

FINDING HOPE ON THE STREETS OF INDIA

Photo by Cecilia Glandberger

A woman's visit to India to see a charity making a difference to the children living on the streets.

BY ANITA WILLIAMS

i-india, a charity established in 1993 by Abha Goswami, is helping over 3,000 children daily. Street Child Project, a registered society in Singapore, has pledged to support i-india's projects that will enable marginalized street children to have a future that they rightfully deserve.

A small group of us made a trip out to Jaipur in October 2010, to take a look at i-india's many projects. This was one of many rewarding trips to Jaipur, deeply encouraging to know the support we give and have given is transforming the lives of the children who need it most. Our first stop was Mumbai as there was no direct flight to Jaipur from Singapore, where i-india is based.

SEEING THE DIVIDE

Mumbai is a city of stark contrasts. The blue squares when you fly in have been mistaken as swimming pools from the air, but they are plastic sheeting over the slums that live beside the busy airport – “Slumdog Millionaire” territory (coined after the award-winning movie). Mumbai is a city where dreams can come true and where many self-made millionaires come from.

The heart beat of Bollywood – children dream of becoming actors or famous cricket players. Whether rich or poor they share this dream. Private cars drive amongst the dogs, tuk tuks (auto rickshaws), cows, pigs, goats, taxis, motorbikes, camels, etc, expertly weaving their vehicles with astonishing ease. Trucks with the words “Horn please” in big writing on the back are everywhere, sharing the road in a haphazard, yet harmonious way.

Juxtaposed amongst the very poor and middle class is an Indian tycoon’s US\$1 billion house, 27 stories, with three helipads, a cinema for 50, a four-storey carpark, a total of 400,000 sq ft for just six family members with 600 servants to take care of them. On the streets below, women with small babies tap and beg at the window. Some women give their babies to others for begging, sometimes drugging them to sleep. Whatever is “earned” is shared.

Despite Mumbai’s diversity, following the bombing in 2008, people joined together as one, supporting each other and all

those who suffered injury or loss. Wealth, poverty, caste and religious differences were cast aside. In India, there is a saying “the world is your family” referring to strangers in the street as “brother, sister or uncle”. Arms looped over shoulders show the physical solidarity that exists amongst each of them. Warm welcoming hospitality is a hallmark of the Indian culture.

TAKING CARE OF THE CHILDREN

Jaipur, an ancient city known as the pink city of Rajasthan, is a city where wealth and poverty share the streets together. Jaipur’s pace is slower, calmer from Mumbai but no less fascinating.

The Goswami family – the founders of i-India – welcomed us at the airport and draped garlands of rose petals around our necks. Porters busied themselves with loading the cars up with donated canvas bags of clothes, toys, shoes and educational material from Singapore.

Monday morning, we visited a relocated slum community called Bagrana. The people who were there were once living on the streets of Jaipur, but were removed by authorities in a bid to “beautify their city” for tourists. Families are regularly removed and taken to isolated areas – forced to survive with very little. Often, no employment, education, electricity or running water available.

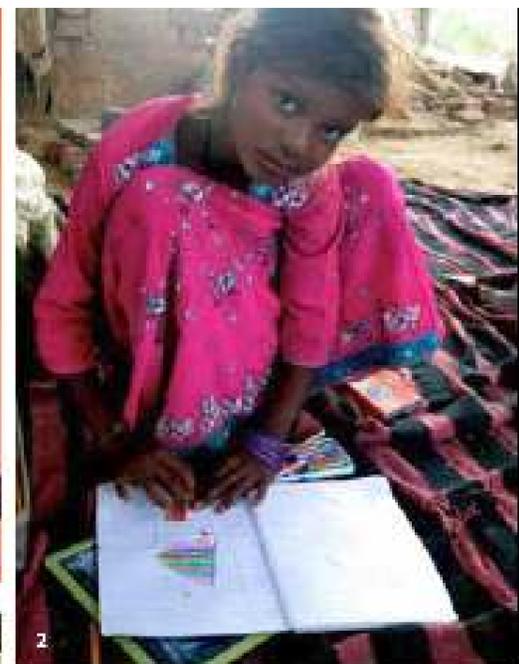
Bagrana has been steadily growing in size, though people are told not to build anything “permanent” as they will be moved on again.

However, despite this, they have managed to build simple homes out of mud bricks and cloth to shelter from the deserts’ extreme temperatures. i-India’s mobile projects visit several of these relocated communities providing a School on Wheels bus which includes education of two to three hours and a hot meal.

The i-India Jeep ambulance tends to the families (donated by Street Child Project Singapore) and later a water tanker provides an alfresco shower and safe drinking water for the families. These projects are the highlight of the children’s day as many of them will only know this basic education, and the meal they get is the only one for the day. The teacher Kanta acknowledges sadly that on Sundays the children still wait in hope that the bus might come. It doesn’t but every other day it does.

Later that day we went to see Ladli, a center by i-India to help girls. Ladli which means “loving girl” was started to enable children from the age of 12 to learn a skill in jewelry making and tailoring. The girls attending this center rotate between Ladli school,

- 1 Siblings who live under the train bridge with their mother – surviving on i-India’s School on Wheels’ daily food and education.
- 2 Art lessons via the School on Wheels.
- 3 Lessons about to begin via the School on Wheels bus.
- 4 Cleaning teeth using their finger as a toothbrush.
- 5 We asked her what her name was: Anju – a little girl who ragpicks to survive.
- 6 Receiving a donated toy from Singapore, uncertain what it was for.



In donated uniforms and barefoot, they sat cross-legged on the floor listening to the teacher who was standing by the newly-constructed blackboard. Education for girls is generally not commonplace in poor rural India.

dance and computer lessons. Each participant is given a hot daily meal, and is paid for her work. I must stress this is a voluntary center in a country which has the world's highest number of child laborers. The children's families allow them to attend the center as the money earned is supporting them. Ladli is a haven from the dangerous life on the streets, where physical danger and exploitation is a constant threat.

About 50 of these girls greeted us with smiles and welcomed us to sit beside them. Chai tea was served and we talked to the girls in simple English and we purchased the jewelry.

The following morning, we set off for Jhag Children's Village in the seven-seater vehicle which Street Child Project funded a year ago. Along the way, we came across another relocated community. Unlike Bagrana, the people here live far more simply with sticks and cloth erected for shelter. The children with matted hair waved and ran beside the car in excitement. The School on Wheels was busy conducting a lesson under a tree with the children sitting on mats learning

basic Maths, English and Hindi. Their exercise books were kept neatly and they showed their work proudly. The mothers watched the lesson while others lined up at the ambulance to have their children treated.

Many children had skin lesions and infections – a major problem due to lack of sanitation available. Goswami introduced us to several women keen to earn a living by making gudris. A gudri is a rug made from local resources of cloth and wool. The rugs provide warmth during the winter, as well as a place to rest on. During the harsh winters, the small children sometimes die from overexposure to the cold.

These women can make a gudri in approximately three hours, with each one costing approximately US\$2 to make. We promised them we would do our best to help them start a small microfinanced business with the help of i-india who would oversee and support their project. We gave out much-needed clothes as well as soft toys. Many of the children looked puzzled at them but they soon learnt that they were for cuddling.

Later, we visited Jhag Children's

Village school, which is called Prem Pathsala meaning the "school of love". The children welcomed us with garlands of marigolds and tika. We were shown the computer room where several children sat immersed in the lesson. Some 200 students attend the classes. Prem Pathsala School is a project of i-india Project Australia, a partner of Street Child Project.

Due to enthusiastic interest in education from the Jhag community, i-india has set up a kindergarten for children in the common room of the shelter home whilst the children who live there attend full-time school. I did not expect to see so many children, many of them girls; it brought tears of joy to my eyes. In donated uniforms and barefoot, they sat cross-legged on the floor listening to the teacher who was standing by the newly-constructed blackboard. Education for girls is generally not commonplace in poor rural India. From a young age, boys are sent off to school while the girls remain at home to work or care for their younger siblings. When you educate a girl, you educate the whole family as well as the next generation. Girls will grow up empowered and self-confident, and will have increased earning power and economic independence.

i-india's medical clinic is half completed, and there is a new home for girls to be completed by January 2011. Plans for a vocational training center is also in full swing as well as expanding the school. The second home in Jhag Village was funded by Street Child Project is full with 54 small boys. It was originally intended for girls but due

to many needing urgent housing, they were placed in the home. In the afternoons, the children play cricket outdoors or play in the playground.

Before I left I spoke to three small boys who moved to Jhag Children's Village six months ago after their mother begged i-india to take care of them. A prostitute with a violent husband she knew she could not give them a safe, happy life. They sat on the steps smiling and surprised to see me again. The boys know they can see their mother when needed, and they can get educated and be cared for at the village.

Most children living in the home are orphans. I was introduced to two brothers, Bitu, four years old, and Rahul, five. Their father is seriously ill, while their mother works as a domestic servant. The money she earns goes into paying her husband's medicine. The boys were left to fend for themselves on the streets. Their mother pleaded for i-india to care for them. This being a special exception as orphans, children of single parents, step-parents, cruelty at home, and abandoned children are placement priorities for i-india. Before taking the children into its care, i-india meets regularly with the Child Welfare Committee of India.

As the sun sets, the School on Wheels bus heads to Jhag township to pick up the children unable to attend school during the day but are allowed to attend "evening school" after their work and house chores are done. Here, lessons are two hours long, a hot meal is given and time to play outdoors after before being taken home to their families.

MORE SERVICES

The following day, we met with i-india staff, who man the 24-hour help line. This emergency phone line is free of charge for any child to call. Many children come to i-india this way. Approximately 70 calls are taken daily. Some need counselling while others need medical assistance. The children know by the many posters up especially at the train stations that help is there for them if needed.

i-india runs a shelter at night for children who choose to go back to the streets during the day. In the winter months when the temperature drops below zero, the School on Wheels bus is parked at the train station so children can also find a warm and safe refuge with support from Singapore's Tanglin Trust School, a Ladli for boys has been funded. Many boys sat happily sewing and gluing cards, decorating them with their individual artistic styles. Older boys sat by the newly donated sewing machines making bags. All products are sold and each child is paid. Having a Ladli for boys means these boys no longer need to live and work on the streets.

The very last day was spent with the girls. They held our hands and smiled up at us, welcoming us into their home. These girls are the "lucky ones" who are able to go to full-time school. In India, women sell their bodies for prostitution for as little as a cup of tea to feed their families. Their daughters are at risk of following suit, once they reach puberty. The girls in i-india homes are protected to some extent, but if their mothers demand them back,

sadly i-india cannot refuse them.

The new home we have funded in Jhag for girls will be a refuge for these girls in danger of this (Jhag is 45 km out of Jaipur). Again, we gave out more donated clothes and toys from Singapore.

We left for the airport with great reluctance and tears in our eyes. Visiting i-india was truly life-transforming. Each visit that I make, I come home feeling invigorated and "alive" even though there is much need with so many children denied even the most basic of rights. Supporting i-india projects enables thousands of children opportunities, giving them a hand up out of the poverty trap. 🇸🇮

Anita Williams is the president and founder of Street Child Project in Singapore, which supports i-india. She heard about the NGO through her family and was interested to know more. A visit four years ago was "the most inspiring and life-changing experience" and she found the organization worthy of support.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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