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On the Ground Emergency Relief,



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W.I.S.H. - Women's Independent Self-Help Network

In Orissa, India, girl children are often still seen as a family burden and women suffer many negative social pressures and gender bias. The dowry system, although outlawed since 1961, is widely practiced and the patriarchal extended family system is the norm. Marriage is seen as the primary option for many women. When a woman enters the household of the husband's family, most often she will adopt a new role of caring for the husband's parents, having children and serving the household. Ideally this system works well in rural Orissa, but when the family structure breaks down or when there is abuse, it is disastrous. To complicate matters, rural women have often been denied education and job opportunities are limited. The society also does not accept the concept of re-marriage for women. Without personal, social or economic freedom, women are often left

completely helpless.

Vulnerable women include widows, unwed mothers, trafficked women and girls, women survivors of natural disaster, victims of sexual abuse who have been disowned by their families, women who are victims of domestic violence or those thrown out by husbands who have simply taken a new wife. Thousands of women in Orissa fall into this category and are placed back into the hands of a society that has helped perpetuate the problem in the first place.

Rescue homes are poorly funded and have restrictions on how long "inmates" can stay. With few options, NGO's and the government repeatedly encourage women to return to unsafe homes or families that do not want them. As anger and abuse usually escalate, many women return to what is in

reality a living hell. Those that absolutely cannot go home live with the social stigma of being an unwanted "destitute woman". Confined to a home where funds for vocational training or business opportunity are virtually nil leads to increasing depression and helplessness. Many are teens or young adults with their whole life ahead of them...

Grassroots Asia visited several rescue homes and asked the women what their *wish* was for their life. Unanimously they stared back with a blank expression, never having been asked this question before. Gradually what emerged was the same answer from all the women questioned. "We want to stand on our own two



Left: A 29 year old woman shows how she tried to protect herself from her husband and his brothers. Her broken fingers, black eye and bruises on the neck are visible

feet, to be independent women." Thus the Women's Independent Self-Help Network (W.I.S.H.) has been developed to help women become personally, socially and economically independent.

Grassroots Asia will begin with a small house in Cuttack for 10 women and will develop a business for them. In addition to establishing a small entrepreneurial business, we will provide the women with professional counseling, mentoring, vocational training and other life-enhancing activities. This project is to be the seed which will begin an independent women's network of self-sufficiency in Orissa. *More in the next issue of On The Ground....*

40 New Children Will Join the Hariharananda Balashram in June



This woman, living in a rescue home, has four daughters. She cannot care for her children or herself. The oldest daughter (right) has been accepted this year at the Hariharananda Balashram

The selection process has begun for forty new children who will be accepted into the Hariharananda Balashram resident home and school this June. 500 applications have already been received requesting admittance. As the school's reputation becomes more widespread, the demand for seats has been overwhelming.

Applications will be reviewed carefully and sorted according to the need of the children. Those selected for an interview will be visited by the staff of the Balashram and their home condition will be evaluated. Some of the children have no parents and some have single parents or guardians that cannot care for them. The final forty selected will move into the Balashram for the next 12 years. The chil-

dren will receive the education and care that is usually reserved for the upper classes (an English-medium education, medical and dental care, nutritious vegetarian food and extra circular activities) all free of charge. The loving care and spiritual guidance of Prajnana Mission will bring inner security and a solid foundation for their life in the world. Let us welcome the new children into our family.....

Ruchika Shraddha Bhaban: Condolences to Rajani

Grassroots Asia extends loving condolences to Rajani, one of our precious children at Ruchika's *Shraddha Bhaban*. *Shraddha Bhaban* is the rescue home that we established in Bhubaneswar in 2004. In the last issue of *On The Ground* we published a story about rescuing a 15-year old girl from the red light district. We were able to do that with the help of Rajani, a 14-year old girl at *Shraddha Bhaban*. That day we also met Rajani's mother who lived and worked in the red light district. Rajani's mother welcomed me into her small hut with open arms. She was so thankful that we were caring for her daughter and giving her a chance at a different life.

The close relationship between Rajani and her mother was apparent.

During our visit this February Rajani's mother made the front page of the newspapers when three of her clients murdered her in her hut during a dispute over money. Rajani's pain was apparent as the staff at *Shraddha Bhaban* recounted the details of the stabbing.

Her mother and her 16-year old brother were her only family. Her brother now lives with her mother's 22-year old "friend", most probably the young man who procured the clients for her. When I asked Rajani what she needed, her requests were simple. She

asked that we try to help her brother and she asked us not to send her back. We assured her that she was welcome to stay with us. We are currently trying to locate her brother. Her destiny will be different than her mother's thanks to Ruchika Social Services, who manages *Shraddha Bhaban*, and the donors at Grassroots Asia.



Rajani

Medical Surgeries Transform Lives

Kapura Hansta loves to dance. She was born in western Orissa with a club foot that required complicated surgery. With no surgeons who could perform the operation and with no money, she has grown up with the disability. Her mother died when she was very young and when her father was unable to care for her, he placed her in the St. Vincent's orphanage, where four sisters care for 50 disabled children.

One sister recently traveled 450 km with the seven year old to seek help for her disability. Our friend Dr. Singh at Seba Hospital, with Grassroots



Asia's support, performed the surgery in February. After 10 days in the hospital Kapura returned to the orphanage with a newly constructed foot. Although her club foot never stopped her, she will now be able to dance even better.

Pranti Das lost her husband two years ago to septicemia after a hard battle. The family gave up their small piece of rice paddy land for medical bills

to save his life. However, it was unsuccessful and the family was left fatherless and landless. Pranti has three children, sons, 15 and 13, and a 12-year-old daughter. Her oldest son has undergone two surgeries himself and is limited in the work he can do. Other family members help pay for his schoolbooks. He has managed to graduate high school by studying by a gas lantern. He also earns rps. 800 (about \$18) per month as a laborer to support his family. His 13 year old brother makes rps. 200 by watching cows. Pranti Das has been suffering with an infected gallbladder and several gallbladder stones for 1 1/2 years. When the discomfort became unbearable, she showed up at the Balashram asking for help and she was



Pranti Das and her 15-year old son at Seba Hospital

referred to Grassroots Asia. We had the required surgery performed at Seba Hospital in Cuttack. Her oldest son and her brother came to the hospital and traded shifts for 5 days to care for her. I accompanied them back to their village, and when I entered their hut, the first thing her son did was show me a picture of his father. As I left her I wondered what would happen to this family. We will check up on them on our next visit.



Pranti Das in front of her hut with her brother (left) and her two sons

Many of these projects have been funded, or funded in part, by a grant from the Duane Stranahan Estate of the Toledo Community Foundation. Grassroots Asia extends a warm thank you to the Duane Stranahan family and all of its donors for making this work possible

Bijayalaxmi Rout What happened to her?

We visited 17-year-old Bijayalaxmi Rout from Ali district of Orissa, who was awarded a scholarship last year. She has been attending collage and in the six months since we last saw her she had grown from a child to a young woman with a confident demeanor. Her family was very thankful and showed deep appreciation for the chance that the scholarship gave Bijayalaxmi. Her life will now take a new course and she will have a chance at being a self-sufficient woman.

When asked what she wanted to be after college, Bijayalaxmi said that she wanted to major in political science and be a politician so that she could make a difference and help people.

Her scholarship from the Tripathy Scholarship Fund included college fees for two years, books, uniforms, and a bicycle for transportation.

Oftentimes people ask, "What can a small donation really do?" Here is a good example...the scholarship amount was \$109.... and it transformed her life.

Unfortunately our picture of Bijayalaxmi did not turn out. We will add her photo in our next issue.



Registration is still open for the **Balashram Sinai Trek**, a charitable trek for the Hariharananda Balashram resident home & school.

The trek will take place **October 30 – November 6** in the Sinai Desert and will be led by Paramahansa Prajnananandaji, founder of the Balashram. This is a rare opportunity to spend time with a renowned spiritual master and help a worthy cause.

For more information, visit www.balashramtrek.org

Orphanage Receives Two New Sewing Machines Teen Girls Start Entrepreneurial Business

Sangram Sahoo says that several years ago he received a calling from the Lord to care for abandoned and unwanted babies. Today he has 55 children living with him in his small house in Cuttack, Orissa. And this is not the typical orphanage...these children have been adopted by the family. Both of his biological children and his wife agreed to adopt the children as their own. And when you visit their house it is clear... they are a family. They are, however, extremely poor.

Two of the boys who grew up in the Sahoo household have returned home to help their parents raise the other children and when I questioned his daughter, now in college, about what she wanted to do with her life, she said that she wanted to help care for the children.



During our visit, two homeless young brothers whose mother could not care for them were brought from the railway station and accepted into the household.

The nine oldest girls have started a wholesale clothing business to supplement the family income, but they were using a broken sewing machine. We decided to purchase two new sewing machines that were also capable of embroidery. The girls ramped up production in March and have sold several items at the local market for a good profit.



Nine girls from the Save A Life orphanage have started a wholesale dress making business

Santa Claus at Sambalpur, Orissa

Grassroots Asia president, Debbie Pennington, played Santa Claus to hundreds of children in Sambalpur, Orissa on Christmas Day. Traffic was backed-up for several blocks as children lined up to receive their candy canes, pens, pencils and pencil sharpeners. The most important ingredient was the love and laughter shared by adults and children alike.



About Grassroots Asia...

Grassroots Asia identifies and empowers grassroots projects in Asia which offer a high social return on investment. Emphasis is placed on emergency relief, basic care and education for children and the underprivileged.

Grassroots Asia is a volunteer organization. 100% of contributions go directly to projects. There are NO administrative fees.

Grassroots Asia is a 501(c)3 organization. Contributions are tax deductible.

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Hariharananda Balashram Begins New Computer Lab Thanks to Rotary International

The Hariharananda Balashram inaugurated a new computer lab in February thanks to a matching grant between the Rotary Club of Snowmass Village (Colorado) and Rotary Club of Kendrapara Central (Orissa). Seven computers were purchased through the Rotary grant and Grassroots Asia added two more for a total of nine computers.

The plan is to develop a full multimedia room for the children. Each year we will add more computers and equipment which will insure the children at the resident home and school a quality technical education.



The Hariharananda Balashram is currently home to 120 children who were once destitute. Accepting the poorest of the poor in Orissa, "the Balashram" as it is affectionately called, has embraced the unique concept of giving the best care and education to the least likely to receive it.

Forty new children will be selected for admittance this June (see page 1).

The Rotary Foundation matching grant also includes textbooks for all the children this year, library books, desks for two classrooms and a well for drinking water and sanitation. These items are currently being purchased & constructed.



The Balashram children enjoy their first computer lesson after the installation of the new computer lab

Grassroots Asia spearheaded the grant and is acting as a coordinating and reporting agency for Rotary International. Look for further reports on the Rotary matching grant for the Balashram as well as for the *Kendrapara School For the Mentally Retarded* and the *Kendrapara School for the Blind* in the next issue of *On The Ground*.



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