

HVP Dang: Spreading Its Wings

As my time in HVP Dang draws to a close I thought it would be nice to reflect upon my experiences over the last three months and report on the developments here. This is the second time I visited Dang having first volunteered for HVP in the summer of 2006. So much has changed in just over a year!

During my first visit I lived in the school in Ghorahi with my friend Vicky Biggs. We were the first volunteers to work in Dang after a long spell of absence due to the political unrest over the past years. The school seemed like it was recovering from the troubles and finding its feet again. I could sense the students and teachers were searching for energy to lift the spirits of the school community that had suffered due to the nation's conflicts. My most poignant memories were that of the children – particularly the borders living at the school. I felt we were all one family living together, sharing in our laughter, joys and even the occasional outbreak of tummy-bug! It was very hard for me to leave my 'family' back then.

This time around I have returned with my good friend Erin Jarvis to find that the special fellowship in HVP Dang has continued to blossom. I say this in light of the new initiatives and programs that have taken shape. In particular, the Children's Peace Home (CPH) stands out as the most promising project in Dang.

The CPH is based at the Yogi home in Parsa which is some distance away from the hum-drum of Ghorahi. It is a secret heaven. Previous visitors to Parsa will remember the serene beauty surrounding the Yogi home – lush hills, effervescent paddy fields, eagles, mad dogs, barmy goats, grumpy oxen and mangos (although we didn't get any of those this time)! All that still remains but with the addition of a hidden facility to house the sponsored children of the school. Two hostels neighbour the Yogi house which itself has been renovated – new toilets, showers and rooms for the volunteers!

Living at the CPH has been a moving experience. My duties as a volunteer have not changed as such – I still teach, plan lessons, take part with extra curricular activities and so on, only this time I have had a chance to deepen my own spirituality in Dang. This is not simply a result of the natural beauty in Parsa, but the very nature of the CPH. The children are there not just to receive a formal education, to learn a curriculum and pass exams. The children are being taught how to be good human beings. They pray together, work for each other (preparing meals from the field all the way to the table!) and learn to be happy with what they have. These sponsored children were previously living with the fully-paying students in Ghorahi, and this created a source of tension between the students. Those who did not have much wanted more.

This reminds me of an old Chinese saying which states that the greatest form of happiness is to be content with what you have. The sponsored children are happy. In many ways I think they are now at an advantage over their peers –

and rightly so, because they will no doubt need that 'edge' in the big wide world. They are developing practical skills such as farming and cooking, through which they learn the value of hard work. When I first heard about the CPH back in England I was a little sceptical because I thought that the sponsored children were being pushed into vocational training and deprived of the main education system. This is not the case. The children are still pushed in their studies and in fact I have found they tend to out-perform their peers in class. Their English level is much improved too as they live with all the visiting volunteers.

The underlying spiritual ethos of the CPH has rubbed off on me. As a volunteer I had the chance to live the lives of the students in essence – praying, working, eating, playing, going to school etc. The experience has made me appreciate what I have and also challenged my outlook on life. Here are children who have had so much more to deal with in life than I may ever experience, yet they get on with life - working hard, enjoying the simple things and having great hope for the future.

There are many new important projects also taking place in Dang. A new unit hospital is being built for the local Disabled People's Organisation. A care home is being developed to help the elderly in the locality. It seems HVP is spreading its wings to help more members of the community, and rightly so. With the ongoing pressure from certain political groups it is only wise that not all eggs are put in one basket, so to speak. By serving in a multitude of ways HVP is opening more doors for the future. Should one close, then all is not lost. Most importantly, I believe the original aims of the organisation were to help society through social work, not just specifically tied to education but in all manner of ways.

As I prepare to leave Dang for the second time I hope and pray that HVP continues to expand and flourish as it has been doing over the last 18 months. I am sad to leave this wonderful place (and Auntie's cooking!) and look forward to the day I will return to my 'family' once again. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to Bhola Ji and my HVP Dang family.

**By Anthony Gomes
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