

## Bihar, March 2010 Visit to Harivatika School, Bettiah

By Geri Johnson



The car stops on a busy street. We are ushered down a narrow alley between two buildings, one of which is under construction and the other hidden behind a high wall. Construction workers gaze at the foreigners with puzzlement and we are equally baffled. There is an opening in the wall, a gate of sorts, and we enter a courtyard filled with children, seating on a concrete floor. They are in the midst of a lesson. We interrupt but then our visit was anticipated and they were waiting patiently.

Teacher, Suman Devi, is in front of the black board, the sole piece of educational technology in this school. To the left is Roxie Overaker, an American student who had spent 6 weeks or more in Bettiah, assisting FSWL and Sister Crescence. Behind Roxie and the curious young men, is the entrance/exit to this courtyard.



On the right is Bhagrashan Ram (with camera), Bettiah's FSWL supervisor, Sr. Crescence and Linda Praamsma (also with camera)

These are the children from the Harivatika wholesale food markets, who picked through the decaying and unsalable vegetables and fruit to take home to the family. They also know how to pinch a good piece of fruit or vegetable too. They are street wise and quick.



Many are eager to show what they are know and are learning.

Some are wary, some shy and others confident and charming like our friend in the striped shirt.





This young girl was very bright. Unfortunately I did not get names of the children. She has a younger sister and brother in this school, who equally stood out as bright children. One day, this girl may be a good scholarship student to a formal school or a candidate for the new Bridge Course program.







Most are remarkably clean and dressed in their best. But these pictures do not capture the barefeet, the rips and tatters in the clothes.





We spend 30-40 minutes smiling at each other, listening to a welcome song and receiving paper garlands around our necks, watching the children recite and listening to lessons. We are touched by their openness and eagerness.

Since this school meets from 3.00-5.00 pm daily, I asked what they do during the morning and other parts of the day. I am told they are home with their parents, doing chores and learning “other skills”. My inquiries as to what those skills would be, gets a vague reply of ‘handicrafts’. The next question is “who is teaching them” but I get no reply. So, I venture one more question, “are they still picking through the trash and stealing food”. The reply is a definite “no, they don’t do that anymore”. I am not convinced though I am glad they are learning new skills.

