

# Vidya Ashram

First Annual Report 2005-06.

Vidya Ashram has been functioning for over a year now. A group of friends who had been working together in and around Varanasi for several years got the Ashram registered as a Trust in March 2005. In November 2005, Vidya Ashram was able to acquire the 'Buddha Kuti' premises in Sarnath. This purchase was made possible by the help and donations given by friends (see Appendix 1). These friends are principally those who contributed financially and intellectually from the very beginning, for organised efforts in Varanasi in the social and *Lokavidya* sphere..

## I) BEGINNING

In November 1998, the Third Congress on Traditional Sciences and Technologies of India took place in Varanasi. This event, also known as the *Lokavidya Mahadhiveshan*, was jointly organised by the Patriotic and People Oriented Science and Technology Foundation (PPST), Chennai, Mazdoor Kisan Niti group (originally from Kanpur), and Nari Hastakala Udyog Samiti, Varanasi, and was conducted at the Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi.

During the preparatory work done for the *Lokavidya Mahadhiveshan* among social activists, intellectuals, women, artisans, farmers and adivasis, there emerged a group that was motivated to work along the idea of *lokavidya*. Both this group, and the idea of *lokavidya*, continued to gain further strength through the publication of *Lokavidya Samvad*. The understanding also gained strength that the realm of *vidya* is awaiting a popular revolution. Without such a revolution, neither a new politics, nor a humane society can be reconstructed.

In January 2004, the massive World Social Forum was organised in Mumbai. Participants from all over the world came forward to participate in our workshop "Dialogue on Knowledge in Society". The group engaged in Knowledge Dialogues came together with renewed energy, and preliminary thinking about setting up of a 'Vidya Ashram' began.

In June 2004, a meeting took place in Sarnath, where friends from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and Delhi participated. This meeting of approximately 15 activists (Appendix 2) resulted in the decision to construct the Vidya Ashram in Sarnath. On 1st August 2004, Vidya Ashram started functioning from its present premises.

## II) IDEA

Vidya Ashram is an attempt to bring about a pivotal change in social sphere of *vidya*, an attempt to revitalise *vidya* in society. There is never a paucity of *vidya* in society, but societal structures, patterns of governance, and domains of organised knowledge do aid or impede the progress of *vidya* in society. Ordinary people keep enriching the *vidya* existing in society on the basis of their needs, experiences, philosophy, and logic. The University and the structures of organised-religion, refuse to recognise this *vidya* present in society, indeed they disrespect it and even conspire against it. It is therefore necessary that *vidya* be liberated from being imprisoned by the University or by organised-religion,

so that it can work for the processes of construction and reconstruction of truth for the benefit of ordinary people.

The processes of monetisation and internationalisation unleashed via globalisation, the development of Internet, and the American wars have served to hurl into a void all those who think seriously about society and social issues. Politics and education have both become unipolar. Those wishing to stand at the pole of public good are left discouraged. Farmers, workers, artisans, and lower-middle class families are the biggest victims of such change. The loss of jobs, the demolition of living spaces, the destruction of small businesses, and the despair of farmers; behind all these lie the painful life-stories of millions of families. In this scenario, the prevalent politics, organised-religion, or the University do not seem to be in a position to fulfill an even distantly beneficial role.

It is necessary to emerge out of the web of deceit of organised-religion. The myth that universities are locales of *vidya* needs to be shattered. It is important to understand that the virtual society being created by the Internet is the new locale of knowledge, and that this locale is going to be even more divorced from ordinary people, their experiences, their needs, and their modes of thinking. In this changing world, the *vidya* among the people demands a fresh invigoration. Vidya Ashram considers itself to be a part of the currents that fulfill this social need.

The ideals of Vidya Ashram lie in *lokavidya* and in ordinary life. We are votaries of the natural knowledge, natural thinking, and natural living emanating from the traditions of Buddha, Kabir, and Gandhi. Spiritual practice doesn't require the renunciation of food and water. The ideal life doesn't require renunciation of ordinary life, or renunciation of everyday duties. Monasticism is not what is required for inner growth; living amidst ordinary people is what is. Sadhana, ordinary life, contact with the people, and dialogue on *vidya* - these are the lifeblood of the Ashram. Support to the idea of change through people's initiative and people's struggles makes *vidya* earthy and its dynamic real.

The attempt in the shape of Vidya Ashram has been to create a space and atmosphere where people with varied endowments of life and thought keep coming. They come to participate in the dialogues here, to enrich them with their own ideas, and to learn from them. Farmers, artisans, their families, litterateurs, artists, scientists, linguists and social activists, all come here. Through extensive participation in the dialogues on *vidya*, the attempt is to reconstitute the role of various paths and standpoints on of *vidya* in human life and in social change.

### **III) WORK**

The Ashram doesn't wish to make a distinction between ideas and work. We wish to initiate a dialogue on *vidya*, and on *vidya* in society, among farmers, artisans, women, tribals, artists, social activists, scientists, and intellectuals. All are equal participants in this debate; equal in their epistemic prowess.

The lives, problems, oppressions of ordinary people, and their sources of strength are the subject of this dialogue on *vidya*, as is philosophy, science, art and literature, and language.

The loci of this dialogue are all those areas where the expectation of change is taking shape: education, literature and art, media, international law, the web of information, etc.

Also appropriate loci for this dialogue on *vidya* are the struggles over markets, production, and living spaces that the poor and oppressed are waging.

The struggles and movements for change have a strong and long-term relation with the dialogue on *vidya*. While on the one hand the dialogue on *vidya* has the capacity to help attain clarity on how these movements can be sustained in the long run, on the other hand the dialogue itself is enriched and *vidya* develops a people oriented dynamic by being situated amidst such movements and struggles.

#### IV) ACTIVITIES

**1) Lokavidya Samvad:** Through this periodical, a knowledge dialogue is conducted in the Hindi-speaking areas, on public, social, and political issues. The ongoing transformation of the industrial world into the world of information and communication technology provides the principal context in which this dialogue is situated.

Since 1998, 17 issues have been published. Of these, since 2005, 3 issues have been published from Vidya Ashram.

**2) Knowledge Dialogue (English & Hindi):** This began in the form of the workshop titled Dialogues on Knowledge in Society that was organised at the World Social Forum, Mumbai; the (nine) presentations made at the workshop were also published in booklet form. These dialogues have focussed on those questions that the world of Internet and Computer technology are throwing up - patenting, media, philosophy of science, all find place in this dialogue. We attempt to put forward the lokavidya standpoint in these dialogues and foreground the aspect of public good. Such knowledge dialogue has been initiated in the following institutions and cities:

<b>Varanasi</b> -	Vidya Ashram, Sarnath; Theosophical Society, Kamaccha;Tulsi Pustakalaya, Bhadaini.
<b>Nagpur</b> -	Rashtrabhasha Sansthan, Mor Bhavan.
<b>Indore</b> -	Abhyas Mandal, Town Hall.
<b>Delhi</b> -	Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Rajpur Road.
<b>Kanpur</b> -	I.I.T. Kanpur
<b>Mumbai</b> -	I.I.T. Mumbai
<b>Hyderabad</b> -	University of Hyderabad; Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.
<b>Bangalore</b> -	National Institute of Advanced Studies, I.I.Sc.
<b>Chennai</b> -	K.B.C. Centre for Electronics, Anna University.

At the Karachi World Social Forum in March 2006, a workshop on 'Virtuality and Knowledge in Society' was organised as part of the Dialogues on Knowledge in Society. Abstracts of the 10 papers that were sent in for the workshop were distributed in booklet form.

**3) Kisan Peeth:** This is a forum for discussion on ongoing contemporary changes (informatisation - globalisation) in view of the wellbeing of farmers. So far 'Farmer-Market Relationship' and 'Seeds' have been the principal areas of focus of discussions in this forum. And the following activities have been taken in hand so far:

- Collective as well as individual discussions have taken place so far with farmers from about 25 villages around Sarnath. Of these, the discussions that took place in Salaarpur, Babhanpura, Chaandpur, Deenapur, Chireigaon, Chhaanhi, Hridayapur, and Sultanipur were particularly significant.
- Detailed work was done on vegetable markets, vegetable seeds, and vegetable farmers.
- Two large meetings on markets, seeds, and farmers were organised at Vidya Ashram (in February 05 and May 06) with the participation of farmers, leaders of their movements, and social activists, of Varanasi, Chandauli, Ghazipur, Mirzapur, Azamgarh, and Ballia.
- Two bulletins of Kisan Peeth were published (June 05 and May 06).

**4) Kala Sadhana:** In the Ashram's view, kala (art) is an essential part of *vidya*. This is that form of *vidya* with which the ordinary person relates easily. Because it is motivated by sensibilities, a certain morality inheres in it. Activity centred around art has been made an important programme of the Ashram. The following activities were taken up during the year:

- Training in visual art and music for boys and girls through evening classes.
- Drawing/painting competitions were organised among students of local schools.
- Musical Programmes featuring singers from nearby villages were organised (February 05, August 05, October 05, December 05).
- A Poetry Confluence was organised around the topic "Village Youth & their State / Directions" with the help of Shri Gandhi Inter College of Gaura Village. In this, 7 poets from villages, and 7 poets from the city participated (October 05).
- Recitations and discussions of poetry were organised at Vidya Ashram (February 05 and November 05).
- Extensive discussions were held with Hindi litterateurs. On the basis of these, the Literature special-issue of Lokavidya Samvad was published (Issue 17, February 06).
- Discussions and meetings were organised with those with expertise in the Arts (November 05, December 05).

**5) Society and Education:** It has been a continuing concern to construct programmes that would help raise the level of knowledge of village children and youth of the areas

around Sarnath. As moves in this direction, a short-term study scheme, a program for learning Asian languages and a small library was attempted to be started .

- The short term study scheme was supposed to attract those young men and women who would have liked to spend a few months at the Ashram to think , dialogue and write on issues of their interest in philosophy, art , technology or society. So far one student has dabbled in Buddhist Philosophy in this scheme.
- In the program of Asian Languages some Ashramites began learning Urdu.
- Special attempt was made to include in the library books written in Hindi. Particular effort was made to collect literature connected with the social changes coming about as a result of globalisation, spread of computer-Internet, and media. There has of course also been an attempt to collect information about the communities that are possessors of *lokavidya*.

**6) Dialogues at the Ashram:** The Ashram perceives each person as embodied with *vidya*. Farmers, artisans, women, adivasis, intellectuals, experts, spiritual aspirants, monastics, all are knowledgeable beings. All those living amidst the currents of particular traditions are possessors of knowledge. In the Knowledge Dialogues, Vidya Ashram insists upon the epistemic equality of various knowledge traditions. Right from the inception of the Ashram, there has been a stream of visitors representing various knowledge traditions, who have come to stay and conduct dialogue. Farmers, workers, artisans, teachers, monastics, students - all have been coming here. Also visiting and enlivening the atmosphere of dialogue at the Ashram have been activists connected with various people's movements: Azadi Bachao Andolan, Bharatiya Kisan Union, Samajwadi Jan Parishad, Janwadi Lekhak Sangh, Yuva Bharat, Sangharsh Vahini, Lok Chetna Samiti , Prerana Kala Manch , NAPM etc. Artistes and thinkers associated with education, literature, music, cinema, and media have also contributed to these knowledge dialogues. From within Varanasi, intellectuals, scholars and students from various institutions have participated in these dialogues: Gandhian Institute of Studies, Kashi Vidyapeeth, U.P. College, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Benares Hindu University, Theosophical Society, etc. Individuals/groups from abroad have also participated; a 25-member team of the International Futures Forum from Scotland visited Vidya Ashram and participated in a knowledge dialogue, which also saw the participation of intellectuals and activists from various institutions of Varanasi.

Efforts were also made to have regular discussion sessions at the Ashram, in which questions related to society, *vidya* and education figured prominently.

**7) Participation in Social Struggles/Movements:** Members of the Ashram participated in the following struggles/movements:

- Farmers' movements/struggles
- The anti Pepsi-Coke movement
- Indo-Pakistan Peace March
- Peace March during the communal riots in Mau
- Agitation against the raising of the Sardar Sarovar Dam

**8) Campus:** Most of the members of the Ashram stay on campus (Appendix 3). There are some rooms for staying. The Ashram kitchen provides meals that are eaten together. There is an office that is open during the daytime. For the office, and for purposes of reading-writing, computer and Internet facility are available. There is a small library. The campus is spacious and open, with space where the members cultivate vegetables. The campus already had old trees of Mango, Jamun, Amrood, Kathal, Ber, Custard Apple, Lemon, Pomegranate, Kadamb, Eucalyptus. We have planted a neem tree.

**Appendix – 1**  
Contributors and Supporters

	<b>Name</b>	<b>City/Town</b>
1	Dr Vijay Joshi	Chennai
2	Dr Ashok Jhunjhunwala	Chennai
3	Dr C.N. Krishnan	Chennai
4	Shrimati Rajlakshmi	Chennai
5	Dr J.K. Suresh	Bangalore
6	Dr G. Sivarama Krishnan	Bangalore
7	Dr Abhijit Mitra	Hyderabad
8	Dr Naresh Sharma	Hyderabad
9	Dr. B. Krishnarajulu	Hyderabad
10	Dr Girish Sahasrabudhey	Nagpur
11	Dr K.K. Surendran	Pune
12	Shri Avinash Jha	Delhi
13	Dr Chandra Prakash Singh	U.S.A.
14	Dr Amit Basole	U.S.A.
15	Dr Chitra Sahasrabudhey	Varanasi
16	Shri Vinish Gupta	Varanasi
17	Shri Sunil Sahasrabudhey	Varanasi

**Appendix – 2**  
Members present in the Sarnath Meeting in June 2004

	<b>Name</b>	<b>City/Town</b>
1	Dr K.K. Surendran	Pune
2	Dr Girish Sahasrabudhey	Nagpur
3	Dr Vijay Chariar	Kharagpur
4	Shri Avinash Jha	Delhi
5	Dr Ravindra Pathak	Gaya
6	Dr Pramila Pathak	Gaya
7	Shri Rajvallabh	Gaya
8	Dr Krishna Gandhi	Jhansi
9	Shri Ramadhar Giri	Chandauli
10	Shri Arun Kumar	Varanasi
11	Shri Tenzin Rigzin	Varanasi
12	Shri Rupesh	Varanasi
13	Mohammed Aleem Hashmi	Varanasi
14	Shri Vinod Kumar Chaubey	Varanasi
15	Shri Lakshman Prasad Maurya	Varanasi
16	Parvez Aslam Hashmi	Varanasi
17	Shrimati Chitra Sahasrabudhey	Varanasi
18	Shri Sunil Sahasrabudhey	Varanasi

Arun Kumar ( Delhi ) , Ananya Vajpeyi (Delhi ) , Amit Basole ( USA ) , Krishnarajulu ( Hyderabad ) , and Naresh Sharma ( Hyderabad ) could not come for the meeting but communicated their support for the decision to build Vidya Ashram.

On the second day there was dialogue with the President of Varanasi Division of Bharatiya Kisan Union Shri jagadish Singh Yadav and his comreds.

### The list of people who visited the Vidya Ashram

Name	Work/Occupation
1 Shri Ramadhar Giri	Social Thinker and Veteran Activist
2 Shri Jagdish Singh Yadav	President, Bharatiya Kisan Union, Varanasi Mandal
3 Shri Shama Prasad Singh	Thinker, Leader and Activist
4 Shri Dinanath Shrivastava	Thinker and Leader of Farmers' Movement
5 Shri Ramjanam Yadav	Social Activist
6 Shri Tenzin Wangchuk	Student
7 Shri Yeshe Wandue	Student
8 Swami Sacchidanand Hari	Monastic from Ambala
9 Shri Arvind Murty	Social Activist and Thinker
10 Shri Vallabh	Active in the area of Education
11 Shri Arun Kumar	Social Activist and Thinker
12 Shri Mansur Ali Khan	Cinema Director
13 Shri Vivek Umrao	Engineer
14 Dr Ramsudhar Singh	U.P. College, Varanasi
15 Dr Rahul Burman	I.I.T. Kanpur
16 Shri S.S. Modi	
17 Shri Mahendra Singh & wife	Jeevan Vidya, Somaiya College, Mumbai.
18 Shri Ranjan De	Independent Educator
19 Shri Ashok Singh	Writer, Social Activist
20 Shri Gyanendra Pati	Hindi Poet
21 Shri Praveen Singh	Jeevan Vidya Proponent
22 Shri Pawan Gupta	Director, SIDH, Mussoorie
23 Shri Rupesh	Social Activist
24 Shri Ashok Kumar Dubey	Artist
25 Shri Bhuvan Pathak & friend	Social Activist
26 Shri Sanjay	Activist, Azadi Bachao Andolan
27 Shri Ravindra Pathak & Rajvallabh	
28 Shri Praval Singh	Engineer
29 Shri Ravi Gulati & companion	Educator, 'Manzil', Delhi.
30 Shri Om Tyagi	Leftist group, Kanpur
31 Shri Virendra Shrivastava	
32 Shri Gopal Krishnan	Social Activist, Faizabad
33 Shri Vijay Kundaji	Computer Engineer, Bangalore
34 Iuliana	Computer Engineer, Romania
35 Shri Avinash Jha & sister	C.S.D.S., Delhi
36 Shri Murali	Computer Engineer, Bangalore
37 Shri Arthur	Peace & Education Researcher, U.S.A.

**Appendix - 3**  
(Ashramites)

- |    |                                    |
|----|------------------------------------|
| 1  | Smt Chameli Devi                   |
| 2  | Shri Lal Babu                      |
| 3  | Shri Mohammed Aleem Hashmi         |
| 4  | Akbari Begum (w/o Md. Aleem)       |
| 5  | Firdaus Bano (d/o Md. Aleem)       |
| 6  | Kulsoom Bano (d/o Md. Aleem)       |
| 7  | Shri Vinod Kumar Chaubey           |
| 8  | Arpita Chaubey (d/o Vinod Chaubey) |
| 9  | Shri Sunil Sahasrabudhey           |
| 10 | Smt Chitra Sahasrabudhey           |
| 11 | Shri Parvez Aslam Hashmi           |
| 12 | Shri Dilip Singh 'Dili'            |
| 13 | Shri Vinish Gupta                  |
| 14 | Shri Laxman Prasad Maurya          |
| 15 | Shri Anirvan Das                   |
| 16 | Shri Gharbharan Yadav              |
| 17 | Shri Rajit Singh                   |
| 18 | Shri Ajit Rai                      |

Shri Ram Anchal Varma	(Music Teacher)
Shri Amarnath Tiwari	(Music Teacher)
Shri Kameshwar Joshi	( Drawing Teacher)
Shri Ashok Dube	(Artist , a painter)
Moh.	( Urdu Teacher )