

Our Trip to Veerayatan Kutch

This summer, the three of us (Disha, Kevallee and Roshni) decided to volunteer at Veerayatan Kutch. At our SCVP Jain school in London, we had been told about the selfless service and dedication that Pujya Acharya Shri Chandanaji and the Veerayatan Sadhvijis rendered at the educational and medical facilities they have established in India which kindled in our spirits to experience volunteering at the institution we had heard so much about.

At first we were apprehensive, as it was the first time we would be travelling completely independently and living in an entirely new place, but it was the best decision we had made. Our days at Veerayatan were thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding as we were welcomed with open arms by the Sadhvijis and the children at the Jakhania campus.

With the chirping birds we woke up at 6 in the morning daily to make it to the morning prayers at 6:30am. Back at home, especially during our summer vacation, we would not even dream of being awake at such an ungodly hour. Just as dawn was breaking, the beautiful singing of the children would reverberate in the open courtyard, where we would all gather, with Pujya Sadhvi Sumedhaji leading the prayers with her melodious voice. We were amazed to observe that although the majority of children were not from a Jain background, they sang prayers with such passion and devotion illustrating that prayers are indeed universal. This also highlighted to us the fact that Veerayatan is such a welcoming and non-sectarian foundation. We noticed that the zeal the children had was not only whilst praying, but also in their academic life. Their thirst for knowledge and their eagerness to learn what we taught them was something we do not often notice at our schools, where education seems to have become an entitlement rather than a privilege.

From 8am to 4pm daily, we used to teach children from standards 1 to 12 at the Jakhania School. We were pleasantly surprised at their eagerness to learn English. In fact, not only did every single one of the students want to spend their class time learning English, but on our fifth day at the school, a 10-year-old boy came up to us in between classes and asked if one of us would have time after school to give him and a few other kids extra English tuition. And it didn't even end there. When we went upstairs there were already eight people in the room, with more by the door and a few more apparently on the way. Although we were slightly overwhelmed, it was one of the many moments that made us realise just how much education was valued and how whatever we offered was highly valued and regarded by the students.

Our teaching wasn't just a one-way system, as there was so much the children taught us too: from a young boy pointing out a sparrows nest in a tree and showing us how the chicks would hatch, to the girls teaching us a few phrases of Kutchi, the local dialect. However, above all what they taught us was the true meaning of happiness. We had tears pouring down our eyes when Sadhvi Sumedhaji narrated to us background stories of some of the children living in the hostel who were orphans, had been abused, or had seen their parents murdered in front of them. But when meeting the children themselves it was heart rendering to see how the Sadhvijis have nurtured the traumatised children and transformed their grief to happiness. Despite their tragic childhoods, these children were grateful for everything they had been given, and as a result they were probably the happiest and the

Our Trip to Veerayatan Kutch

most care-free people we'd ever met. It really helped contextualise our own problems and made us value what we have back home.

Although a lot of our time was spent with the children, time with the Sadhvijis was an integral part of our experience at Veerayatan as well. During our stay we were lucky to have three Sadhvijis present: Pujya Sadhvi Shri Shilapiji, Sadhvi Sumedaji and Sadhvi Shrutiji. Every day we would wake up to see the Sadhvijis themselves guiding the students at the campus and helping anyone in need. They taught us the true meaning of dedication, selflessness and unconditional love. It was easy to see Veerayatan's tagline 'Compassion in Action' come to life. We spent a lot of time with Sadhvi Shrutiji as she patiently taught us a range of different prayers, including Namuthunam, Man ka manav and even the whole of the Bhaktamar Stotra (a 48 verse prayer) during the time we were there.

Akin to any other holiday, one can never truly have a great time if there isn't great food and therefore we must dedicate a small section of this article to Komalben, the wonderful woman who headed the kitchen and took such good care of us while we were there. Every day we were treated to scrumptious meals, including bhel, chana bhatura, idli sambhar and the most mouth-watering of all, the famous mango ras. Before we left, we had packed piles of the typical English snacks, such as chocolate, biscuits and cereal bars, but they all lay forgotten at the bottom of our suitcases!

Another unique aspect of coming to Veerayatan Kutch, is that Jains and volunteers from all over the world come to spend their time there, and therefore it is a fantastic opportunity to make new friends. Coincidentally, while the three of us were there, so was Harsha, a girl from Dubai, and we don't think any of us have made such a close friend so quickly. From the first day we were inseparable and even at the end of our stay she came all the way to the airport with us and even now we're still in contact with each other.

By the end of our stay, we were regretting only having 12 days there and were contemplating different ways we could delay our flight back. (One young girl to whom we had become very attached to had even kindly offered to rip up our passports so that we wouldn't be able to leave!)

Overall, this article doesn't even begin to cover the phenomenal experience we've had at Veerayatan. Despite how cliché this sounds, none of us expected to come back as changed people, but it's one thing hearing stories about the underprivileged, but it's a completely different thing seeing and experiencing it in person. We've come back with a new appreciation for everything around us, a new meaning of love and compassion, and an even greater respect and admiration for the Sadhvijis. Veerayatan was a place where we felt completely at peace and happy, and it's a place where we cannot wait to return.

Written By

Disha Haria, Kevallee Shah and Roshni Haria