

# Inderjit Khurana India (1936- )

There's a lot going on at a train station in India. Of course there are travelers of all sorts coming and going, but in addition there are people selling things, offering services, or just begging. Many of them are children.

Inderjit is a teacher, and perhaps for this reason her heart went out to these children. It seemed to her that they had been robbed of their childhood.

She originally just wanted to bring some fun into their lives, so she started reading stories to them on the train platform. At first only a few children came to listen and to sing and dance. But the groups grew. Then, Inderjit says, "...the children began to ask things like, 'Why can't we read the stories? Why do you have to read them to us?', and that's how the learning began." (Dasra, 2007)



**Inderjit Khurana**  
From *Clinton Global Initiative*, 2007

## ***Train Platform Schools***

Within a few months, that first Platform School in Bhubaneswar, an important city on North India's east coast, had over 100 students sitting in the square inside the chalk line marking the "classroom" boundaries. Obviously, this school was filling a great need. Inderjit started asking other teachers to volunteer their time at the platform school, and many did.

The year was 1985, and in this same year, Inderjit founded Ruchika Social Service Organisation (RSSO). RSSO's motto is: "if the child cannot come to the school, then the school must come to the child." (RSSO web site) From this point forward, this new project would fill Inderjit's life; for as she got to know the children and their families, she began to see that they had many other needs.

These children are part of a complex community living in the shanty towns and slums that have formed around India's train stations. Some children have families living there, and some are orphans or runaways from abusive situations. Some beg, but many work, sweeping up the cars on the trains, selling things, collecting bottles, "rag-picking" (going through garbage heaps picking out what can be sold or eaten), shining shoes, anything to make a few rupees. There are many dangers there for them: gangs, rape (often a girl's first sexual experience), prostitution, drugs, AIDS, and other diseases. It is the kind of situation that "causes most of us to turn away in despair." (Robert Redford, *The Train Platform Schools*). But Inderjit did not turn away. Instead, she started with what she could do and it all grew from there.

"I collect empty plastic bottles. Usually I travel with a group of friends and we help each other. I've travelled all over India, to Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai... everywhere. The trains are my workplace. When the trains come in to the station, I have to work. Sometimes I only stay on the train for a bit, sometimes for several hundred kilometres. In between I go to school on the platform.

I grew up in a small village. My dad is a day labourer in the fields and my mum gathers wood and sells it. I had to work in the fields too when I was little, but I didn't like it. I ran away and made it to the train station. The only thing I'm scared of is the police. They beat us, so we run away whenever we see them. "

--Mitun, age 12

--In: Children's World,  
2007

## ***Why Aren't These Children In School?***

One reason is that regular schools are located outside of slum areas, too far for these children to go, even if they could afford the fees for uniforms, books, and so on.

Many parents and children of this community are unaware of the benefits of education. Even if they are aware of it, parents may be unwilling or unable to let their child go to school. Boys, especially, may be sent out to work to bring home money to help support the family. Girls as young as 5 years old may be left at home to care for their younger siblings or kept occupied doing housework.

Many of the children new to the RSSO schools are surprised and even a bit suspicious that Inderjit and her staff are willing to touch them. Their experience has been that well-dressed people do not like to touch them. They already know, you see, that they are different from those neat schoolchildren they see in the streets. It's not surprising that the idea of going to school does not enter the mind of most street children.

## ***Zero Barriers***

RSSO began establishing schools in slum neighborhoods around the railroad stations. Inderjit and her organization's goal is to create schools where there are zero barriers to a child's attendance.

"Zero barriers" means schools must be located close to where the students spend their days. It means no economic barriers — that is, free. It means a

schedule convenient for students (7-11 a.m. or 8-12 a.m., depending on the school), and always welcoming any siblings that the children are caring for, which is especially important to get girls to attend. Because the children have a lot on their minds, such as earning some money or finding some food (or, unfortunately, sometimes drugs), or obeying parents or others in their community, zero barriers also means allowing them to come and go according to their needs.

## ***Other Important Aspects of the Schools***

Hunger or disease can prevent a child from learning. Inderjit discovered this early, and that's why RSSO includes food, medical attention, and counseling as part of every school's program, as well as an emphasis on cleanliness. Soap and towels are a regular part of each school's equipment, and the staff bathes the children every Saturday. Just these acts of caring for their physical bodies improve the children's self-esteem.

RSSO schools are multi-grade (grades 1 through 5), with a student-teacher ratio of 25 to 1. The teachers are very involved with the local community and they get to know each child's family (if a child has a family).

All the teaching materials fit into a 5 by 3-foot trunk — except, of course, the most important one for making lessons relevant to children—the surrounding environment. The children receive instruction in reading, writing, basic mathematics, geography, history, and basic life skills. The teachers make it meaningful and significant to the children by constantly using examples from their neighborhood and their lives.



**A platform school in action**  
From RSSO web site

## **Continuing Education**

RSSO's ultimate aim is to "mainstream" as many of the young children as possible—that is, get them to the point educationally where they can attend regular schools. To get the children engaged, the beginning curriculum uses a very informal activity-oriented format. Singing, drama, puppetry, and dance are important tools here.

Gradually, the use of more traditional exercise-oriented methods of teaching is increased, so that by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade the student will be comfortable with what they encounter when they move to the regular schools. The schools also use government textbooks supplemented with special workbooks. In order to graduate the students must pass a government-supervised examination. RSSO has helped around 2000 students make this transition.

" Although the Indian government has decided that educating the nation's poorest citizens is an impossible task, Inderjit has dedicated her life to doing the impossible."

--**Robert Redford**  
--In: *The Train Platform Schools of India*, 2005--  
can be viewed at the RSSO web site.

However, since their students can't afford regular schools, RSSO also has a sponsorship program to help them out financially. They are currently able to sponsor around 105 children each year. The staff also continues to mentor graduates after they leave, to improve their chances of success,

Older students can continue their education in one of RSSO's vocational education centers, where a variety of vocations is taught. Around 40-50 students a year go on to get "meaningful" work, either salaried or as micro-entrepreneurs. (RSSO, 2007)

This arrangement has not come about easily!! It has required much negotiation with concerned government authorities, who at first would not offer any support to the schools. But now about half the budget is coming from the regional and national governments. (RSSO, 2007)

RSSO estimated in 2007 that it was costing about \$114 US (using the average 2005 exchange rate) per month to operate a school, including organizational overhead of around 7.1%. (RSSO, 2007)

## ***RSSO Today: Filling Many Needs***

RSSO estimated in 2007 that they had reached approximately 50,000 kids through their program. Their goal is 100% enrollment in each community where they have a school, and they estimate they are around 90% successful. (RSSO, 2007)

RSSO is serving around 5000 children ages 6-14 in 14 Platform Schools and 67 Alternate Schools in railroad shanty town neighborhoods. Many of the latter have their own "permanent" building now, a tin-roofed shed erected with the assistance of community members.

They have over 125 teachers, who receive a modest salary, and about the same number of staff members who run an amazing assortment of supplementary services to assist the train station community members, including 6 nurseries, 20 nursery schools, preventative HIV and SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) projects, two "schools on wheels", clean water-sanitation projects in the slums, and healthcare and ambulance service. (Balakrishnan, 2007, *Whole Child Initiative*, no date)

## ***Accomplishments and Awards***

Inderjit and RSSO have received several prestigious awards: The National Award for Child Welfare (2004), the Henry Derozio Award (2006), the World Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child, also sometimes called the "Nobel Prize for Children" (2007) and recognition from Indians for Collective Action (2008). The World's Children's Prize is interesting, because which nominee gets the prize is determined by millions of children, in a global vote which in 2007 involved 16 million students in 87 countries. (See Wikipedia, *World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child*, at [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) )

However, Inderjit says: "...I wasn't working for any awards. I'm working because I love it. I love making a change for the children, and I look forward to the day when they are change-makers themselves." (Dasra, 2007)

" In all its activities, RSSO recognizes and understands the totality of the lives of the children it serves. Acknowledging that the complex demands of simple survival often preclude a child's ability to attend regular school, RSSO offers a style of non-formal schooling that takes these issues into account, making education **accessible, meaningful, and significant** for even the most deprived child. "

--In: RSSO,2002  
(emphasis theirs)

## References and Further Reading

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## Discussion or Essay Questions

*When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.*

1. Should it be the responsibility of the government to educate all children? Explain your answer.
2. Are there any ideas from the Platform Schools that you believe could be used in other places and situations? Explain.
3. Do you think Inderjit can achieve her ambition to have a Platform School on every train platform in India? Explain your answer.
4. The story mentions negotiation with concerned government officials. In this case, we would be talking about a country's education system. Why might people in the official education system of a country be against what RSSO was doing?

## Notice to Reader

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