



A Better Life

A deep affection for India and its people has repeatedly drawn **Anita Williams** to the country, first as a nurse in Kolkata's slums, and now helping street children as head of Street Child Project, fully supporting i-india. And Anita absolutely believes that it is she who benefits most from the experience.

Interview by Lydia Davis



Feature: Profile



How was i-india originally founded?

Abha Goswami founded i-india in 1993. Abha was commissioned by UNICEF to do research on street children. She collated extensive information after interviewing many children and handed the information back to UNICEF. When she asked them how they would then use the info to help the children, their response was that they just wanted the statistics. Abha felt she had promised the children that there would be action as a result of the research, so she quit her job and started cooking from her own home and taking it to the children. She taught them how to use a pen, how to write their names. Every day it got bigger as more children heard about it, and now i-india helps 3,000 children a day.

How did you hear about i-india?

I became involved with i-india in 2005 when a family friend, Tri Barker, encouraged my sister and me to visit the organisation. Tri taught jewellery-making to the girls in the vocational training centre called "Ladli" (meaning loving girl). I had worked and lived in the country before, so Tri knew that I would be interested in helping. She has no idea what she's done; in teaching the girls a skill for life she has given them pride as well as future possibilities that they never had before. The children don't want handouts – they want education and skills so that they can become empowered.

Fundraising is a major part of your role. How do you find that?

Fundraising can be intimidating when we have large events. But I know that I have to do it; audiences need to feel comfortable and secure in giving their support. All the planning beforehand can be quite unnerving; however, it's a great method to raise awareness and funds for i-india. I want the guests to enjoy the event but also understand the meaning of our work, and to leave with a smile, knowing that they've made a difference.

What other forms does the fundraising take in Singapore?

There are many ways we fundraise – through events, selling Ladli jewellery in fairs and private homes, donations, school activities (for example, swimathons, walkathons, and bake sales, etc.). "Food for Thought" lunches and dinners also are enjoyable ways to raise funds, as each guest gives a donation to i-india rather than buying gifts for the host. Last week I attended two fairs and raised over \$2,500; someone else had a private dinner, a lady who came to a jewellery party and wanted to help. I thought that she was going to invite

10 people round and give them a glass of wine, but no! She invited 70 people round and raised \$13,000.

How much money does i-india need per year to run?

It's around \$500,000 on an annual basis. That covers everything – seven shelter homes, the School on Wheels buses, Ladli vocational centre, Jeep ambulances, water tankers, staff wages (which are nominal), food for over 600 street children every day, and other projects reaching out to help around 3,000 children in some way every day. i-india wants to do more.

What developments have there been in the last couple of years with i-india?

Thanks to wonderful volunteer support in the last two years we have funded two solar-powered homes. The first one was a residential home for boys in Jhag Village – there were some boys in desperate need of somewhere to stay. Now they have so much space, and they are able to play cricket every afternoon. We couldn't move any girls in because the government told us that if we housed girls there, they would deem it unfit and close it down. Therefore, this year we funded a home for 54 girls, due to be completed in February 2011. Additionally, money from fundraising contributed towards a library at Jhag school, two School on Wheels buses, a Jeep ambulance, transport vehicles, a water tanker, a tractor, a generator, and room for a new Ladli boys home; we are a constant form of strong support for Ladli by promoting and selling the products in Singapore. There is also a medical clinic under construction, with plans for a vocational training centre in Jhag.

You travel to Jaipur twice a year to view i-india projects. How do you find the trips?

Every trip to Jaipur is so intense; I include as many people as possible so more awareness is generated. They are



emotional trips, and the people who come out with me nearly always get involved as a result and fundraise or donate on whatever level they can. One couple were getting married and instead of presents they asked for donations to i-india. The trip changes people.



What amazes you most about the children when you go out there?

I have seen them when they first come into the homes, terrified, not knowing what's going to happen to them next. They've been exploited and abused. And then the transformation – you can almost watch it unfold by the minute as they see how happy the other children in the home are, and begin to talk to them. They get counselling and social work support, as well as the food and shelter. They can be children again.

I remember seeing three brothers come in, the eldest with his arms around the other two; they looked so frightened. I went up to the eldest boy and showed him the photo of where they would be living – the Jhag boy's home. He then showed it to his brothers. They couldn't believe it; now they would go to full-time school, play cricket in the afternoons, have fun with other children in the home. They have their childhoods back. They used to live on the street trying to earn money which their violent alcoholic father took from them. Their mother, a prostitute, begged i-india to take care of them.

How do the children come to i-india?

A lot of the children come to i-india through the free Child Helpline – there are posters in train stations and public places advertising the number they can call for help. Sometimes the parents call and ask i-india to take their children; it's a long process as the community services and police have to be involved. Orphaned children take priority of placement. I want the homes to be filled immediately, but unfortunately it can't happen that quickly. The process takes time.

Are there any particular children that have touched you?

Each case touches me, as every child has a really staggering story. However, occasionally, a child has a particular impact. There is a girl, Anita. We share the same name, but were born into completely different destinies. When she was nine, she was sold into marriage by her parents to an old man.

Although she managed to run away, more horrendous things happened to her. She came to i-india through Child Helpline, and is now a stunning jeweller. With her savings from Ladli she's just left to set up her own jewellery business. That's what validates my work.

What advice can you offer to someone who reads this interview and thinks "I want to help but I don't know how"?

We will have a volunteer's awareness morning early next year in the hope of getting some more people keen to be involved. A role that plays to their strengths can be found. We can utilise most vocations, roles such as sales, graphic design, editorial expertise, event fundraising, administration, work with schools, etc. Our society, Street Child Project, is made up of volunteers who share a passion for the work being done by i-india. We welcome anyone who also shares this enthusiasm. We are all very different, and we all have talents we can bring to the table.

Is this now a full-time job for you?

At times, it can be all consuming; however, it is extremely rewarding to see the transformation over the years due to the support generated in Singapore. Imagine if we spent our lives not making a positive difference – supporting i-india provides incredible fulfilment. The children have nothing but their spirit and their hunger for a better life. i-india is giving street children a future.



For more information, email streetchildproject@gmail.com or visit www.i-indiaonline.com and www.i-indiaproject.org.au.