

## Women and Engaged Buddhism in INDIA



These days the phrase 'engaged Buddhism' has become well-known world wide. In India, Buddhist women have been involved for many years in setting up projects to meet the needs of some of the poorest people in the world. The Arya Tara Mahila Trust is a group of Indian women who continue this work.

The last year for the ATMT has been very busy!

In July, 2006 the administration team moved to a new office housing the three-women office team and a branch of our women's computer training centre, the Karuna Computer Education Centre. Find out more on page two.

The ATMT is establishing a programme to address the issue of domestic violence suffered by women. Reports in India tell us that domestic violence is experienced in all communities, rich or poor. At last, in October 2006 new legislation was passed in the Indian parliament which outlaws domestic violence. Read the report on page two.

On a happier note, the Dhammajyoti team have been very active in spreading the Dhamma in India. At the present time there is a massive interest in knowing about Buddhism. Members of our team have travelled from the north to the south of India in the last few months.\*

### Special points of interest:

*The ATMT is a registered charity and can receive contributions from India and internationally.*

*The projects involved with the ATMT have all been set up as independent and autonomous, with a minimum amount of central organisation.*

*The ATMT office team is at the hub of this new approach to running a Trust in India.*



Arya Tara Mahila Trust

### Inside this issue:

## Welcome to the first issue of VARADA - a message from the editor

VARADA keeps you up to date with the Arya Tara Mahila Trust, which supports projects run by women in India. The ATMT has evolved out of some 25 years of Dhamma, social, educational and medical work with some of the most disadvantaged people in the world. Our trust has grown out of the work of Trailokya Baudha Mahasangha Gana (TBMSG), known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in other countries.

Although India is changing rapidly, in some ways these changes are exacerbating the divide between rich and poor. The work of the Arya Tara Mahila Trust is helping women to move out of the grinding poverty of the past but the situation is still very difficult for many. Here are a few statistics from the World Bank:

*- The top 10% of India's population makes 28% of its national income; the bottom 10th, only 4%.*

*- India has 80% of its population living on less than two dollars a day, 35% on less than one dollar a day.*

VARADA is an ancient Indian word meaning supreme generosity, symbolised by our logo's outstretched hand. I hope you enjoy this first issue and look forward to hearing from you. (contacts on P.4)

*Until we meet again  
The Editor*

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## *The Karuna Computer Education Centre – a pioneering project*

*VARADA talks to Vaishali, one of the founder members of the Karuna Computer Institute*



Vaishali – a founder member of Karuna Computer Education Centre

Most of the slum students are totally unfamiliar with the computer. Sometimes they are afraid to touch the keyboard

**Editor:** What sort of things do you teach in the Institute?

**Vaishali:** Most of the slum students are totally unfamiliar with the computer. Sometimes they are afraid to touch the keyboard. So that's why we start with basic fundamental knowledge of computers and an introduction to basic MS office. When they are interested in further courses, we teach them an accounts package

**Editor:** You were one of the founder members of the computer Institute, what made you want to start this project?

**Vaishali:** We wanted to give the benefits of computer literacy to girls. It is now an IT world, and if they do not get access to IT skills, this is a lack in their education. We started with girls from the local hostel.

**Editor:** What year did the Institute start?

**Vaishali:** It started in 2004. We have recently expanded and are operating in two areas with a team of six members in total.

**Editor:** For how long were you thinking about this project.

**Vaishali:** Since about 2000, before my marriage. I applied to one of the Trusts to see if they would support this project to work with hostel girls. There were some problems and they were not able to give me any answer. Later, when I communicated with Karunamaya, she gave me a lot of courage and inspiration. This thought came more into the picture because of Karunamaya's efforts. We also had help from Dh. Karunika. And eventually, the Institute came into existence.

### *Introducing computer skills to poor children*

and DTP, leading to a state government recognised qualification.

**Editor:** How do the slum children manage with computer programs being in English?

**Vaishali:** We provide them with study material and teach them in their native language, Marathi. Some of the students are from a Muslim background and we

teach these students in Hindi. But we tell them that all the literature for computers is in English, so you must try to learn some English for computers. But while teaching them we use their mother tongue. All children in India are now learning some English but often the standard is not very high. So this year we will offer English classes in the computer Institute.



### *The Future for Vaishali and the Karuna Computer Education Centre*

**Editor:** The Institute has expanded to be working with more than just the hostel girls. What is your main goal now?

**Vaishali:** The main social goal of the Institute is to concentrate on other slum students especially women, because they are still socially oppressed. Their family situation and social conditions are difficult, resulting in low levels of confidence. Because of lack of

skill they miss out on good job opportunities. Through this computer course, they will get important skills and develop independence.

We are now including not just the hostel girls (about 90 girls), women and children from the slums but also boys from a neighbouring hostel.

**Editor:** What do you enjoy most

about your work?

**Vaishali:** From my childhood I have been very interested in teaching. I am still very happy now when I teach. I enjoy building up our team and my relationship with the other team members. And through preparation for my teaching work, I myself learn new things in the computer field. \*

## Domestic violence in India

Last October's new legislation against domestic violence addresses a wide spread problem in India. BBC South Asia research reported.

1. Overall, a crime against women is committed every three minutes in India.

2. 'We have been trying for long to protect women from domestic violence. In India alone, around 70% of women are victim of these violent acts in one or the other form', said Renuka Chowdhury, Junior Minister for women and child development.

### ATMT's response

#### THE FIRST PHASE

From December the ATMT started a training programme with a Canadian NGO to empower young women to face challenging and potentially violent situations arising in many homes. We anticipate that from these courses at least one woman will emerge as a trainer for other

#### The Training so far .....

We interviewed one of the participants in this training. We were advised not to name the participants, as in the past some of the women have been violently attacked for attending the training programmes.

**Editor:** How is this training useful to you and other women?

**P:** We look at how to protect ourselves and how to teach this to others. We need to concentrate on our mind. We

3. A survey by the International Institute for Population Studies showed 56% of Indian women believed wife beating to be justified in certain circumstances. The reasons varied from going out without the husband's permission to cooking a bad meal."

*Many of us involved in the Arya Tara Mahila Trust have frequently met women who have to endure ongoing violence in their marriages. This abuse occurs across the different social strata in India.*

women (perhaps becoming the basis of a new right livelihood, working in the area of domestic violence).

#### THE SECOND PHASE

Working with Indian legal advisors in women's rights, ATMT plans a programme of advocacy and counselling.

were told that 98% of women know that they are in trouble but that they cannot hear their inner voice. We need to identify what is happening both inside and outside so that we can protect ourselves.

**Editor:** So it's not just like learning physical moves in karate but it's about mental states as well?

**P:** Yes, we learn both, some physical moves and we look at our mental attitude. We have also been trained in non-



A group of women interested in training

*There is much fear, shame and insecurity around this matter. Most women will only reluctantly speak about it because of economic dependence and the fear of losing access to their children.*

56% of Indian women believed wife beating to be justified in certain circumstances, for example, cooking a bad meal

To continue this important programme we need funds to pay training costs and also travelling expenses of women attending the courses. Each training course will cost the ATMT Rs.46,000 (approx. £600 or US \$1000). If you can support this project, please contact us on [atmt@vsnl.net](mailto:atmt@vsnl.net)



A women's event in Ahmedabad, Gujarat

violent communication techniques.

**Editor:** What are your impressions of the course?

**P:** It is good for women. After doing this training I feel very confident and I wish all women could learn it.

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We're on line at  
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#### HOW YOU CAN HELP SUPPORT 'TRADE NOT AID' IN INDIA

Volunteers with marketing or business development skills are needed to help set up new projects for women in India.

Women working in the Indian social projects are coming forward with ideas about how to become self-sufficient and independent of overseas funding. Their plans are full of enthusiasm and potential and now they need help in developing different manufacturing options, the path of "trade not aid". And because we know many women are living in poverty, we can see their real and immediate need.

Could you give six months of your time to visit India and share your professional expertise? Or could you give advice from afar?

If you or anybody that you know are interested in helping in this way please make contact with the Arya Tara Mahila Trust on [atmt@vsnl.net](mailto:atmt@vsnl.net)



Arya Tara Mahila Trust

## *A retreat centre in India run by Indian women*

In the next four to five years, we want to develop a retreat centre for Indian women run by a community of Indian women. At the present time, there are three main retreat centres in TBMSG, all run by teams of men.

We want our retreat centre to be somewhere in central India, accessible to women both from the north and south. This is increasingly important as the Dhamma spreads and grows more and more in other Indian states.

We intend in the next year to focus on fundraising in other countries as well as in India. If you are interested and are able to help in any way please contact us on [atmt@vsnl.net](mailto:atmt@vsnl.net)

For the next year, we aim to raise a minimum of US \$150,000

## *The Dhammajyoti team spreads the Dhamma in India*

The Dhammajyoti team of seven women has been operating for the last three years, taking the Buddha-Dhamma out of Maharashtra to other Indian states and to more remote rural areas. Recently, VARADA interviewed the team about their important work.



**Jnanajyoti:** Through the Dhammajyoti team, I am able to reach many different areas throughout India, where many women are in difficulties. I want to know the difficulties of these women and I want to help them.

**Vijaya:** Most important is self development. We are helped by teamwork to learn about our own nature and our habits. And through this we can help

the situation of other Indian women from villages and other states. Cultural conditioning may be different but we have a common goal - we are doing very good work. We can help women come out from their situation. I love my project!

**Sraddhajyoti:** Through the Dhammajyoti team I am trying to fulfil Dr Ambedkar's dream. I am able to visit many different Indian states and especially helping women. I am very happy to do this.

**Vajrasuri:** My joy is working with our team, developing our programmes, our friendships, supporting one another. We develop ourselves in order to take the Buddha-Dhamma to Indian women, moving out of the cities into the villages and further. We are encouraging other women who need this confidence, through the Buddha-Dhamma which says everyone can gain enlightenment.

**Vimalasuri:** Because of the Dhammajyoti project we are spreading the Dhamma, we are working for Dr Ambedkar's

movement, we are fulfilling Bhante Sangharakshita's dream to help Indian women

**Karunamaya:** Through working together as a team, we are able to achieve much more than working alone. Our teaching can move beyond just words and we aspire to exemplify what we are trying to teach. So many women have not had much opportunity to experience the Buddha-Dhamma. You can't separate the so-called spiritual and the social, they are really one.

**Tarahridaya:** It's a platform where we can develop ourselves, spiritually, emotionally, the whole personality. We are learning to work as a team. We are reaching different kinds of women in different parts of India. We are learning about their culture and understanding their pain. In some ways this work is our small effort to relieve their pain. We are offering the opportunity for women to develop their spiritual lives - more opportunity than was there in the past. In summary it is the Bodhisattva's work.\*