sanitation, hygiene and cleanliness, to eradicate diseases and to create a community aspect. He also wishes to educate the local farmers on good farming and animal husbandry practices. He sees that all over India, the use of plastic has increased such that there is a real problem with rubbish – people will throw things outside without a second thought, with the issue that cows etc are now eating this rubbish including plastics. Bapu realizes that this will take years but recognizes the urgency of the issue.

It was so refreshing to see that all the funds you have raised over the years have gone to such wonderful

causes and have uplifted the whole community. We were really humbled by our visit, it was truly a spiritually uplifting experience, bringing us joy, tears and inner peace– Bapu's enthusiasm, energy and drive is truly infectious and we are keen to do more . There is so much more to do!

And if all this has not yet convinced you that this is indeed a Yatra place, then you also have Girnar nearby – a jain and hindu tirth with beautiful Jain temples and stunning scenery – with Bapu's ashirwaad (blessing) we also managed to climb Girnar.

So what are you waiting for? You will be made really welcome, a home away from home and for all those gap year students, who are thinking about doing some charity work for a few months, you could help the students with their English.

For more information on BEHT and a video outlining Bapu's philosophy, click the links below:

[http://www.beht.org/;](http://www.beht.org/)

<http://betindia.org/bapus-philosophy/>

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