

An Interview with:

Ms. Anuradha Bakshi
Project WHY, Giri Nagar, New Delhi, India

Why are there so many destitute people in the world with no one to care for them? Anuradha Bakshi started "Project WHY" (Giri Nagar, New Delhi, India) to get her own answer to this question, and to pay off what she felt was a debt to India and to the land, for her own privileged upbringing. Today Project WHY (see <http://www.projectwhy.org>) reaches over 500 children from slums and deprived backgrounds through its early education programme, after school education support programme, vocational counselling, computer centre, a day care centre for disabled children, and an intervention programme for the children of the nomadic Gadiya Lohar community. Besides this, children can engage in a variety of creative activities like dance, theatre and painting, as well as sports like karate. A gauge of the project's success? About 97% of the school going children passed their March 2003 examinations in their respective schools (primary and secondary, class I to XI).



Anuradha is also involved with Project Return, which seeks to urge the migrant poor to return to the countryside and their homes. She found through her work in Giri Nagar that many families in rural India leave marginal lands and migrate to urban slums. Their lands are good enough to raise oil seed bearing trees like Pongamia and Jatropha. The aim of Project Return is to make it profitable for people to return to their lands and base their livelihoods on naturally grown bio-diesels and organic products. Anuradha has organised a cooperative of Giri Nagar residents to raise and market Pongamia pinata saplings. Families raise between ten and thirty saplings in every available space that they have. Handcrafted pongamia oil -based organic soaps and jute products are now available for trial and sale through the website of the returnToNature initiative (See <http://www.projectwhy.org/rtn.asp>).

What inspired you to initiate this work?

A simple visit to my ancestral village in Bihar in May 1985 after three generations and the realisation that I would have been like all the women of the village, uneducated and married at 14 years of age, had there not been a historical accident in my family.

I felt that a debt had to be paid, and that someday, when my children would grow up, I would find a way of paying that debt back. I am doing just this, and am nowhere near the end.

How did friends and family react to your decision?

Initially I think many people thought that it would just be a temporary pas time for me. But my immediate family, my daughters and my husband stood by me, all the way.

Well, a 24-hour day and seven days a week commitment makes you lose many friends, but Project WHY has given me wonderful new friends from all walks of life and different parts of the world.

What is a typical day at work like for you?

Project WHY is almost a one woman show!

I get up at 6 am, and do administrative work till 8 am. From 8.30 to around 12 I am at the project site with the children. This is mainly to sort out problems that might occur in the field.

I go back to home/office and spend time with the Project Return (Renewable Energy Technologies in Urban Rural Networks : see <http://www.project-return.org>) team as we have to launch our product as part of our income generation team. There is work packaging, marketing etc.

At 12.30 pm some of the babies from the centre come home: Utpal the burnt baby, Arti and others. They are bathed and cared for, have lunch with us, play around and leave in the afternoon.

In the afternoon and evening there is more administrative work, looking for funding options, searching for information, answering mails, and updating our website.

This is a normal day when there are no crisis like a medical one, a family in distress, a child to be buried (happened last week), or a fight within the community.

What are some of the major obstacles that you have faced in your work and how were they dealt with?

Space is the major obstacle ... we are often *thrown* out of parks and roadsides, but our motto is find an alternative, so another road side is found, a little shack rented, and we carry on...winter or summer we have never stopped our classes.

Funds are another obstacle as we are not government -aided, have not yet got our FCRA clearance and have no institutional support.

My dream has been to have a pool of people giving small sums so that we carry on our work without having the limitations often linked to institutionalised funding.

This enables us to help the community and intervene in moments of crisis: hence we could help Utpal who had third degree burns, help the *Lohars* (gypsy ironsmiths) in their fight for human rights, help a little destitute family, add more classes, and so on.

At present we are in acute financial crisis but we will find a way, the destiny of 500 children and the livelihood of 40 slum dwellers is at stake.

Does your work lead to interaction with government bodies and if so, what is the experience of working with officials like?

We have had our share of interaction with government, and sometimes things were difficult, but in the ultimate analysis we abide by the law of the land, and keep our dealings with the local people concerned friendly and open: local police station, local municipal councillor etc. We strongly feel that this is the best way to get cooperation.

When there is a problem we go to the concerned authority and have found that they are helpful in general.

Is there any unique event/experience that you had while working that you would like to share with us?

There have been so many moments of joy in our work that it is difficult to choose one, often it is the smiles and the trust of the children that make every thing worth it. But I would like to share what was my most difficult day.

This happened last month when we had one of our staff in a government hospital and Rani, my assistant, had gone there to meet her. I got a call from the hospital and a shocked Rani asked me to come by. When I reached I found a young girl of 17 holding a dead stillborn baby that she had delivered alone the previous night. The hospital authorities wanted to throw the baby in the garbage, and this young mother, who had been dumped by an uncaring family, refused to let her child go. I took the tiny baby, wrapped it in my shawl and decided to give it a decent burial. When I reached the up-market crematorium I was shocked to see that children were buried in what looked like a garbage dump. We buried that baby and fulfilled a mother's wish.

I was too bewildered and shocked and honestly I do not know what was worse: the fact that a woman was abandoned, the callousness of a hospital, or the burial ground reserved for children...

Project WHY is always throwing up questions that need to be answered, but how!

Do you have message for young people who would like to do similar work?

Yes, a simple message... always remember that if you change one person's life it would have been worth it...

Are there organisations/people doing similar work in your area?

There are other organisations maybe with out a different approach but all doing good work....

What are your future plans?

Future plan is to open an extension centre for primary children in Okhla Phase II (New Delhi) and many more centres by generating enough funds through Project Return, so that we can empower many more communities to play an active role in the education of their children.

If you are reading this interview and are motivated by the work of Project WHY, then you can consider making a small donation to Project WHY to support the work it is doing.

You could sponsor a slum child's education programme, sponsor school fees for a Lohar child's class X examination, or contribute to the cost of specialised care and vocational training for disabled children. (See <http://www.projectwhy.org/howtohelp.asp> for more details). Cheques made in favour of Sri Ram Goburdhun Charitable Trust can be mailed to:

Anuradha Bakshi
C-15, Chiragh Enclave
New Delhi 110 048, India

Or you can make an online credit -card donation to Project WHY at:
<http://www.giveindia.org/give/ngoprofile/getOrganisationProfile.do?ngoid=98>

Say Hello to Life

Hello Life (www.hellolife.org) is a voluntary effort dedicated to improving the lives of people worldwide. The aim is to embrace life: and to help those less fortunate to embrace it as well. Hello Life periodically features an extraordinary individual initiative or South -based organization that has made the difference where it counts: at the grassroots. One of the core aims of Hello Life is to link up and share information on South -based initiatives that so far have an inadequate web presence. Hello Life volunteers will aid such organizations to develop a web presence of their own. It is hoped that this will catalyze their work and further the overall mission of improving the lives of people worldwide.

Do you know of a unique individual initiative or small South -based organization that has made a difference to people's lives? Would it benefit from the publicity of being featured as the "Helping Hand of the month" on HelloLife.org? Then share it with us at helpinghands@hellolife.org. Join Hello Life and become part of our network: Send a blank email to hellolife-subscribe@yahoogroups.com and receive updates on network activities, featured stories and the latest "Helping Hand of the month".