

dream in Sarnath: Buddha's Smile school

by Vanessa Turner

"I have seen miracles in action here and hope our dreams will come true."

sFirst, let me begin by saying that until I saw it with my own eyes, I had no conception of the intensity of the poverty, destitution, and sheer starvation that beset many of the local poor in the area of Ashapur, Sarnath, and the larger city of Varanasi. The suffering here is so prevalent it is almost nightmarish. I have seen far too many beggars' children, age five and below, walking barefoot and nude under the scorching Indian sun, their bodies so emaciated and ruined by hunger and malnutrition that you can see the cracks in their bones and the outline of the skeleton frame against their dry and pallid skin. Many have swollen stomachs, a sign of severe malnutrition, and these sights have become so mundane and banal to the local affluent (upper caste) people of this area as to become inconsequential to those who are not affected by such poverty. The lack of attention and sheer humanity to this epidemic of childhood poverty and mortality among the shudra, or untouchable caste of Uttar Pradesh (the larger state within which Sarnath and Varanasi are couched) is truly astounding to me, for I cannot understand how any human being could bear to walk past a starving young child and not even feel a minor pang of sympathy and an almost innate impulse to pick them up and carry them to a restaurant and feed them for the mere forty rupees (one US dollar) it takes.

Now the situation of the shudra castes in this district is much more severe than many other areas in India. The caste system, though ostensibly outlawed by the Indian government years ago, is acceded to religiously by the locals of Uttar Pradeshian society, and their glaring lack of concern for the increasing number of starving, dying children in the poorer areas of Varanasi is simply tragic.

I became involved in Buddha's Smile School for Underprivileged Children after meeting Rajan only a month into my stay in Sarnath. I am here on a Fulbright scholarship, as encouraged by my teachers, including Alan Wallace and his inspirational wife and my Sanskrit teacher, Vesna. Meeting Raj and her family was like finding a diamond cluster of jewels amidst a narrow-minded society of self-involved people. I was immediately taken by her warmth and open-mindedness, her gentleness and her kindness to me. I was homesick and confused, and she and her family immediately accepted me as a part of their family and insisted I take my every meal with them and their family of husband, wife, and two very young adorable daughters, ages 7 and 2. Our karmic bond and the uncanny feeling of familiarity that we shared led me to believe that it was no accident that I had become so instantly close with this exceptional Indian family, the kind of people who always invited the Rickshaw walas and other beggars and poor locals to their home for chai and food, who would not kill even the smallest insect if it crawled on their floor.

Getting to know Raj even better, I soon became aware of her great mission and current project, a recently-started free school for underprivileged beggar children in the surrounding area that would provide a comprehensive education covering Nursery school to Grade Five, giving them hope and encouragement for a brighter future, opening their young minds and stimulating their innate creativity,



The children have transformed since they are having regular meals, medical care and attention.

teaching them to think critically and to always question everything, to learn the ways of the previous great thinkers of India's past, such as Gandhi and Mother Theresa. The children born in these unfortunate positions grow up with the unquestioned assumption that they are worthless, that they will never rise up from their dejected states of poverty and constant hunger, that they too would be consigned to a life of carrying bricks for thirteen hours a day at two rupees a day, a life of begging or prostitution, or a life of fear and constant distress. Rajan made the commitment to begin this school after she moved from the more modern and thriving city of Calcutta to the small district of Varanasi with her newly-wed husband, Sukhdev. At that time she was working as a teacher in a local public school (by the way, Indian public schools are all tuition based and are a privilege afforded only the affluent and wealthier families of India who can meet the often exorbitant tuition costs demanded by these money-making institutions. Thus, education becomes a commodity for the wealthy, rather than a universal right for all).

Rajan and her husband began their new life in a very humble way, living in a small one-roomed flat in the poor village of Ashapur, the well-known abode of the beggars' colonies where many of the poorest people live in shacks or huts and where the constant threat of starvation is as common as the mosquito in humid summers. Seeing the light and joy in the eyes of the young children in the small community, Rajan began dedicating every afternoon to teaching the local children in the front yard of her flat, tutoring them and teaching them how to read and write Hindi and English. Pretty soon, word of Rajan's selfless deed spread and within a few weeks, she was literally flooded with children and their thin young mothers begging Rajan to tutor their children as well so that they would have the opportunity to escape the trap of their own predicament in the future. Unable to bear their requests, Rajan acceded, until she had one hundred small beggar children in her front lawn and was unable to attend to them all, nor even afford to sponsor them to get the essentials such as notebooks and pencils, or even to feed them when they began to cry out in hunger during class. At that point Rajan and her husband made a plan to move to the nearby city of Sarnath and open up a small restaurant there, for which Rajan's husband would have to take out a huge loan from the bank. They struggled for two years to make ends meet, and Rajan even opened up a small public school that took fees in order to support their family in the new town. But Rajan had already become quite famous in the beggars' colonies throughout Varanasi, a kind of saint for the children. She was soon flooded with beggars camping out on her new doorstep and pleading with her to reinstate her unofficial tutoring for their children. It was then that Rajan enlisted the help of her husband and some local friends and actually opened a Government of India accredited "free school" for the underprivileged children of the local area. It was small at first, and held in her gated front yard adjacent to the family's small restaurant. There were thirty students and over three hundred on the waiting list. To expand the school required money for bus transportation to pick up and drop off the children from and to their village of Ashapur,

the poorest village in all of Varanasi. Also, many of the children would come to school famished and weakened by prolonged hunger and lack of proper hygiene, and had difficulty concentrating on the class. So Rajan had to raise enough money to pay for daily free lunches for the children in order to revitalise and replenish their young bodies.

In addition, there was money needed for textbooks, pencils, notebooks, and school uniforms. Once I came, we put our heads together and e-mailed a bunch of organisations. Thanks to the help of Vesna and Alan Wallace, we were able to enlist the support of Amistad International, and this enabled us to provide all of those things and to increase the school to a number of 130 children, ranging in ages from 3 to 12 years old. Two more teachers were hired and the donations from Amistad provided enough for small but healthy daily meals, transportation in the form of three small vans, two teachers' salaries, text books, uniforms, and other necessities. I watched in awe as the children blossomed before my eyes. These children, once withered and emaciated by hunger and despair, their young faces already evidencing the signs of worry and aging, their small frail bodies with cracked skin and wrinkles around their brows, now glowed again with renewed joy and began to resemble ordinary children, rather than serious little adults. They say that there is no sweeter sound than that of a child's innocent laughter. Rajan gave them so much nurturing and love, and began to excite and stimulate their young minds in ways that no one had ever done before. She teaches a compendium of subjects including English, Hindi, Math, Science, General Education, Art, Dance, Creative Writing, Social Studies, even Sanskrit! Later she wants also to include music courses for the children.

Recently, however, we received an e-mail from the Amistad International president, who sadly informed us that their primary sponsor who had been our main source of monthly income had recently been wiped out of funds and that all monthly support would come to an end.

I have seen miracles in action here and hope our dreams will come true. I myself never imagined that I would have become so centrally engrossed in such a cause. My gut feeling is that Rajan's is no ordinary dream. I see Rajan as a modern heroine of Uttar Pradesh, a future Mother Theresa of sorts, to help extricate the children of the poorest castes here from the seemingly inextricable trap of economic and social suffrage.



If you are interested in the project and would like further information, you may contact Vanessa Turner, Fulbright student University California Santa Barbara, on e-mail: sarasvatima@yahoo.com.