

The Tricycle Wheelchair Project



ONE DAY on our first visit to Bihar in 2006, I went with Sister Crescence and Mark Bloomfield to inspect the schools in the town of Sugauli, about 23 kilometers from Bettiah where we were headquartered. This took us about an hour over bumpy, potholed roads!



Entering the town, we stopped off for morning coffee at the Sacred Heart Convent, run by Sister Ambrose. Here they specialized in all manner of disabled and terminally ill children.



Some were boarders and others lived at home with their families, attending school during the day. While their bodies were defective, there was nothing wrong with their minds!

Before we went inside, the Sisters brought out a small group of handicapped boys, mostly polio victims,



and it broke my heart to look at their loving, innocent faces. Polio may be eradicated in some parts of the world, but not here!

Inside, a group of crippled and terminally ill children gathered in a dark hallway (electricity only being available a few hours a day), and a little girl with a deformed leg was brought forward for me to inspect. Sr. Ambrose mentioned that a Dutch charity, the Lilianefonds, paid for the children's surgeries and rehabilitation.

The convent was full to capacity with boarders, and Sr. Ambrose showed us a room where about twenty handicapped boys slept in little cots.

Sr. Ambrose explained that these unfortunate children, especially the girls, are hit double. Born into a lower caste family automatically places them at the very bottom of the underprivileged list, but when they arrive with birth defects, their own families often regard them with superstition and treat them as outcasts. And for girls born with deformities it is even worse, as they are often treated as pariahs for placing a curse on the family. This is why the work of these Sisters in this part of the world is so important, providing as it does a haven of love and security for these otherwise throw-away children.

After coffee she took us outside and pointed to a small plot of land next to the main building, now used as a garden, where the nuns hoped to build a hostel to take in as many disabled girls as possible from the surrounding villages. At this time there was no room for them.

Outside stood a tricycle wheelchair, something we had noticed everywhere we went in Bihar, used by people who can't walk—at least, those who are lucky enough to afford one. It works like a bicycle but instead of pedaling with their feet they turn a handle with their right hand and steer with the left.

Sr. Ambrose told me that they could use at least fifteen of these tricycles, but the convent only had one. At first I thought I might raise money for shiny western-style wheelchairs, but Sr. Ambrose said no, that these tricycle wheelchairs were made locally in Patna for around \$125 each, that they are built to withstand the beating they get riding over treacherous Bihar roads. Unlike our wheelchairs, these models join in with the regular road



traffic. In addition, having it made in India gives the tricycle maker a chance to earn a few rupees, since many struggle to earn a living in Bihar.

In the past few days, driving through towns and villages I had noticed many crippled adults, unable to walk and crawling along on the ground, unable to afford the cost of a tricycle wheelchair. This this had tugged at my heartstrings.

I can truly say that I left my heart in Sugauli. After this visit I could not get these children out of my mind, so one of the first things I did when I returned to the States, in addition to starting a fundraising campaign for the FreeSchools themselves, was to create a separate fund for tricycle wheelchairs. At that time I was only able to raise \$350 for the tricycles, but at least it gave three kids a chance at mobility!

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The next year, when I returned to Bihar with Sue Tennant and Dr. John Lange, we visited the Sugauli convent again. A Medical Camp for Children had been organized by the Sisters, and the courtyard was filled with a welcoming committee of village children and their parents, along with the nuns, teachers, and local dignitaries. Also gathered on the lawn to greet us were the three handicapped children sitting in their brand-new tricycle wheelchairs.

To look into the eyes of these children you will see that mentally they are just as sound, and have just as good a chance of becoming worthy and accomplished citizens, as any of their more perfectly formed peers.



Returning to the States, I campaigned with new vigor and this time raised another \$1250 to purchase ten more tricycles. Sr. Ambrose emailed me the photos below of the happy recipients with their wheelchairs made with our funds. Thanks to Dick & Janny Feenstra, Dolores Nice, Judy Ausma Nyland, Hendrik & Margreet Snyder, Paula Sutton, June Vickers, Richard Voss, Don Ware, Ron and Socorro Zebal, and the Anonymous Donor who purchased 5 tricycles!

To think that a set of legs can be purchased for around \$125!

