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Volunteering at ROSHNI

Thank you for your enquiry about volunteering at ROSHNI in India.

Volunteering overseas offers a wonderful opportunity, not only to share your skills and be of service to others, but to really experience life in another culture; not as a tourist does, but as a member of the community you will be living and working in. Most people say that after volunteering abroad, they feel they have gained even more than they have given. We hope we can give you the opportunity to experience this!

Friends of ROSHNI UK

We were started in 2004 to support ROSHNI's work. We do a lot of fundraising, and also recruiting and preparing skilled volunteers. We support volunteers until they leave UK, by helping with the practicalities of preparing for their trip, planning their work, and thinking about some of the cultural and social issues of volunteering and living in India. This preparation work is usually done over several evening or weekend sessions for those living near Manchester, or over a weekend for volunteers living further away. If we have more than one volunteer going to ROSHNI at a similar time we will try to do the training with you all together, so you can get to know each other before you go. We also tend to give a lot of support and advice via phone/email in the months and weeks (and sometimes hours!) leading up to your trip. Once in India, the staff at ROSHNI take responsibility for the volunteers, but we continue to support and advise via email.

ROSHNI – a summary of their work

ROSHNI is a rehabilitation centre in the city of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, in central India. ROSHNI was established in 1998 by 2 special educators called Manjula Patankar and Priti Kapoor – Manjula is the Director of ROSHNI, and speaks fluent English. (Priti now lives in Delhi, but is still involved with ROSHNI in a supporting role.)

ROSHNI provides educational, therapeutic and vocational support to babies, children and young adults with neurological impairments, from birth onwards.

The majority of the beneficiaries have cerebral palsy or learning disabilities. There are currently over 1000 people registered with ROSHNI, around 100 of whom attend the centre at least once a week. Many of the beneficiaries live in extreme poverty. Not all do though, as ROSHNI serves the whole community, regardless of background.

After many years of working out of small loaned buildings, in 2008 ROSHNI finally moved into their new purpose-built, fully accessible centre. It has a school section with 3 classrooms, a Vocational Training Unit, Therapy Unit, Sensory Room, Early Intervention Unit, as well as an outdoor play area, small 1:1 rooms and office space. Building work is due to begin on the roof space. In the future this will accommodate training and resource facilities, a multi-purpose hall, and private accommodation for our volunteers. This new building is providing lots of opportunities for ROSHNI to expand its programmes, so it is an exciting time to be there!

ROSHNI runs several different programmes, all of which volunteers are likely to be involved with. The early intervention group is for children aged 1-5 years, the primary group for 6-13 years, and vocational training group for 14+ years. Babies and children from mainstream schools are seen as outpatients. The children are given education and therapy, as required. Home and school visits are carried out, although not as frequently as they would be in the UK, due to there being less access to transport. ROSHNI recently ran a pilot project working in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit of a local hospital, and there are plans to resume this project in the near future.

ROSHNI has a strong focus on training and awareness-raising, for staff, parents, mainstream school teachers, health professionals, government officials, and the general public. Volunteers are likely to be involved in this work in some way.

ROSHNI is based in an ashram, the Ramakrishna Ashrama. This is a community project run by Hindu monks. (We don't have a direct comparison here in the UK so it is a little difficult to explain what this is; the closest to it might be a monastery/convent/parish which provides services to homeless people or the elderly, or a community centre providing childcare and adult training courses.) The Ramakrishna Ashrama runs other projects, such as an old people's home, 3 schools, a children's home, medical centre and music school. There are also a few temples on the site. ROSHNI is part of the ashram, but is run under its own management system.

The therapy team

The therapy team is led by Mr Vivek Sharma, a Developmental Therapist (a generic qualified paediatric therapist). Vivek speaks good (although not fluent) English. He worked alongside a VSO therapist from the UK for almost 2 years, and has since visited the UK for further training. There is also one more developmental therapist, Ram, and 2 therapy assistants, Mamta and Vegbhati. It is very difficult to find qualified therapists in Gwalior, as many prefer to work in the major cities, or overseas.

The therapy team provides both physiotherapy and occupational therapy to the children at ROSHNI.

The therapy team also run the following services: orthotic clinics; equipment assessment, manufacture and loan; out-patient assessment and home programmes; school visits; home visits; rural community-based rehab visits. Most services are done in conjunction with the education team: there is a strong ethos of inter-disciplinary working at ROSHNI.

Volunteering at ROSHNI

We do not see our placements as a one-sided charitable service to ROSHNI. The team in ROSHNI has a lot of knowledge and skills, some of which we rarely develop here in the UK where resources are more easily available. We feel that our volunteers can learn a lot from the ROSHNI staff, specifically about working with limited resources, about cultural awareness and tolerance, and about working in paediatrics for those who haven't experienced it before. However, volunteers from the UK all come with skills, ideas, experience and talents that can be shared with the team at ROSHNI. They will be encouraged to pass on these skills to the team, and so leave a lasting benefit for the children and staff at ROSHNI. We consider our placements to be a two-way sharing of skills, from which we hope both parties will benefit, learn and grow, both professionally and personally.

The volunteers will work with the therapy team, and be given their own day-to-day caseload to manage. The number of children attending ROSHNI is large, so it can be difficult for the ROSHNI therapists to give the children the level of support they need. Your support will really make a difference to the quality and frequency of the children's therapy input. You will also have the chance to work with the team on developing the service, and the way therapy is administered. For example, recent volunteers have worked on the following projects:

- Developing 24-hour postural management programmes for specific children, and helping design new postural equipment for the centre;
- Running a 2-day training course in Rebound Therapy for therapists and special needs teachers from the surrounding areas, and developing rebound programmes for children at the centre;
- Teaching local physiotherapy students about Bobath Therapy;
- Working with the education team to develop common assessment tools for reviewing the skills of the young adults in the vocational group;
- Running small group sessions with children in the sensory room;
- Developing new ideas for the Early Intervention group activities;
- Running PE groups to enhance fitness levels with the children and young adults.

We help the volunteers to think of work they might like to be involved with before they leave the UK, but invariably, they think of more ideas once they get to ROSHNI and see for themselves how their skills might best be used.

As a volunteer, you will probably be asked to be involved in other areas of ROSHNI's work: assisting with administration, school trips, cultural festivities, Special Olympics, medical camps, art projects....the possibilities are endless! This is a normal part of the running of small NGO's in India, and should be expected and accepted by all our volunteers.

Volunteers tend to be qualified therapists or teachers, and many have been new graduates. However, we would also gladly consider anyone with experience of working in a related field, for example therapy assistants, musicians and artists who have worked with people with learning disabilities etc.

Practicalities

A normal working day is 9am-4pm, Monday-Saturday.

Volunteers can decide their placement length, although we have to insist on a **minimum commitment of 3 months**. This is because of the length of time it takes to acclimatise to the weather and change in diet, and to familiarise yourself with the language and routine at ROSHNI.

However, ROSHNI now feel that it would be more helpful for them to have volunteers who are able to commit to longer placements – this is not only more beneficial to ROSHNI, but it tends to be more fulfilling for the volunteer. It can take several weeks to settle in and 'find your feet'. Living and working in a new culture can be very challenging, even for those used to travelling. Learning basic Hindi can be a huge advantage too, but this takes time. Bearing all this in mind, we are now asking new volunteers if they would consider committing to **6-8 months** at ROSHNI (although we are still accepting volunteers for 3 months).

The best time of year to be in Gwalior is September-March. The school year is July-April. From April it starts to get very hot, reaching the high 40's by the end of the month. ROSHNI is almost closed during May-June, with just a 'skeleton staff' to see new children. July and August bring the monsoon rains, and with it a lot of mosquitoes and illnesses. Therefore, we don't send new volunteers during these months, although long-term volunteers who have already acclimatised in the cooler months can continue their placement during April-August if they wish.

We are happy to advise volunteers who wish to combine volunteering with a period of travelling before or after.

We currently accommodate volunteers in a bedsit in a family home. It has a small kitchen, balcony, and separate bathroom. The room sleeps 2 volunteers, and costs Rs2000 per month, which is a little under £27. This is paid by the volunteers directly to the landlord, and is shared between the volunteers if there are 2 at any one time. Electricity has to be paid on top of this, and is usually just a few pounds a month. The house is about 10 minutes walk from ROSHNI.

Funding

Volunteers raise their own funds to cover the trip. Friends of ROSHNI UK do not profit from this: we don't take any of this money. Volunteers book and pay for their own flights, insurance, visa etc before they leave the UK.

Volunteers are asked to pay for all their own expenses once in Gwalior, including meals and accommodation. We anticipate that a volunteer will need a maximum of £100 per month to live in Gwalior. This includes accommodation (which Roshni will arrange for you, see above), meals, travel around Gwalior and the use of internet cafes/occasional phone calls to the UK. (The average salary in Gwalior for a professional such as a teacher or therapist is somewhere in the region of £60-100 per month.) You may need a little extra to get started, for example to buy clothes, to cover the first few days when most volunteers stay in Delhi, and travelling from Delhi to Gwalior. Most people can survive on £1-2 a day in Gwalior, although more may be needed to cover 'luxuries' such as weekends away, and the occasional beer!

We recommend that volunteers fundraise to cover all their costs, and our fundraising coordinator can advise you on methods of doing this. We can also help you re-claim Gift Aid (28%) on any donations you are given.

Interested....?

We hope so! If you would like to know more before deciding to apply, email or phone for a chat (details above). Enclosed is an application form. You will then be invited to attend an interview, and we will seek references. If successful, you will be asked to come to a preparation day/weekend. The aim of this is for us to get to know you, as well as for volunteers to get to know each other if there will be more than one at a time. It will give you a chance to explore some of the issues you may face in India, relating to work, culture, day to day life, and health. There may also be the chance to meet past volunteers, ask questions and find out more about the work you will be doing in India.

We will also help you with obtaining visas, booking flights and any other concerns you may have.

We aim to send out volunteers who feel well supported, and prepared for the challenges they are facing. We hope you will be one of them!