

A Visit to Snehibhavan



Association for India's Development Volunteer Site Visit Report

by Benjamin Bianco, AID Penn State
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Cover photo: Abiya helps Georgina (daughter of director) up a hill as Neethu follows close behind and Mathews (husband of director) blazes the forest trail ahead.

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Athira, Jesna, Akhila, and Georgia being goofy as usual.

Note from the AID Volunteer

I joined the Penn State chapter of Association for India's Development (AID) in January 2012 upon returning from my first visit to India. Like many AID volunteers, I was anxious to see AID supported projects firsthand. When I made my second visit to India, August 28th to December 18th, 2013, I made a point of visiting a handful of AID supported projects. I spent the most time at the children's hostel Snehibhavan, an AID Lewisburg project located in central Kerala. I volunteered there from September 22nd to October 22nd, and returned to visit from December 2nd to 12th, 2013 (40 days total).

I intend to disseminate the information I have gathered from Snehibhavan to the AID community. With this report, I will provide fellow AID volunteers with a firsthand account of Snehibhavan's mission at work through a description of the target population, staff, beneficiaries, finances, and facilities. I will detail the challenges they face and potential solutions. Lastly, I will explain the future direction of Snehibhavan, including up-to-date information on their new building project. The views presented in this report are based on my own objective assessment, and do not necessarily reflect the views of AID or Snehibhavan. I thank both Snehibhavan and AID Lewisburg for making my visit possible.

Snehibhavan Today

Mission

The mission of The Snehibhavan Children's Hostel is to rehabilitate and empower poor, abused, and neglected girls from the tribal and Dalit communities of central Kerala. The hostel is located in rural Kottayam District, Kerala. *Snehibhavan* is Malayalam for *Home of Love*. The organization is secular and nonpolitical. Its philosophy is more about depth than breadth—it devotes 100% of its efforts to the lives of the dozen or so girls living the hostel at any one time. After living and working with the director, Sajini, and her husband, Mathews, for 40 days I am convinced both of their integrity and the necessity of Snehibhavan's mission.

As I have come to understand it, Snehibhavan's mission is twofold. First, Snehibhavan provides the girls a long-term refuge from neglect, abuse, and/or extremely poor living conditions. With the consent of a parental or guardian, girls come to live at the home for a safe place to play, study, and grow up. Second, while living at Snehibhavan, girls find an escape-route from poverty, lack of education, abuse, and emotional trauma. The organization provides them with much more than a place to stay. Girls receive personalized, meticulous attention to their academic progress from a paid in-house tutor. A certified counselor visits the home bimonthly to provide the girls with individual and group therapy, helping them to cope with their emotional scars of abuse and neglect. Snehibhavan also provides skill-building and occupational training. For example, a tailoring teacher gives lessons every Saturday. The goal of these programs is to provide the girls with the skills and empowerment they need to succeed in the world after leaving Snehibhavan. All of Snehibhavan's services are provided free of charge.



Sajini "Auntie" helps Athira look her best for a singing/public speaking competition at school.

Target Population

Snehibhavan targets beneficiaries based more on need than location. Girls come from a broad area spanning the Kottayam and neighboring Idukki district of central Kerala. In some circumstances, girls come from other districts, but the target population is restricted to the state of Kerala. Admission is granted irrespective of religion but is

reserved for tribal and Dalit girls only. Girls typically come from remote, underdeveloped villages scattered throughout the forested, hilly landscape. Beneficiaries are referred to Snehibhavan primarily through word of mouth. Over the past decade and a half, over 100 girls have lived in the hostel, building Snehibhavan's sterling reputation in the region and proven methods of youth development.

Like many hostels for needy children in India, Snehibhavan is not an orphanage *per se*. Girls are referred to the hostel because of poverty, abuse, and neglect, not necessarily orphanhood. However, most of these girls are born out of wedlock and have extremely unstable family lives. One day I sat down with a translator so Sajini could explain the problem of unwed motherhood in the poor communities of the region. She told me how children born to poor unwed mothers in tribal and Dalit communities are highly vulnerable to malnourishment, lack of education, neglect, and physical and sexual abuse. Fathers tend to drink and abuse or abscond the mothers and children. Mothers often go through multiple cohabitating relationships with abusive, alcoholic men. In these situations, they must choose between enduring beatings and leaving their children homeless. Unwed mothers are abandoned by family because of cultural stigma, so there is little else they can do to survive. Most mothers must labor long hours on farms and rubber plantations, leaving daughters home alone and vulnerable to sexual abuse. Sajini explained that over the past few decades, she has seen a rise in unwed motherhood in the impoverished tribal and Dalit communities of this area. Protecting and empowering girls that suffer from this growing phenomenon was her and Mathew's impetus for creating Snehibhavan.



Aparna, Mathews "Uncle," and Radhika take a break from garden work to pose, while Sajini continues tending to a bitter gourd plant.

However, Sajini and Mathews realize that separating children from their families is a last resort. Girls are only admitted to Snehibhavan when they are at ongoing risk of abuse or neglect and/or their families cannot provide for their most basic needs. And children visit their families as often as safely possible. After learning the personal histories of each current resident and finding continual reassurance of Snehibhavan's integrity and efficacy, I am certain that Snehibhavan is the best possible option for these girls.

Current Beneficiaries

There are many needy girls in the area, but unfortunately Snehibhavan can currently accommodate no more than 15 girls at any one time. During my visit, Snehibhavan was home to 11 girls ages 7 to 19. Through observation and interviews with Sajini via translator, I collected as much information on these girls as possible (for bio data on each girl, see separate document: "Meet Snehibhavan"). In recounting sensitive information, I will leave the girls' identities anonymous to respect their privacy.

Of the eleven girls living in the hostel during my visit, all lacked proper education, healthcare, and nutrition before coming to Snehibhavan. Ten girls are Dalit and one girl is tribal. Three reported suffering physical abuse, and four reported sexual abuse. The actual number of abused children is likely higher because girls are often reluctant to explicitly recount these experiences. Three of the girls were homeless. Three had experienced the murder of a family member. One girl, who has since graduated from Snehibhavan, came to the hostel after her own father cut off her finger. I met a girl at Snehibhavan who had to sleep with her mother under a tree to avoid beatings from her drunken father. A beautiful young girl currently living at Snehibhavan was only eight years old when she witnessed her father burn her mother alive.

With scars such as these, rehabilitating the girls is a tremendous challenge. During my time there, two of the girls were struggling in school. These two girls had been admitted to Snehibhavan less than two years prior. I noticed a trend: the longer a girl lives at



Ariya, Stephy, Simi, and Aparna help each other with homework out on the back porch under a flickering overhead light.

Snehibhavan, the more she excels in school. Some girls enter as teenagers lacking basic literacy, and they have to work hard to catch up with their grade level. On the other hand, the girls who have been at Snehibhavan for the longest are thriving in school. For instance, Abiya, 17, was admitted at age 7, and she recently completed the +2 standard of a commerce program with high marks in all subjects. She plans to advance to post-secondary education and become a chartered accountant. However, it has become more difficult for

newcomers to achieve the same success as Abiya because Snehibhavan cannot currently afford to hire a highly qualified individual for the in-house tutor/warden position. Despite this, all 11 girls spend two to three hours every night studying diligently. Sajini has taken it upon herself to motivate the girls and give each of them personalized attention so that they may achieve academic excellence. During my visit, she was particularly concerned with the

two girls who were struggling in school, and said that they would catch up to their grade level more easily with the support of a skilled tutor. Despite this, as of May 2014, all girls have passed their final exams and are moving on to the next grade!

Staff and Administration

Snehibhavan has a small staff considering their accomplishments. Sajini is the director. There is a board of seven women that meets every three months to vote on all important decisions. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet the board members and have little information on them. Sajini and Mathews manage most of the day-to-day work themselves. They receive some volunteer help from family members—Sajini's sister Sini and cousin Sonya. They are supposed to have a full-time cook and an experienced in-house tutor/warden, but both quit during the time I was there. There is frequent turnover in these positions because the wages are quite low. Currently, a mother of one of the children works as a cook part-time. Two friends of Sajini's—twin sisters recently graduated from teaching programs—are temporarily filling in the in-house tutor position. The current staff situation is inadequate and unsustainable. Without a cook, Sajini is forced to spend hours in the kitchen that she would otherwise spend caring for the girls and handling managerial duties. Without a highly skilled tutor, the girls struggle with their studies. However, these problems are financial in nature and solvable with budget adjustments.

Finances

Snehibhavan is tremendously grateful for the continual funding they receive from their primary sponsor, AID Lewisburg. The organization has valid FCRA clearance. In my time there, I saw that they are very prudent with funding, and I am certain that providing for the girls is their top priority. However, because of recent circumstances, the budget has been stretched thin.

Sajini submitted the 2014 budget to AID Lewisburg during my visit. Due to the rising cost of food and the diminished support from local donors, Snehibhavan had to ask more from AID Lewisburg than ever before. The grand total for the 2014 operating budget is Rs. 11,56,200 (\$19,710 USD), up 20% from previous years. Furthermore, Sajini and Mathews are facing difficult times with the expenses of their own household. Sajini has chronic health problems, namely respiratory and joint pain, that have gone untreated. Mathews has diabetes, which he treats with only diet and exercise due to the prohibitive costs of standard western treatments. In January 2014, Mathews suffered a stroke, and the family was unable to afford proper treatment



Aparna and Stephy relax on the side porch beside stacked bunk beds.

without help. On top of all this, they must provide for two children of their own. Mathews use to support both his family and Snehibhavan with wages as a daily laborer, but his health now makes it impossible for him to work.

The financial sustainability of Snehibhavan currently depends almost entirely on the annual contributions of AID Lewisburg. Both the officers of AID Lewisburg and the staff of Snehibhavan realize that the hostel cannot depend on the support of a single benefactor forever. With this in mind, Snehibhavan has sought to implement income-generating activities in order to cover at least a small portion of their operating budget independently. In their small garden, they grow chilies and other vegetables to help supplement the cost of food. They have produced crafts and value-added products for sale and considered purchasing land for cultivation. Aside from the small success of the vegetable garden, these



Neethu alters a dress while Radhika patiently waits her turn and an anonymous bystander ducks for cover!

ventures have not yielded significant profit for several reasons. First, Snehibhavan lacks manpower. The organization is understaffed, and Sajini and Mathews are overworked and unhealthy. Second, the resident girls are given a portion of the profits on any projects to which they contribute. For instance, when Sajini had the girls mix and package spices for sale, she deposited the majority of the profits in each of the girls' personal savings accounts. These savings are very important for the future advanced educational and/or marital expenses of the girls, and Sajini always gives the

girls fair compensation for work on income-generating projects. Lastly, Snehibhavan does not have enough leeway in its budget to invest in the input cost required for a profitable venture, especially if the return is slow and uncertain. Given these circumstances, I do not believe it is feasible for Snehibhavan to achieve a significant level of self-sufficiency in the near future.

However, as an alternative solution to Snehibhavan's financial sustainability issues, the NGO could develop a broad and dependable network of supporters. Distributing the burden of the Snehibhavan's operating budget over multiple chapters of the Association for India's Development and other donors is, in my opinion, the best way to ensure the sustainability of the children's hostel for years to come. In 2013, AID Penn State supplemented a quarter Snehibhavan's annual operating budget. AID Lewisburg is currently calling upon other chapters of AID to help with the 2014 and 2015 budget.

Snehibhavan's efforts to achieve self-sufficiency are admirable. However, I personally believe that it is entirely reasonable for a children's hostel, especially a small operation like Snehibhavan, to depend on donations rather than work towards self-sufficiency. Snehibhavan must dedicate 100 percent of its efforts to ensuring the girls are provided with a safe place to stay, personalized emotional support, opportunities to excel in academics, and a chance at a better future. Sajini, Mathews, and the girls should never have to worry about money. For this reason, I hope that Snehibhavan can attain sufficient funding by branching out and creating partnerships with multiple chapters of AID and other donors in the US.

Facilities

The Snehibhavan hostel is tucked away in the steep hills of central Kottayam District, Kerala, encircled by thick forest and rubber plantations. The building is modest in size for Snehibhavan's needs. There is one common room for all the girls to sleep and play. The Orphanage Control Board (OCB) requires them to use beds as opposed to sleeping on grass mats. When I first arrived, the common room was crowded with bunk beds, but after a few days they decided to stack the beds out on the porch to give the girls room to play and dance. The OCB also requires that a children's home hold ownership of its building. Snehibhavan currently holds an extended, rent-free lease on the building. Not they, but an affiliate organization called the Center for Tribal and Dalit Studies owns the building. Sajini has a good relationship with the OCB, and the officials have allowed some leeway, but Snehibhavan must hold ownership of a building to ensure their future.



Twin sisters Aparna and Ariya lead the group in dance. When they are done for the night, the girls roll out their grass mats, and the room transforms from dancehall to bedroom.

However, regardless of bureaucratic issues, I came to the conclusion that Snehibhavan's facilities are inadequate for their needs. The electrical system is very poor. When there *is* current, it is weak and fluctuating. Even on a good night, reading and writing is difficult for the girls on the dimly lit back porch where they study. Waste management is very poor. The only option to manage their trash pile is incineration. Hazardous fumes enter the building. Still, their biggest problem is lack of space. As of May 2014, Snehibhavan has grown from 11 to 15 girls, and there are many more girls in the area in need of Snehibhavan's services. The girls sit elbow-to-elbow at the benches where they study and eat. Girls age 7 to 19 all sleep in the same room every night and roll up their beds every morning so they have a space to play. They share two toilets and two bathing stalls for 15 girls.

Despite the obvious problems with these facilities, I never heard any complaints from the girls. They were happy to have a safe place to stay with people that love and care for them. Sajini and Mathews are very happy with the water storage tank and building renovations that have been funded by AID Lewisburg. For the girls, the facilities are a dramatic improvement from their past situation. Furthermore, every one of them takes scrupulous care to keep the building clean and organized. The girls spend at least 2 hours a day doing chores. They take pride in their home, and they work hard to maintain it. Still, I believe they deserve better.

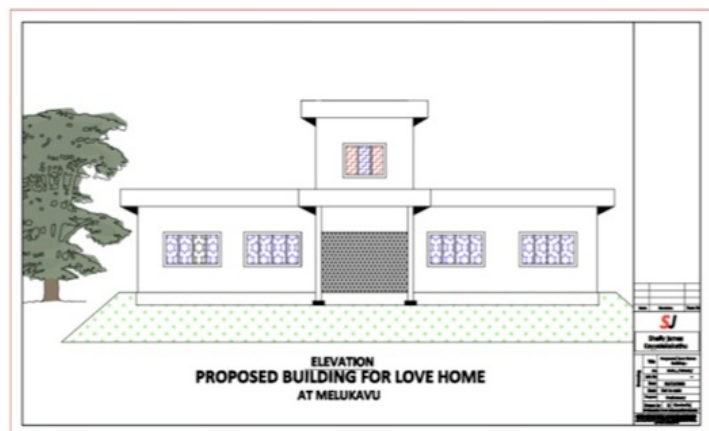


Ariya helps with the daily laundry before heading off to school.

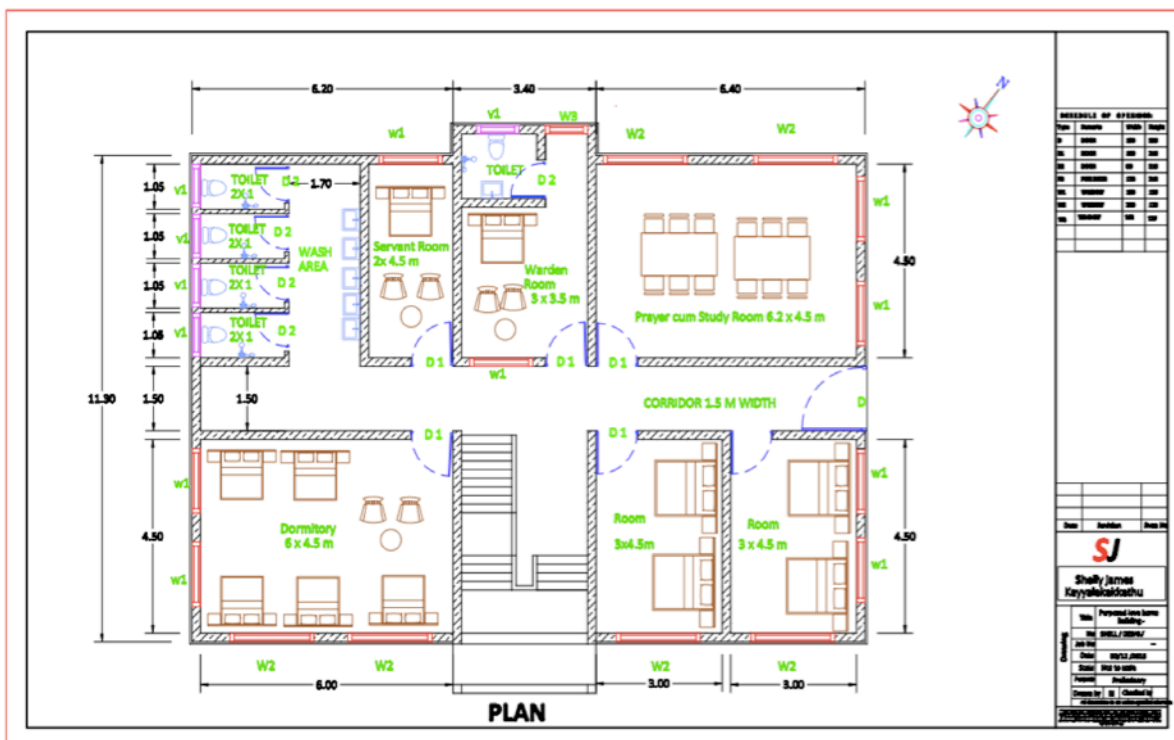
The Future of Snehibhavan

The New Building Project

The only way to fully and permanently solve the problems with Snehibhavan's facilities is to construct a new building. For years now, Sajini has been petitioning to local corporations and philanthropies to fund this project. During my visit, she received a verbal commitment of Rs. 20 lakhs for the project from a corporate donor, Infopark, but the donor did not follow up and eventually reneged the offer. Nonetheless, Snehibhavan has made significant progress so far. AID Lewisburg has purchased a plot of land adjacent to the current building for the future site of the new building. Snehibhavan has building plans and a preliminary budget. During my visit Sajini, AID Lewisburg Officers, and I decided to re-plan the building to minimize cost and maximize utility. The new plan



cuts out unnecessary rooms and divides the project into two independent phases. The current estimated budget for Phase 1, the first floor, is approximately Rs. 30 lakhs (\$50,000 USD). A detailed proposal for the building project will soon be available.



Phase 1 of the new building will accommodate 18-20 girls. The spacious, well-lit study room will be a dramatic improvement from the cramped back porch where the girls currently study and eat. The four extra toilet/bathing stalls and five sinks will certainly make life easier for the girls. The vastly improved in-house staff accommodations will provide incentive for the cook and tutor/warden position, reducing staff turnover. The current building will be just steps away, and it will remain in use, including an office, kitchen, dining hall, play area, tailoring room, and additional bathroom and bedroom. The stairwell in the new building will lead to the roof, which will become a second floor in Phase 2 of the project. The plan allows for expansion in Phase 2, but Phase 1 will be able to stand alone.



Aparna, Athira, Jesna, Akhila, and Athulya enjoy after-school teatime on the back porch.

Electrical and Waste Issues

Snehibhavan could greatly benefit from the help of a volunteer environmental and/or electrical engineer. They are in need of innovative, sustainable solutions to their waste management and electrical issues. They need a method of waste management that is more safe and effective than incineration. Their issues with electricity cannot easily be solved, as they are the result of poor power supply. The power company allegedly neglects Snehibhavan and the surrounding Dalit community due to lack of bribe money. Solar power may be an effective way to supplement the power supply. They could also install an inverter to prevent blackouts and stabilize the current. Perhaps there are engineers or technicians in the AID network who would be willing to volunteer their skills to solve Snehibhavan's waste management and electrical problems.



Athulya, Athira, Jesna, and Akhila show off flowers they collected.

Sending More Volunteers

The girls at Snehibhavan were thrilled to have an international visitor, and Sajini and Mathews are among the most kind and hospitable people I have ever met. They gave me a private bedroom and bathroom in their home, fed me delicious food, and treated me



Stephy scratches a drawing in the rock while Aparna watches the sunset and Simi fixes her hair in the distance.

as part of their family. Their 14-year-old son Athul was very helpful as translator. He became my good friend. I told them that I would not be able to return for a long time, but that I would find someone else to come visit or volunteer. I strongly recommend anyone who is able to consider a visit to Snehibhavan. Sajini and Mathews can probably not accommodate more than two at a time, and volunteers must be willing to stay for a month minimum. Short-term visitors may also be able to come for a few days to collect data, but visitors must take care not to disappoint the girls by forming

bonds and leaving prematurely! If you or someone you know is interested, please contact me at benjaminlbianco@gmail.com so that I may put you in touch with Sajini and Mathews.

Conclusion

I originally planned to volunteer at Snehibhavan for a month, but I enjoyed working there, and getting to know each of the girls so well, that I had to make a return visit for an additional ten days. I still think fondly of my time there: how we all pitched in to work in the garden, how we walked to the rocky slopes to watch the sunset, how we sang and danced every night! I am forever grateful to AID Lewisburg for continuing to make Snehibhavan possible. I hope that other chapters of AID will rise to the opportunity and help Snehibhavan to overcome its challenges and further its mission to provide poor, abused, and neglected girls with a pathway to a happy life.

Contact Information

AID Lewisburg President:
Kathi Hannaford
hannafrd@bucknell.edu

AID Lewisburg Vice President:
Sally Nyquist
nyquist@bucknell.edu

Snehibhavan:
Sajini Mathews
snehibhavan@gmail.com
(91) 98 479 32799

Author of this Report:
Benjamin Bianco (AID Penn State)
benjaminlbianco@gmail.com
(412) 360 9083



Athulya, Aparna, Stephy, and Simi grinning ear-to-ear.
The girls at Snehibhavan treat each other as sisters.



(Left) I wish Aparna, Simi, Athira, Ariya, and Jesna good luck at the bus stop before they leave for exam day.
(Right) Sajini "Auntie," in her characteristic cheerful demeanor, laughs with Abiya on a boat ride in Allapuzha.



On behalf of the Snehibhavan family,

Thank you!



All eleven girls pose in their new dresses with Sajini. The dresses were a gift from a teenage girl named Sara Elizabeth from Pittsburgh, PA. Back row, from the left: Aparna, Stephy, Radhika, Abiya, Athulya, Neethu, Ariya, Sajini "Auntie," and Simi. Front and center, from the left: Athira, Akhila, and Jesna.