Facets of the North-east

Vivekananda Kendra in North-east

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One of the national level voluntary organizations which has undertaken many good activities in the region is the Vivekananda Kendra. This organization with its headquarters at Kanyakumari is well known all over the country. It is running different activities of education and social development in almost all parts of the country. Responding to our request, the Joint General Secretary of Vivekananda Kendra, with special responsibility for the north eastern region, Kumari Rekha Davey has given this article for Ishani giving a detailed account of Vivekananda Kendra's working in the north eastern region. We are very happy to carry this valuable and informative article in our current issue.

Author

Genesis of Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari

A grand memorial to Swami Vivekananda was constructed at Kanyakumari in 1970. The indomitable will and contribution of millions of people of India made it a truly national monument and also a point of national convergence. Vivekananda Rock Memorial, a poetry and beauty in granite, vibrates with dynamic peace and is a source of inspiration to one and all. More than four crore of people from all over India and abroad have visited it so far.

Mananeeya Eknath Ranade, the Man behind the Memorial, started Vivekananda Kendra, a spiritually oriented service mission, in 1972 as the living memorial to Swami Vivekananda with a cadre of dedicated Jeevanwratis, Sevavratis and Vanaprasthis, thousands of local Karyakartas and lakhs of patrons and well wishers. Vivekananda Kendra is centered on the noble thought: Service to man is worship of God, and is guided by the national ideals of Renunciation and Service. At present it has more than 200 branch centres and various projects all over India, engaged with the twin objectives of Man-Making and Nation-Building.

Vivekananda Kendra in North-east

The North-east region is considered the crown of Bharat and Arunachal Pradesh its crest jewel and therefore it is vulnerable to the evil designs of forces inimical to India. Bharat's "Ideal Social Order" is a unique one and its preservation, protection and promotion is a prime necessity. This Ideal Social Order is still prevalent in living form in all the eight States of the North-eastern region. It is the responsibility of all patriotic citizens of this great land to contribute their time and
energy for the purpose. Shri Eknath Ranade, founder of Kendra was therefore very particular that appropriate multi-dimensional activities should be undertaken here.

With this in view, Kendra is working in the region with the theme "Development through Culture". Kendra is at present having numerous active branch centres in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Nagaland and is slowly increasing its activities to the other North-eastern States.

**Vivekananda Kendra in Arunachal Pradesh**

Arunachal Pradesh, the land of rising sun, is a hilly State of 83,743 sq. km. surrounded by China and Myanmar. The temperature here varies from place to place. Itanagar, the capital, has a minimum temperature of 9.5 degrees and maximum of 30.9 degrees centigrade. Its forests covers 68,847 sq. km. (82.21% of the total area), with varieties of fauna and flora.

The first phase work through Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas (VKVs)

Swami Vivekananda said - "We want the education by which character is formed, Strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet."

It is populated by about 11 lakhs of peace loving and innocent people. Their few needs are met from local sources - be they construction materials, utensils, and clothes.

Vivekananda Kendra started its work here in 1974. At that time it was a Union Territory with five districts - Tirap, Siang, Lohit, Subansiri and Kameng, named after the major rivers of the State. The interior places could be reached only after several days trekking or by helicopters of the Indian Air Force and messages sent only by wireless or by runners.
Pasighat is considered the only developed town in the State. It could be reached by train from Silapathar or by boat over the mighty Brahmaputra from Dibrugarh, which took 7 to 8 hours. Silapathar and Dibrugarh are in Asom. There was just a single college - Jawaharlal Nehru College - at Pasighat. The State had 11 English medium Higher Secondary Schools with CBSE syllabus and a few middle and primary schools situated in interior places.

Vivekananda Kendra started training its Jeevanvritis in 1973. It was keen to commence work in remote areas, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh. The then Government here was direly in need of trained teachers for its schools. This was a welcome opportunity and Kendra sent a number of trained Karyakartas (Jeevanvritis) and also selected teachers to work in government schools.

The Karyakartas thus sent were able to gain first hand knowledge of the State and its people. Kendra became popular because of their good work.

Vivekananda Kendra Rural Welfare Project (Khatkhati)

As mentioned earlier, the workers and selected teachers were posted to all the Government schools in the five districts of the State. Some of them had to work in remote places like Sagali, which could be reached only after five days walk.

Kendra Karyakartas started social service with students and villagers during vacation in different places. Yoga classes and Shibirs also were organized during the holidays. This helped us to understand better the dynamics of the State and its people within a few years.

Kendra chalked out a program to impart such education, as needed for the infant State of those days. Though there were three private schools - two of Ramakrishna Mission and one of Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, there was a demand for more residential schools.

Shri KAA Raja, Lt Governor, was also keen that Vivekananda Kendra should start its own residential schools to impart value-based education to Arunachal children to enable them to imbibe the national ethos.

Thus Kendra's seven residential schools - Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas (VKVs) were born in 1977. The villagers donated 30 acres of land to the government who in turn handed it over to the
Kendra. The government put up some temporary buildings to start the schools immediately. Later pucca buildings were constructed according to a master plan with 100% Government aid to run the schools. Kendra withdrew its Karyakartas and some teachers from the government schools and posted them to VKVs. Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas Arunachal Pradesh Trust was created and located at Dibrugarh with Jeewanvritas to manage the schools. These seven schools were exclusively for the boys. In the initial stages, Karyakartas as teachers had to go from village to village with the help of the local administration and the village Gaonbura to select students for admission to the schools. With difficulty, 30 boys were selected. But it was hard to convince the villagers to allow their wards to stay in the hostels. The children were not afraid of the forest or the wild animals and would occasionally run away to the jungle. The teacher Karyakartas had to search and catch them with the help of the locals to bring them again to the schools. Sometimes the children would run away with whatever their tiny hands could lay on. They knew how to reach their homes.

They are sharp and smart and quick to learn whatever subject - curricular or co-curricular - is taught. The daily routine starts at 0430 hrs and ends at 1900 hrs. In the northeast, the sun rises and sets very early. So getting up at 0430 is not difficult. These close-to-nature children are adepts in singing, dancing, acting, and painting. They pick up any new language fast and speak correctly. Their pronunciation of Sanskrit is faultless. They learnt fast some chapters of Bhagwad Gita and a number of patriotic songs. Being agile, they excelled in gymnastics, band music, etc.

They get plenty of opportunities to display their talents during local festivals celebrated in the schools.

Kendra organizes annual orientation and subject wise camps for the teachers of VKVs.

The popularity of VKVs for boys made the public to raise a question: Our boys are getting educated but what about our girls? They also should be given good education. So there should be girls' schools.

Mananeeya Balakrishna ji, then in charge of Kendra work in North-east and now Vice-President of Vivekananda Kendra told them that Kendra's policy was to power both the wings of the society and soon schools for girls too would be opened. The first school for girls started in 1980, at Tafrogam, a village 11 km. away from Tezu, district headquarters of Lohit district and it proved to be very popular.

Kendra opened many more schools one after another and now there are 25 schools in which 10,000 students study. Three schools are exclusively for the girls and the remaining are for both boys and girls; 18 are secondary schools, five of them at higher secondary level.

The problem of regular attendance in schools does not occur any more. But what confronts us now is how to meet the demand of all the parents seeking admission of their children in VKVs. The number of Vidyalayas (25) is far too less to meet the increasing demand. Some more schools have to be added soon.

Hundreds of students, boys and girls, who passed out of these schools are spread all over the State working as IAS officers, engineers, doctors, advocates, lecturers, etc., in government and in private organizations. Some have joined in VKVs as teachers and some others are working in other parts of the country and abroad and are doing well. Wherever and whatever they are, they hold their heads high as Men with capital M as Swamiji (Vivekananda) wanted. Each one of them has a distinguished place in Arunachal. Thus, Kendra's aim to generate creative leaders is also getting fulfilled.

Swamiji said - “Men, men are wanted, rest every thing will come.” The people here are coming forward to shoulder the responsibility, and therefore to reach out to them Kendra started its second phase of activities.

Second phase - Vivekananda Kendra Arun Jyoti (VKAJ)

Vivekananda Kendra Arun Jyoti Project was started in 1993. Its rural development programmes under five Manchs - Anaupcharik, Shiksha, Yuva, Mahila, Swastya Seva and Samskritik were created. Through these fora, different programmes are organized to guide the society in right direction by creating active leaders.

Vivekananda Kendra has made its entry in all the districts through-
- 100 Balwadis with 200 Balsevikas (teachers)
- 2 residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas for girls
- 12 Anandalayas (Tuition cum Sanskar Varga for students of government primary schools) with 24 Acharyas
- Mobile video cum library van
- Study circles for college students
- Camps and educational tours for the youth
- Women’s awareness camps
- Vocational training for women in weaving carpets and shawls, tailoring, handicraft, jam and pickle making, etc., and their marketing,
- Training village health workers,
- Mobile medical camps for prevention and cure of common diseases,
- Seminars, symposia and documentation of data relating to the local traditions and culture, etc., with the help of the locals.

Their impact is seen through the joining of 35 local Poornakalin (full time) Karyakartas and Sevavratis. A team of trained Karyakartas trains the new recruits. A new generation of creative leaders is emerging. Most of the alumni of VKVs are associated with VKAJ work. Hundreds of youths are involved in this useful work.

We can boldly claim now that VKAJ project is managed by the society of Arunachal Pradesh for its Development through Culture.

**Third phase - Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture - Arunachal Pradesh Chapter (VKIC APC)**

This was launched in 2003 at Itanagar to motivate the educated people to be aware of their responsibilities to their society. *If a society does not move in the proper direction, it is not because the negative forces are active but because the positive forces are inactive.* Organized efforts are necessary to come together, think together and work together. The leaders should be so in true sense of the term to develop the society properly. This process started with the study circle for the elites. A group of about 30 persons meet once in two months and present papers on different aspects of the life of the people. VKIC APC encourages the common men also to participate in state level seminars on Development through Culture. This was well appreciated. Lectures by leading lights of the country and from abroad are organized from time to time. Many seminars and symposia on different communities and their traditional systems and change and continuity are conducted. The data obtained are documented and books brought out on them.

Arunachal Pradesh is now the largest and sparsely populated State of the North-eastern region with 16 districts. It has a number of Janjatis (tribes) - Adi, Apatani, Idu, Khampi, Mishmi, Nishi, Tangsa, Sheduppan, etc. Sun and Moon, Rangfra, Nani Intaya, Duryan, and Buddha are some of the names and forms of God worshiped by them on the different occasions. There are rituals for every event and everything is considered sacred as in other parts of the country. There are rituals from birth to death. Every important work commences with a Pooja to the Almighty. Many cultural centres exist and weekly prayers are conducted there. These are increasing day by day. The communities also publish books.

Thus now many educated people are coming forward to preserve, protect and promote their rich culture, which is similar to that of other parts of the country.

Swami Vivekananda's prophesy that a "New India will arise from the hills and from the mountains" is coming true. The State of Arunachal is poised to become a model State with the theme - Development through Culture. Let us all help by becoming members of Arunachal Bandhu Parivar and contributing our - *Tan* (body), *Man* (mind) and *Dhan* (wealth) to make it happen at the earliest.

**Vivekananda Kendra in Asom - Educational Activities**

Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas - Under this educational project in Asom, 15 co-education Vidyalayas with 7800 students are getting all round education. The full time workers from the
centrally located Vivekananda Kendra Shiksha Prasar Vibhag (VKSPV) manage the schools. There is a NEEPCO financed VKV in Nagaland at Doyang which also comes under VKSPV. Five of these are at Higher Secondary level and others at secondary level. The schools at Tinsukia and Dibrugarh have completed 25 years and hundreds of student who passed out of these are well-settled and help the society to march forward in the right direction.

Here too, there is demand for more good schools. This demand can be fulfilled provided right type of material is available.

To meet the demand of the society, Kendra is conducting the teachers' orientation camps not only for the teachers of VKVs but for other private schools too from time to time. These have proved successful and fruitful.

**Balwadi & Anandalayas**

The Kendra also runs 20 Balwadis and 34 Anandalayas for the tea garden students. These are supportive educational activities for the Government school students.

**Impact:** There is awareness about the benefit of teamwork and savings and the need for cleanliness and hygiene for well being.

**Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC)**

Culture is the backbone of the society and it is to be nurtured. (Culture nurtures Unity).

Therefore, VKIC started in 1993 with its headquarters at Guwahati and is working with this theme for all the North-eastern States. Its main work is research and documentation of customs, practices and traditions, etc., in this region. VKIC focuses on seminars, and lecture-cum-discussions by directly interacting with the communities concerned to understand the richness of their traditional systems and identifying the unifying elements that binds us.

- Reflect on how best to provide meaningful continuity to these practices in the fast changing life-style.
- Inspire leadership with the idea of 'Development Through Culture'.

The VKIC envisions its role as the fountainhead for India's North-east. It aspires to create leaders to promote 'Development through Culture'.

**VKIC's operational plan:**
- Compilation of available published material on the cultural life of NE India.
- Organizing periodic lectures, seminars, workshops, discussions and exhibitions.
- Analyzing the field-data collected through various documentation projects and opening up a data bank for the benefit of scholars and researchers.
- With this in view, VKIC organised many seminars for all the states of the NE.
- To carry out the systematic work in the region, it is necessary to have VKIC Chapters in every NE State's capital. A beginning has been made in 2003 with the opening of a Chapter for Arunachal at Itanagar.

The highlights of some of the recent programmes:

**Satra Darshan**

To commemorate a decade of its service and to apprise the people of the cultural importance of Satra institutions of Asom, a series of programmes of Satra Darshan were held at three centers on 25, 26 and 27 November 2006. For the first time, Satradhikars of 15 different institutions assembled together on a common platform to educate the people about the relevance of Srimanta Sankardeva's teachings of universal brotherhood. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Gen S.K. Sinha and many eminent scholars from Asom were present.

**Some recently conducted seminars in Asom and Arunachal Pradesh**

The Institute conducted seminars on the traditional culture and faith of the Mishings of Assam. The Institute's Arunachal Pradesh chapter conducted a 2-day programme for Janjatis - Nyishi, Wanchu and Aka communities recently, to bring together large number of members of the communities to deliberate on various aspects of their social problems.

**Publication**
VKIC has brought out many books.

- 'Glimpses of The Satra Institution of Assam,
- 'A Survey of the Theravadi Buddhist Monasteries of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Besides the publications, the popular annual "Quest" carries important articles and other valuable matters and is also based on seminar papers on different communities.

**Vivekananda Kendra Rural Welfare Project (Khatkhati)**

(Residential training centre for the grown up girls)

Year of establishment: 1986

Location: In the heart of Karbi Anglong District (Asom) and close to Dimapur (Nagaland)

Target area: North East India

Perspective: 'Women must be in a position to solve their problems in their own way. And our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world.' - Swami Vivekananda

Focus: Strengthening human resources intensive technology, socio economic empowerment, capacity building, natural resource management, mother & child health care, education, nutrition, collective action for common causes, skill development in areas women are already skilled in, value addition to products.

Skills: Weaving, knitting, tailoring, pickle, sauce & jam preparation, sales & marketing.

Impact:

- The people are able to solve their problems themselves. They have become job creators and not job seekers and thus promote a self-sustained society, thereby achieve development through culture.
- There is an improvement in the health and hygiene of individuals and the society as a whole.
- They are capable of withstanding cultural shocks.

**Vivekananda Kendra NRL Hospital, Numaligarh**

This ISO certified (ISO 9001: 2000) and well equipped Hospital with 35 beds provides medical care in pediatrics, obstetrics, gynecology and general surgery. It also offers mobile medical services to villagers around Numaligarh. The health of the general public as a whole and in Numaligarh Township in particular has improved. The hospital has also brought about a positive change in the society and motivated youths to become self-reliant to achieve 'Development through Culture'.

*Kumari Rekha Davey is a jeevanvrat i or life-worker of Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari. She joined the Non-Sannyasi Order in 1974 at the headquarters of the organization at Kanyakumari. After the initial training at Kanyakumari she was posted in Arunachal Pradesh in 1975. There she worked continuously for 20 years in an educational project of Vivekananda Kendra. She was the founder Principal of two Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas (VKVs) for girls in Arunachal Pradesh. In 1995, she was given the responsibility of All India Joint General Secretary of Vivekananda Kendra and since 2001 she has the special responsibility of Kendra work in the North-east. She can be contacted at rekha@vkendra.org.*