

Daily life at Karm Marg.

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Deborah visited Karm Marg in November 2019 and wrote a wonderful account of her stay that paints an intimate picture of daily life at Karm Marg.

Karm Marg, November 2019

Every visit to Karm Marg is a special experience. We often go on the occasion of a festival, Diwali, or for Karm Marg's anniversary on 7 February. But this time I went in November, not for any special reason. The weather had started to cool down to around 26 degrees during the day and the air quality was incredibly poor. I went out wearing a face mask that I had bought back home. And I discovered that especially on these normal days there was a lot going on at Karm Marg. I found out what Veena and the organisation really do. I witnessed the big and small dramas in the children's lives and met the older children who now live outside Karm Marg and had the opportunity to hear how they are doing in the real world.

This account gives you a glimpse of Karm Marg's current projects and into the lives of its residents.

Sustainability and environment

Karm Marg has been an environmentally conscious organisation from the beginning. They've had a long policy of recycling newspapers, fabrics, coconut shells and CDs in the products they make for sale. They do not use plastic bags and last year they had solar panels installed that now generate half of the complex's energy needs. And they even go one step further: citrus peels are used to make washing-up liquid, all leftovers are composted and the water from the kitchen is used to feed and water banana trees. This happens through an ingenious system of wells. The wells are built so that the water that flows into them slowly seeps into the ground. Banana trees, which need a lot of water, have been planted around the wells so they can absorb the water from the ground: the first bananas will be harvested soon!

New house

Veena's long-cherished plan is finally taking shape. She is building a house on the plot of land next to Karm Marg, where an impressive vegetable patch produces the ingredients for healthy meals. The house is being built as environmentally friendly as possible from local types of brick: fired and sun-dried bricks. The sun-dried bricks are made on site by a real craftsman. The children and the visitors are fascinated by the process and stay for quite some time to watch how the clay is formed into bricks. Slowly but surely the rows of perfectly formed bricks are growing. Not only the building materials are environmentally friendly, the toilet and the bath also play their part. The toilet will be a so-called dry toilet that uses microbes to turn urine

and solid waste into compost. The bath will have the same system as the kitchen. More banana and other fruit trees will be planted behind the house to profit from the water that would otherwise just seep away. The vegetable patch stays and the piece of land lost to the house is compensated by creating a new garden within the walls of the compound.

Absolutely nothing is lost at Karm Marg!

There are plans to strip out the interior of the old, no longer used diesel van and convert it into a small shop that can be used to sell Jugaad products, home-grown vegetables and home-baked bread to visitors. Yes, the plans for a bakery are still very much alive.

The day-to-day experiences of a Karm Marg child.

There are about 60 children at Karm Marg at the moment. The youngest is six and the oldest is eighteen. Sanjeeda moved into Karm Marg to look after the youngest children. She's a caring, energetic woman and the children adore her. The oldest children more or less look after themselves under the guidance of Pooja and Veena. Once a week all the children join them for a meeting to discuss current issues and problems with each other. It is an honour to be allowed to attend this meeting. Everybody sits in a circle and first the notes of the last meeting are read out and dealt with item by item: who has kept to the agreements and who can do better on this front the following week. The tone is never one of rebuke, but always light and constructive. Children come up with suggestions themselves on how to improve their own behaviour or the behaviour of others. Next, the children can bring up any personal problems. Some of them are solved on the spot: like the one of a new girl who doesn't have a warm cardigan, and it's getting colder now. After the meeting she can come to the office and pick something out. Some conflicts are not so easily solved. These are discussed and noted to return to later and look for solutions together.

And yes... teenagers do rebel in all cultures... The teenagers at Karm Marg, especially the boys between fourteen and seventeen, are a challenging group. They see themselves as quite mature, simply refuse to fulfil their household chores at Karm Marg and regularly pick a fight. Often they don't want to go to school anymore and think they would do just fine living on their own outside Karm Marg. Veena has a talk with these boys, asks them what they want and how they think they can achieve it. The "how" often proves a stumbling block, so she lets them reflect on that to resume the discussion the next day.

An example of such a rebellious teenager is fourteen-year-old Abdul. He's lived at Karm Marg for years and we knew him as a lively, kind boy. But since puberty hit, he no longer wants to go to school and even wants to leave Karm Marg. His older sister Kulsum is already eighteen and lives independently with three other girls in Delhi. His proposal is to go and live with her. The only thing is that nobody knows how Kulsum herself feels about this. On the days that I'm there, the various possibilities are discussed. Kulsum is called in and turns out to be willing to take responsibility for her brother. But before the decision is made, all hell suddenly breaks loose: Abdul is

physically lashing out at one of the mentally impaired boys. When Veena hears about this, she immediately calls him into the office. This is the final straw. With an angry voice, she tells Abdul that enough is enough and that he has to leave right away. He looks at her in surprise. Now that leaving has become a reality and the only option, you can see the doubt creep in. He quietly leaves to fetch his things and Veena turns to me with a smile and says: "He'll be back within a month, you know." A little taste of the harsh outside world will probably be enough to put Abdul back on a more positive path.

How are the young adults who have left Karm Marg doing?

I've known Karm Marg for such a long time now that I've seen a whole generation grow up. It still feels special every time I think about it. Where do the children who have left Karm Marg end up?

I'm friends on Facebook with a number of them. Rumpi, for instance, is married and lives in Bangalore with her husband, their daughter and her in-laws. She makes and sells bags and jewellery, a skill she developed at Karm Marg. She regularly features in photographs in the Bangalore papers selling a bag or piece of jewellery to a well-known Indian actress at a trade fair. She looks positively radiant in each of them!

Her younger sister Payel has also left Karm Marg. She lives in Delhi together with Kulsum and two other girls and works in the trendy bakery owned by Jiten, an old and loyal friend of Karm Marg. Brimming with pride and confidence, she showed me where she works and the delicious loaves she makes.

One evening, Shabila invites Veena and me to have dinner at her home. Pooja joins us and the ladies do the shopping on the way. Shabila and Pooja are both about 26 and work at Karm Marg. Pooja works in administration and helps Veena support the children. After having lived at Karm Marg for years, she has now moved back in with her mother in Faridabad. Shabila oversees the production of all Jugaad products and lives with one of her brothers in the Karm Marg house in the village of Bathola. The house was renovated many years ago with a generous donation from the Soroptimist Club of Ede, the Netherlands. Various groups of children have lived in it over the years.

While Pooja and Shabila are preparing the food in the small kitchen, Veena and I are having a chat in the livingroom. She tells me that Shabila supports her entire family with the money she earns. If I understand correctly, that includes a mother, a father and a number of younger siblings. Quite a responsibility for a 26-year-old woman.

A little while later, two former Karm Marg boys walk in. Babaloo was part of the very first group and is 32 now. He lives in Delhi and works at a small, specialised publishing house. Anish is the same age as Babaloo, lives in Faridabad and is a dancer and a yoga teacher. With Pooja, Shabila, Babaloo and Anish we talk about the old days: what it was like to grow up at Karm Marg and what it has meant to them. 'Family' is the word that sums it up for all of them.

A week at Karm Marg just flies by. During the day Veena is busy working, but fortunately we have time to talk in the mornings and evenings. This is when she tells me about the award they won from Americares for their excellent care for the children. The award includes a certificate and prize money, which she wants to use to purchase a new van. As the old diesel bus is no longer roadworthy and their small van is also due for replacement, Veena has decided not to buy another big bus, but a van with room for nine people. This purchase is made possible by the €3,000 collected by the Dominicus Church in Amsterdam, the €1,000 prize money from Americares and, thanks to our own fabulous donors, an extra contribution from Step Children of Mother India.

During the last weekend of my visit, Veena and I pick up Romy, a friend of mine, and her husband Ilya in Delhi. Both of them are designers and owners of Studio Roof (www.studioroof.com). Their company has been donating a substantial sum to Karm Marg for a number of years and I had asked Romy whether she wanted to join the Board of SCOMI. Since she was already in India for a yoga retreat, we agreed to visit Karm Marg together. It turned out to be an animated and cheerful weekend. Romy and Veena immediately got on like a house on fire and the charismatic Ilya was a big hit with the teenage girls. He promised them to come back to give a design workshop.

When, after having said our goodbyes, we were on the plane back to Amsterdam, I asked Romy what she thought of Karm Marg. She paused for a minute and then said: "The most special thing is that there is a place for everyone at Karm Marg. Your background, your handicaps, your problems, none of it matters. You are a child and deserve a safe environment."

And right she is.