



The Sugauli Disabled Girls Project

For around \$20 a month, a disabled girl can live and be educated at the Sugauli Sacred Heart Convent, under the supervision of Sr. Ambrose by Saskia Raevouri



IN 2006, Sue Tennant, Mark Bloomfield and I traveled to Bihar, the remotest, most primitive region of India, close to the border of Nepal, to see the work Sr. Mary Crescence had been doing to bring literacy to the "untouchable" classes. With the support of first Mark and later Sue's FreeSchools World Literacy charity, Sr. Crescence had established close to 30 schools, in the towns of Patna, Motihari, Muzzafarpur, Sugauli and Bettiah. My story is told in **FreeSchools—A Life-Changing Experience.**



In Sugauli with Sr. Ambrose and Sr. Crescence in 2006

On the day we visited the schools in Sugauli (twenty miles from Bettiah where we were headquartered) we stopped off for tea at the Sugauli Sacred Heart convent, which specialized in disabled children. Sr. Kadavelil Ambrose, the nun in charge, gave us a tour which included their formal school of six small classes (children pay \$3 a month), as well as an area inside the convent where a class consisting of handicapped and terminally ill was gathered. (Here is where I first saw the one tricycle wheelchair that led us to fund **The Tricycle Wheelchair Project.**)



These children all come from primitive villages where a handicap is considered a curse on the family; a girl with a handicap a double curse. The Sisters take these children in and lovingly provide them with a home and an education, while a Dutch charity, Liliane-fonds, pays for their surgeries and rehabilitation.

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Showing us a large room with many bunk beds, Sr. Ambrose explained that it could only accommodate boys, all of whom slept in this one space. She wanted to take in girls also, but there was no room. Her dream was to either add on to the convent or build a new structure on adjoining vacant land. Income from the formal school supports the convent to a degree, but as always outside funds are needed for such improvements, as well as the costs of housing the children. I hoped one day to help her realize this dream.



In 2007 Sue and I returned to Bihar, this time with Dr. John Lange (read my account **Journey to Bihar 2007.**) During this visit the Sisters had organized a Medical Camp for Children at the Sugauli convent, inviting the primitive villagers to bring their children for examination by Dr. John. The purpose was not to diagnose serious conditions but common ailments due to poor sanitary conditions and prescribe minor medications. This also served as a way break the ice with superstitious villagers, to gain their trust and allow the Sisters to educate their children. Again Sr. Ambrose expressed her wish for a hostel for disabled girls, to give them a chance at a normal life.



Vacant land on the convent grounds in 2006 housed a new building in 2010

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In March of 2010, when Dr. John and I returned to Bettiah, this time with Geri Johnson of FreeSchools World Literacy-USA, for the opening of the **Bridge Course Dormitory** (for which we had raised the funds), we attended another Medical Camp for Children at the Sugauli convent. Now, on what had been vacant land in 2006, we saw a beautiful new building, courtesy of the Dutch charity, Lilianefonds. The main purpose was for rehabilitation and medical care, but now Sr. Ambrose had more room and could take in some handicapped girls. Already she had ten girls boarding.

I asked Sr. Ambrose how many more she could handle and how much it would cost, and she calculated that she could make room for another five, at a cost of \$20 per month per girl. I promised to get her the money. In September 2010 she sent me pictures of the girls along with a description of the situation:

. . . Regarding the disabled children in the hostel, at present we have ten girls and two boys. They attend the formal convent school, tailoring training and participate in other ability-developing activities. Their expenses are somehow managed with our expenses. With \$1,500 I will manage for those five mentioned girls' convent education with hostel accommodation for one year. The sixth girl, Urmila, missing both hands, needs to be supported at home. In this area, I look for support from you if possible, because those who are being educated are highly motivated and doing very well in their studies. . . . Also the payment for a part-time tailoring teacher

Rs.800/-per month [\$18]. Saskia, if possible in this area help me. . . .

Lilianefonds supports 200 disabled children who are with various types of disabilities. Around 60 of them are under home-based programmes (IHPs), they are with severe cerebral palsy (C.P.), mentally retarded (M.R.), mentally ill (M.I.), multiple disabilities (M.D.), a few deaf and dumb. All of our disabled children belong to the remote villages, where 95% of the people are illiterate, landless laborers. In their villages there is Sarvashikha Abiyan (SSA), government schools, but no teaching takes place—children go to school only to eat rice with water. For the capacity building with education we provide hostel accommodation with education.

There are many new disabled children to support. This is my humble request that if possible help me in hostel accommodation with capacity building training, and for at least a few disabled children's education and health checkups.

Once again thanking you and your team very much for the helps which you had given to us. With God's abundance of blessings and love. . . ."

I wrote back agreeing to raise the money, and in December Sr. Ambrose responded:

. . . Thank you for the happy news of helping for 6 disabled girls with tailoring teacher's salary i.e. total amount Rs.74,400/-.



*Ramawathi Kumari 15 yrs
(Cerebral Palsy)*



*Reeta Kumari 16 yrs
(Polio)*



*Ranju Kumari 15 yrs
(Polio)*



*Anthima Kumari 16 yrs
(Polio)*



*Shajaha Khatoon 9 yrs
(Cerebral Palsy)*



*Urmila Kumari 16 yrs.
(Phocomelia)*

If possible I have one more humble request, for a cooking lady's salary per month Rs.1000/-X12 months [\$265] that that they can conveniently get their food after their classes in the convent school. Here actually we can accommodate 12 hostelers on the ground floor of the convent.

In the next email she further explained:

. . . This hostel is for capacity-building education and these children are supposed to write exams in the government schools to make them eligible for their rights.

. . . Regarding Urmila without both hands, I wonder how to help her in the convent and how to make her independent for her own needs primarily. She is in her puberty age, too. I have discussed to make artificial hands for her. . . .

So, Saskia, thank you very much for your hard work to make the deprived ones to live a better life with self esteem.

Also kindly extend our thanks to the ones who contribute to our work. . . .

I initiated a fundraising campaign through my Square Circles website, in partnership with Mind, Body, and Spirit, Inc., raising slightly over the amount. Paula Sutton of MBS wired the funds to India and on March 23, 2011, Sr. Ambrose wrote:

. . . This afternoon Sr.Seema has informed me that the wired money Rs.94,000/- (c.\$1800) has reached the Central Bank of India, Patna. I know that both of you [Paula and I] took much trouble to reach this money to us. Therefore, on behalf of your sponsored girls and me, we extend our heartfelt thanks and gratitude.

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On July 27, 2011, Sr. Ambrose sent me the following report on the girls we had sponsored, with pictures.



Ramawathi Kumari(CP) is from a remote village where female education is below 1%. After her hostel education she took admission in Govt. School in VIIIth Std. She has built confidence to go to school regularly, is socially growing and able to communicate with others, although she stammers. Though her ability to read and write is not yet satisfactory, still it is great that a CP girl has grown up to this level.



Anthima Kumari, with polio of the right leg with contracture and deformity, belongs to a remote village named Navaragia where female education is below 2%. She has passed her Xth Std education and she took admission for I.A. while she stayed in the hostel. She was highly motivated for her right leg corrective surgery and is undergoing physiotherapy with caliper and shoes.



Reeta Kumari, with short right leg and polio, is from Chanpatia village. She was in the hostel and has now joined in the Govt School in VIIIth Std. There she continues her tailoring training as well. While she was in the hostel she underwent orthopedic check and treatment. Now her mobility has improved and she moves about with caliper and support shoes.



Ranju Kumari belongs to a far-away village where female education is below 1%. After her hostel stay, she is highly motivated for education and studies in Govt. School Xth Standard where she also continues her tailoring training. She moves about on her knees.



Shajaha Khatoon, a Muslim girl with severe cerebral palsy improved much in behavior. In the beginning her movements were not under her control but her hostel stay helped her much to develop balance. She studies in the Govt. School in IInd Standard.



Manisha Kumari, 6 years old, with deformity on her right hand, replaces Urmila Kumari, the girl with no hands who could not be kept in the hostel and instead is being supported at home with her family. There will be a further report on Manisha soon.

THANK YOU!

Jean Ascher
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Block/Raevouri matching
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