

More than Mouths to Feed *Rural India Finds its Own Solutions*

By Alex Stonehill and Sarah Stuteville
with additional reporting by Jessica Partnow
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Uttar Pradesh, INDIA--The whirr of old fashioned sewing machines reverberates in the high-ceilinged room. Forty girls dressed in uniform green and yellow *salwar kameez* bend their heads towards their stitching as shafts of afternoon sunlight warm their identical hairstyles of black looped braids.

In India this scene easily evokes the word sweatshop, and rightly so. Twenty five percent of India's population lives below the poverty line, and impoverished girls and young women are an easily exploited demographic. But here in Anoopshahr Sub-district in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), these students at Pardada Pardadi Girl's Vocational School are not sewing for someone else's profit, but for their own futures.

While India is currently the second fastest growing economy in the world, it is also home to the world's largest population of poor people, half of whom are concentrated in three rural states, including UP. In a country where two thirds of the population works in agriculture, mostly as subsistence farmers, stories of technology millionaires seem light years away, and the hope that the recent success of an emerging urban middle class will trickle down is too distant a promise for most rural Indians.

"Everyone in the world is talking about how India is shining," says Sam Singh, a local man who made his fortune in the United States, and returned five years ago to found the school, "and it's true, but only for about twenty percent. You have to ask how these twenty percent can fly with the other eighty percent hanging off of them."

Pardada Pardadi's model emphasizes a belief that while academics are crucial to lifting rural India out of poverty, education must be realistic in its goals and teach relevant skills. Here girls spend the first half of the day studying standardized Indian curriculum. In the second half they learn vocational skills, producing traditional handicrafts and textiles.

These skills will not only provide these young women with an independent source of income throughout their lives, but also function to sustain the school. The work produced by students is marketed towards India's upper classes, and the hope is that in a few years every aspect of the school will be funded by the profits. Former or current students will also eventually fill all of the school's teaching and administrative roles.

Sustainability and self-reliance are key goals of Pardada Pardadi and of particular importance to a rural Indian society where tuition money is scarce, government aid is unreliable, and education for girls is not a priority. For every day a girl attends school, ten rupees are deposited into a bank account created for her so that by graduation, if her attendance is regular, she can expect to have earned approximately 100,000 rupees (U.S. \$2,200). After two years of attendance at the school, a student also earns a bicycle so she can be responsible for her own transportation.

The value of self-reliance even extends to the everyday upkeep of the school, as girls clean and maintain the facilities and cook and serve meals themselves. This sharing of duties also helps break down caste, another cultural element hindering economic development in traditional Indian society.

By graduation students have something unheard of for women in the region: their own savings, a means of transport, and skills that can earn them income. But Singh hopes they will also have acquired a sense of civic duty. This year marks the first graduating class and the goal is that some of these girls will go on to found schools using a similar model in other parts of rural India, while others will start small businesses in their communities. "This is not about exporting talent to the cities," says Singh, "this is about trying to create the beginnings of a modern economy here."

Three hundred miles away, in the desert state of Rajasthan, a different but equally innovative school is also teaching rural children the values of self-reliance, and showing that truly sustainable development

can happen from the bottom up. As in UP, the education of children here is often neglected in the face of the immediate demand for labor on family farms. In response, Barefoot College, an Indian-run NGO fighting rural poverty, created a network of progressive schools held at night so that students can continue working during the day.

While regular education and vocational training are also part of Barefoot College's night schools, the Children's Parliament is perhaps their most unique program. Founded 13 years ago to teach children about government, the Children's Parliament is made up of student delegates, elected by the student body, who come together to discuss issues facing their schools and communities.

Before long The Children's Parliament had taken over full responsibility for administration of the night schools, hiring and firing teachers, organizing infrastructure—such as the solar energy that powers the schools—and developing curriculum. Their power has grown beyond just running their own schools and now these kids, aged 6-14, are a respected voice in local politics, often petitioning government for village development projects in a poor rural area that is underrepresented in the country's political system.

"We should have the right to education, the right to play, the right to health, the right to make mistakes and the right to make our own decisions," says Santosh, 14, the current PM and the youngest of nine children who spend their days tending the family's herd of water buffalo.

This autonomous spirit is emblematic of the kind of social development that is happening in parts of rural India. Instead of imitating urban and western models for development, or waiting for the proverbial rising tide, rural Indians are finding their own solutions to the unique issues their communities face. As a result they often have a more progressive approach than you might find in the middle class homes of New Delhi or Bangalore.

"What rural India brings to the economic table is eight hundred million sets of hands," says Singh, his urbane manner and smart western dress in stark contrast with the sputtering tractors and bullock carts lumbering by behind him.

But whether exemplified in the belief that children should play a central role in community government, or in the enthusiasm of a generation of girls to participate in and spread new educational models, rural India's most valuable asset may prove to be its eight hundred million minds.

*For the kid's version of this article and a teacher's guide of discussion questions pick up an issue of *Indy Kids* at schools and public libraries in New York City or visit www.indykids.net.*

I Come from All of India And I'm Just Like You

By Sarah Stuteville

with additional reporting by Jessica Partnow and Alex Stonehill

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Ahmedabad, INDIA—In a small, dimly lit room decorated with drawings celebrating Christmas, Diwali, and Eid, forty children attending Arzoo Kids Center sit with eyes closed and hands folded as if in prayer, belting out the Indian national anthem. While this may seem like a commonplace scene in an Indian after school program, it could mean salvation for the troubled city of Ahmedabad.

Gujarat made international news in February of 2002 when brutal ethnic riots between the Hindu and Muslim populations swept the state after an attack on a train of Hindu pilgrims returning from the controversial temple site at Ayodhya. In less than a month over 2,000 people were killed and countless others were left homeless, traumatized, and angry. Ahmedabad was the site of some of the worst

violence.

Though the national climate has shifted in the past four years with the shift of parliamentary control to the more moderate Congress Party, the Hindu-Nationalist BJP still controls Gujarat. Despite government probes and investigations into the riots currently underway, Hindu/Muslim relations remain tense. Many citizens of Ahmedabad worry that the possibility for more violence lies just beneath the surface.

"If the spirit of violence is in the people, it will take place regardless of the government," says Sulekha Ali, a young woman from a neighborhood that witnessed some of the worst of the violence. "Even now, if we see anything happening, even some small incident between a motorist and a police officer, our hearts are filled with fear that it will become another riot."

These concerns, coupled with a belief that children's minds are the key to a more peaceful future, led Ali and two friends to found Arzoo Kids in the immediate aftermath of the riots. At the time Ali was living with her family in a temporary refugee camp for Muslims displaced by the violence, and she believed that as long as her society stayed segregated from and suspicious of each other there was no hope for a lasting peace.

Ali and her partners soon moved the center to a small space in the poor and working class neighborhood of Behrampura, home to a diverse population of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, with a reputation as flash point for ethnic violence. She went door to door encouraging children from all backgrounds to come in the afternoons to play games, paint pictures, learn chess, study, or just talk about their problems with each other and the volunteer teachers.

At first community response was low. Though Hindu and Muslim children attend school together and their parents interact by necessity everyday on the streets of Ahmedabad, a program to specifically bring them together was unheard of, and Hindu parents were hesitant to send their children to an informal program run by Muslims. Ultimately, the Arzoo founders' good intentions and community outreach efforts, along with word of mouth from children who enjoyed their afternoons there won out. Now forty children from backgrounds that match the diverse demographics of Behrampura fill the small school building for several hours each day.

The Arzoo kids recently wrote and preformed a musical for their community where individual children came on stage as hypothetical people from different states and of different religions singing about their customs. At the end of the performance everyone came on stage singing together in chorus, "My name is Bhindia, I come from all over India, and I am just like you!" Ali understands the limitations of a program like Arzoo Kids. She knows that it can only do so much in the face of deep-rooted fear and hatred. But her hope is that through Arzoo (Gujarati for Wish), she can play a part in developing young people who are sensitive, tolerant, and courageous so that if violence breaks out again they will be at least forty young voices speaking against it.

Ashraf Sheikh, 14, says he will be one of those voices. The riots came to his neighborhood when he was eleven years old, and he saw many of his friends and neighbors beat up and their houses burned while police stood by. He was terrified and angry, feelings which were intensified by his isolation from his old Hindu friends while his family took shelter in a refugee camp. When Sheikh saw that many of his peers were joining the rioting, he says he was so angry that all he could think to do was fight. But his parents held him back, concerned for his safety.

One day, as he was walking around his ravaged neighborhood just before the state imposed curfew, he came across Arzoo kids. He says the love and respect he felt from the teachers there attracted him right away. Sheikh has now become a serious student, a devotee of afternoon Arzoo chess games, and a master kite maker (A tradition in Ahmedabad, home of the International Kite Festival). He hopes to attend one of India's top universities and to one day become a doctor.

While he believes riots will again come to Gujarat, he says that this time he will stand up against friends participating in the fighting. "I will say 'stop!' and challenge them to think about why they want to make violence and who has told them to do so," says Sheikh, whose shy demeanor grows serious and intent when he speaks of potential violence, "I will tell them that we should give respect to everyone and always take care of them, no matter who they are."

Investing in Delhi's Youth

By Jessica Partnow

with additional reporting by Sarah Stuteville

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New Delhi, INDIA – When 16 year old Ishita Chaudhry agreed to speak at a New Delhi conference on social and ethnic breakdown in India in the wake of the 2002 riots in Gujarat, she had no idea that it would change the course of her life.

The careful preparation and thought that went into her attempt at representing India's youth – nearly a quarter of the country's population – on important issues of social justice was met with what amounted to a pat on the head from conference organizers.

While it seemed adults in the NGO world benefited from professional networks, resources, and funds, Chaudhry felt the youth voice was being silenced.

Four years later, that frustration has been transformed into The Youth Parliament, an organization that has helped over 800 young people design, fund, and implement their own projects.

The YP functions as a resource center for kids with an idea, supplying young people with the research, connections, and support they need to make it happen – and “it” can be anything from a documentary film, to by-kids-for-kids health education programs, to rural-urban cultural exchanges.

Successfully completed projects have included distributing clothes and food to New Delhi's street kids, a documentary on the commercialization of sports culture, and a youth forum exploring the effects of corruption on every day life.