

Before the field trip

Fieldtrip

Upon arriving at Skanda Vale, at the top of the valley, I was first struck by the quality of the area. I am used to country living, however, here was a lack of ever the distant background noise that I am used to, even in the Peaks. Walking further into the valley, to the farm at the top of the hill, I was struck by the remoteness of this area of Skanda Vale; the parts of the farm that could be seen seemed to me like any other farm yard that I had seen. It was only as we started our descent into the valley and we passed part of the deer run that I began to get the sense that this wasn't a working farm in the way that I had encountered them in Staffordshire or the countryside surrounding the University, then, passing the green surrounding the late Ben's tomb, a place which seemed silent even for the location, I started to feel that Skanda Vale was out of my normal experience.

I can't help but wonder what it would have been like to walk the rest of the way into the valley, to experience entering the original area of Skanda Vale as a gradual thing, whether I would have felt differently, whether it would have felt significant. As it was we were picked up by the minibus and taken to our lodgings. The lodgings that we were housed in had been built in the last couple of years and

were surprisingly technological, using electronic key cards to enter and light the rooms as well as having en-suites. We were then driven back up the valley side, to be given a tour by Brother Andy. The tour was started, ~~whether~~ through convenience or a sense of priority, with the large storage barn, newly built to keep out pests and the damp, that, over the summer period when the wham is busier, will be filled with the blessed offerings not needed at Skanda Vale, for the displays and devotions, to be given to those in need of them. We were told that in recent years much of it has gone to the migrant camps in France. Being shown through the barns and pens which held many of the animals of Skanda Vale, the awe and respect given the animals, particularly by the late Ben, became ~~absolutely~~ clear.

Returning to the garden containing Gururaj's tomb, there was then time to contemplate the feel of the place. I don't know whether it was Brother Andy talking about the energy of this specific area being behind the placement of the tomb, as we entered the garden, or the fact that I now had a few moments of time to think on it, but my thoughts turned to how Skanda Vale, not just the garden, felt different to any place I had been before. I know that the residents of Skanda Vale felt that the valley had specific vibrations. For my part, if I had to describe the 'feeling' I get from being in that valley, I would describe it as a mix of both the feeling I get when walking in the valleys of the Pennine District or Lake District, where the temporary shelter of the valley creates a completely natural silence in which you can't but marvel at

the beauty of your surroundings, and the feeling I
get standing in a Church, not the awe of craftsmanship
found in highly decorated cathedrals but the awe I
feel despite, or even because, of being an atheist, even
in the plainest of chapels, at the everyday magic
that is faith. The cynical side of me would claim
that that was all the feeling was; the admiration
of a beautiful setting mixed with a respect for the
faith of the residents and devotees of the Ashram. The
questioning part of me, the part that always puts the word
'apostrophe' before 'atheist' when describing myself, wonders
whether there is more; whether the Ben and residents
were right about 'idolaters', whether I am not in time
enough to feel them or whether I am feeling them and
there is more to the sense of awe I get in a
religious setting than I thought.

Following our return to the bottom of the valley, we
visited the Vishnu temple, the first temple we had been
inside, having seen the Naga Shakti temple at the top
of the hill, and the Lord Murugan temple, also in the
valley, from the outside only. The Vishnu temple is
an open air temple, composed of a semicircular
covering facing an idol of the Hindu aspect Vishnu,
flanked by his female counterpart and another Hindu
aspect of the divine and presided over by Brahman.
Behind the pool of water surrounding these statues
are idols of other aspects of the divine worshipped
at Shirdi Nale, including Lord other Hindu aspects
as well as a Zoroastrian statue and the Christian
ichthys. Outside of the Vishnu temple were three
other idols; one on each side plus one on the

pond, ~~accessed~~ by a walkway.

As it was, by then, nearly lunch time, we returned to the main area of the ashram, in front of the Lord Krishna temple. It was then that we experienced our first puja. We were told beforehand that this puja was the shortest of the day, however, despite usually being able to tell how much time has passed without a watch, I would never be able to say how long the puja took without looking up the time (it started, and the time lunch was served. No seats were arranged inside the Lord Krishna temple and, although chairs were available at the back, we seated ourselves on cushions on the carpeted floor. It feels strange to describe the puja itself; it was mostly Hindi based and consisted of reciting a series of prayers. It was quite jamming when, near the end, the monks and nun leading the puja switched from the Sanskrit prayers to Hindi (aspects) of the deity to reciting the Lord's prayer, Glory Be and a Hail Mary in English before going back to Sanskrit. During this puja the gifts that we and the visiting devotees had brought with us, along with some of the food for lunch, were presented to the idol of Lord Krishna in the temple and blessed. At the end of the ceremony the blessed flame was brought around for us to take into ourselves, followed by ash and a red powder for us to dab onto our foreheads where the third eye is.

Following the puja, lunch of curry and fruit was served. This gave us the opportunity to talk to each other about the experience so far. After lunch we had

a brief moment to talk to some of the visiting devotees. One in particular that I and two others spoke to, after he readily agreed to us using his answers in our reports, told us that he was Hindu by tradition and that he had been particularly drawn to Shonda Vale's peaceful location as he had come from London. Unfortunately, I had to leave the conversation early as I was having a bad bout of hayfever and needed to get my anti-histamine from my room. We were then asked to help do some work, something commonly asked of devotees staying overnight as there is no charge for the accommodation. We started by making some benches out of the Yogan Sola, a large, half open structure used as an extra dining hall in the summer months when there can be hundreds of devotees visiting the temple on any given day. I and two others were then tasked with painting a fence by the Vishnu temple; it was a very peaceful experience which allowed me time to contemplate Shonda Vale as I had experienced it so far. As we were working by the temple a devotee came to pray, as my classmates and I were working in silence we were able to hear him chanting out loud in Sanskrit; it felt to me almost intrusive to be almost listening in to his prayers despite the fact that we had been there first and he was chanting in a language that I did not understand.

A few days later we started on the steep walk up to the top of the hill for a puja at the Maha Shakti temple. As the lunch time puja had given me a headache and the walk up the hill did my hayfever no favours, upon being warned by a devotee that this puja would be quite intense, I

elected to remain in the woods and watch from a
soon. Due to this there is little I feel able to
say about the puja.

Following dinner, which was, again, very, we were given
a group talk by Swami Suryamanda. He talked about
the Guru and why he chose Shirdi as the place to
create an ashram, the development of the ashram and
the beliefs held by the members. He spoke about
'vibrations' and 'energy', showing the spiritualist roots
of their beliefs, the way he spoke about the different
'gods' worshipped at the ashram simply being aspects
of an overall divine energy reminded me greatly of the
pantheist theory of a philosopher (his name I cannot
remember at the time) (later I looked up to be Raimon
Panikkar), specifically his window metaphor. Various questions
were asked about life at the ashram for residents, particularly
in relation to their work. We discovered that since the
Guru's death the ashram has been led by a council of the
Swamis and while I fully believed Swami Suryamanda in
the Swamis being equal in making decisions, from other
things