

Calcutta Out-Of-School project Visit Report to CVI Board (7/99)

by
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I spent a good deal of time with this project, which is run by CINI Asha. I got to know most of the social workers quite well; I found them to be a very motivated lot.

CINI Asha, as you know, is the urban wing of Child In Need Institute. It was spun off in 1989, in response to the need for rehabilitating the street children of Calcutta. I had visited them first in 1997, and you have read the [article](#) that I wrote about them. Although their focus has been on street kids in the past, they have started a push to identify all out of school children---be they street kids or be they kids who live with families---and to mainstream them into formal schools. They started these efforts in 1993, but these efforts have gained a huge amount of momentum in the past two years.

CINI Asha has been concentrating on the areas of Tangra and South Tangra. Tangra is Calcutta's landfill, and is now the site of a huge number of slums and squatter colonies. (I was never clear on the difference between a slum and a squatter colony; my guess is that one of them is acknowledged by the civic authorities, while the other is not recognized at all. The one that is recognized is provided very basic amenities like a common water pump and a common toilet.) South Tangra is dominated by the leather industry, which provides employment to the thousands of immigrants from Bangladesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, who live in more slums and squatter colonies.

The task of mainstreaming out of school children is an enormous community enterprise. It seems as if the actual education of the children is only a small part of the picture: an immense amount of work first needs to be done in identifying the children who are out of school, then in sensitizing the community on the need to put these children into school, then into identifying community space in which to locate preparatory centers in which the children will spend a year before being sent to formal schools, and finally, in ensuring that the families of the children retain their children in school and in ensuring that the child is able to hold its own in formal schools.

CINI Asha's social workers first go into the community and identify the leaders of the community. These could be any of different kinds of people: in the Nengrikhuli slums, it was the tribal chief (the residents of this slum are tribals from the Chattisgarh district of Madhya Pradesh). In other places, it could simply be concerned residents, or public-spirited neighbors. Often, it is more than just one person. It is crucial that these leaders are roped into the enterprise; they are needed to identify out of school children, to procure community resources, and to motivate parents to keep their children in school. With these leaders' help, a tally is first made of all children who are out of school. Next, the parents of these children are approached, and are convinced of the need for their children to be in school. Simultaneously, a few rooms in the neighborhood are procured to house the preparatory schools, and local teachers are hired. The children are sent to these preparatory schools for a year, during which they are taught reading,

writing, and some arithmetic. Most importantly, they are taught basic discipline, such as the ability to sit quietly at a task for an hour. (Since these kids have been allowed to run free all their lives, the ability to sit still is something they lack; the teachers often resort to yoga practices to teach them how to sit quietly and concentrate.) A year later, these children are sent to government-aided schools in the neighborhood. CINI Asha's social workers continue to monitor these kids, and arrange coaching classes for those who are at-risk.

CVI is sponsoring three of their preparatory centers: one for the children of the Dhobiatalla slum (this is in Tangra), and two for the children of the Nengrikhuli slums (these are in South Tangra). I went to each of these centers, and spent quite some time visiting the slums and squatter colonies that these kids come from. These are particularly wretched places: crowded, filthy, with weak social structure: there is much drinking, gambling, domestic abuse, forced prostitution. Education seems to be the only way out for the kids of these neighborhoods.