

THE “HA WA” PROJECT

BUILDING HOMES, NOT INSTITUTIONS,

CHANGING THE FUTURE, *RIGHT NOW!*

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The goal of this project seemed straight forward enough on the surface: to provide homes for orphaned children. As a result of research and consultation with professionals in the field, it became clear that a number of problems existed when raising children in the traditional orphanage. A number of shocking statistics, namely that as many as 75% of children from orphanages go into crime and prostitution when they are of age to leave the home, gave food for considerable thought.

There are a number of reasons for this and not all are to be directed at the orphanage themselves. What is clear is that while many stakeholders fund wonderfully equipped homes, they very rarely provide any support for their children once they leave the home. So while they might think their work reveals shining statistics which are easy to measure and show a high and meaningful success rate – looked at from a broader view, it is quickly seen that though these homes might have provided a decent upbringing for the children they looked after, their future is not so bright. What in fact these homes are doing is perpetuating a cycle of poverty and displacement that has only been allayed by a number of years.

The single greatest failure of most of these institutions is that they do not address the life long stigma of being an orphan in Indian society. They all concentrate on the physical well – being of the child's immediate needs and do not consider the psychological trauma that is concomitant with being orphaned. Not only do they fail to address this as the child matures,

they do nothing to equip the child to enter society thereafter as an orphan. Providing the child with some level of qualification is all too often not, in itself, sufficient. The child is forced to leave the orphanage at eighteen as that is the cut off age. From that time on they are, to all intents and purposes, left to fend for themselves. There are innumerable problems that the child faces:

PROBLEMS ENTERING SOCIETY:

- **Low self – esteem.**
- **No family context.**
- **No surname.**
- **No parent.**
- **No village network.**
- **No support mechanism.**
- **No accountability.**
- **Isolation.**
- **Stigma.**
- **Discrimination.**
- **No home.**
- **No network of friends.**
- **No access to the workplace.**
- **No caste status.**

COUNTERING THE PROBLEM: A CASE STUDY:

An example given by Dr. Raviraj William, Director of C.C.O.O.R.R. reveals a way many of the problems listed above can be addressed. During Doctor Raviraj's period on the board of trustees of one of the largest and most respected orphanage groups in India, he viewed as "pathetic", the absence of any consideration for the child's future. To try and address the problem, he trained, over a period of years, thirty girls from the orphanage as nurses in his private hospital. Once they were trained he allowed the girls to use his name and for them to refer to him as their father when applying for work. In this way, the girls were not only equipped with important qualifications and work experience, they were legitimised in the work place as they had a name and a father. Doctor Raviraj, addressed their psychological scarring by boosting their self –

esteem by giving them training and work experience as well as, giving them a name which would no longer mark them out as “different” from other people. The combined effects of this double tiered approach ensured that the girls went on to marry and enter Indian society successfully. The role of the parent, thereafter plays a less significant role as the adult establishes its own family and life.

WHAT’S IN A NAME? LEGITIMACY:

To Doctor Raviraj, the key is legitimacy, each child should have someone they can call a parent, and they should all have a name that does not mark them out as orphans.

What’s in a name? The fact of the matter is that in India still, a great deal is learned from a name. A surname might reveal a persons religion and cast, it might reveal their place of origin and it certainly reveals a persons status. But while the name might be important, the person behind the name, the parent, often holds the key to a child’s successful entry into the world. India remains ruled by nepotism, meritocracy is still a long way from being part of the fabric of a person’s terms of employment in the less developed towns.

Doctor Raviraj’s case study reveals not only the truth of this state of affairs, but also how a child, by having a name can evolve into a successful and productive member of society rather than being an outcast.

GIVE THE CHILD A NAME:

The simple fact of giving a name to a child and seeing a significant shift in its’ state of mind and behaviour reveals a basic human trait, namely: that we all want to belong.

TRAINING FOR LIFE, NOT JUST THE WORKPLACE:

Though the children should all be offered some kind of meaningful training, they also need to be helped onto the first rung of the ladder. A general standard of education is not going to be of much use in modern India. Thought needs to go into which direction the child should go in. What work are they suited for and likely able to do well in? Should a young man study computer skills just because everyone else is doing it, or should he study a practical craft or skill, such as plumbing or masonry? What is true, is that, only from a position of gainful employment can a person begin to feel properly integrated into society.

INTEGRATION NOT ALIENATION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE:

In developing our strategy it became apparent that there was a vital need to establish a different structure within our homes.

The core concept is our intention to develop homes rather than institutions. Children, who live in these “little kingdoms built on foreign money,” as Dr. Raviraj calls the traditional orphanage, grow up in an artificial environment. They do not have an Indian upbringing. They are disciplined and ordered and are not allowed to run free. They are not called upon to do chores or to help around the home. They are institutionalised and over – protected, and mostly to placate the donor, so that they, the NGO, are seen to be doing the right thing from a First World and inherently privileged point of view, which does not in fact serve the best interests of the children.

Furthermore, given there are only a limited amount of staff, (the staff to child ratio often being in the region of 1:15), many children never get the opportunity to form meaningful bonds with an adult. A child with a strong character might emerge relatively unscathed from the experience but a shy child, with no confidence, is likely never to recover any self – esteem and will always view the state of adulthood from an authoritarian perspective.

What emerges from the research are two key issues. Firstly, the actual trauma a child suffers as an orphan: the death of parents, being abandoned and left in a place full of strange children and strict, unsympathetic carers who have no interest in the actual welfare of the child, is never addressed.

And secondly, the stigma of being an orphan that sticks to them for life. Indian society considers orphans to be outside of the social scheme of things. They have no family network and therefore no one to help them arrange their marriages or get them work. They have been separated from

their village and have no grass roots connection into the wider framework of society and carry the stigma of being orphaned as they have no recognisable name that establishes them in any one place.

So while our goal is to provide homes for orphaned children – it is our intention to be more than an institution that provides temporary respite for abandoned children but, to be a home that recognises its responsibility to see that those children that come under our care, have a home and a future within Indian society rather than outside it – on the margins.

THE GOAL:

To provide homes and support for orphaned children so that they might be equipped to enter society on as equal a footing as other children.

THE STRATEGY:

Conscious of the failings of institutional orphanages to date our strategy addresses these issues from the outset and radically re- defines the infrastructure of the home.

The overall strategy is to ensure that each child develops a meaningful relationship with a “parent” as well as, viewing other children as “siblings” which form part of a family unit, so that they experience something akin to a real family.

The children should be brought up Indian in their cultural rootedness whatever their caste or religion and their lives should reflect the real lives of children in the community with whom they should also mix and build friendships.

The children should not be reminded that they are orphans, which, only further undermines their self – confidence, rather they should be made to feel part of a family in which they are encouraged to flourish.

The conditions of their life should be as normal as possible so that there is no marked difference in their lifestyle from other children. They should have similar experiences so that they can feel part of their peer group, so there is no reason for them to be earmarked as different or unusual.

They should feel secure and at ease in their environment and not afraid or threatened by an excess of discipline or structure. For while, routine might be a good thing – too much structure is suffocating and exists in institutions only to make the life of the carers' easier.

1 / THE RATIO OF STAFF TO CHILD:

Rather than consider those who work at the home staff, they should think of themselves as parents. Each parent should be responsible for no more than six children and these children represent the core of their family and are their main responsibility.

2/ FAMILY UNITS:

Rather than consider the children as one entity, we break down the numbers into groups of six and look at each group as a separate family unit, each with a specific “parent” who is solely responsible for the well – being of the children within their “family”.

3/ BEING A FAMILY:

i/The age range of the children in each family unit should vary, as should the gender of the children.

ii/The children are encouraged to look after one another and the parent, should allocate chores for each of the children according to their age.

iii/The children should all learn from their parent everything that goes into running a family.

iv/ The children and the parent live together within the home and are allocated community tasks which they do together.

4/FAMILY ACTIVITIES:

Each family unit is encouraged to do certain things outside the home together.

5/THE WIDER FAMILY NETWORK:

So that each child is aware of their village context, they should all, either, visit existing families in their village over holiday periods or be allocated to fitting volunteers who will serve as the wider family for the children. In this way, each child is contextualised within a village and comes to know its' ways and traditions and builds friendships within its' home context.

6/THE HOME AS A COMMUNITY:

The family units within the home make – up a community. This community shares a great deal of its' day to day life and there will be and should be a number of communal activities.

There should be some communal meals, as there should be meals taken as a family. There should be some communal get togethers as there should be times when the family unit amuses itself together.

The community should try and find a way to develop a strand of self – sufficiency. Where there is some land, they should tend it, where it is possible to have live stock they should have some. Where this is not possible they should consider a craft of some sort that could be made and sold.

The whole community will benefit from developing some kind of craft and everyone should be expected to participate in some way.

7/ THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE:

The home should be integrated within the community in which it is established in so far as it is relevant to do so. Children from the community should be invited into the orphanage as any child will visit the home of a friend. They might take meals there and so on. There should be no sense of distance between the “home” and the rest of the community, members of which should be encouraged to be involved in the “home”, as any neighbour would be involved with those people’s lives whom they live among.

*Those who wish to make donations to the orphanage should not be expected to be fawned over. The practice of people coming to the orphanage and giving gifts which all the children are expected to humbly receive is not to be encouraged. Donations may be received but the children are not to be made to be thankful nor are they to be presented to the visitor in such a way as to make them feel inferior. This practice only exacerbates their own sense of being different and indebted and somehow inferior.

8/ SERVING THE COMMUNITY:

Elder children should be encouraged to help the elders around them and be available to help them should they need it.

Indian culture demands great respect for their elders and the children should be introduced to this notion and learn what it involves.

9/ ADDRESSING THE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES:

If a child is born a Muslim or a Hindu or a Christian that child should be brought up within that religion so that they are not left outside their religion in later life.

In this, there are some cast issues, as low cast “harijan” children are often Christian, whereas higher cast children will be Hindu or Muslim.

No religion should be given precedence over the other and in a deeply religious country there should be no proselytising. In this, religious tolerance is built into the child’s experience of life.

10/ MICRO FINANCING – TOWARD SELF –SUFFICIENCY:

The introduction of a skill, in the case of the Ha Wa project, it is sewing and embroidery work, both equips the women and provides them and the project with an income strand. It is hoped that some form of co – operative will be developed so that both the home and the community at large might benefit from the scheme, enabling them to move towards economic self – sufficiency. Not only will the home be financed, but some mother’s who had been forced to work away from the village, leaving their children in care, will not have to go. They will not only be able to fulfil their role as a mother but will not be a burden to the community or the project and by sharing in the co – operative actually make a valuable contribution to the community. Such a total reversal of her position re – builds her own self – esteem and develops a positive attitude to her involvement with the work, which in turn, leads to greater productivity and a general improvement in the quality of life.

MEASURING THE PROJECT:

On one level, measuring the success of the project is straight forward. The project, having considered the needs and family situation of a child, considering its current health, level of care, its diet, attendance at school, and level of supervision, to say nothing of its concern for those children from abusive or negligent homes, takes a child and provides for it. The child is removed from danger, abuse, isolation, in this its environment is changed and can be clearly contrasted with that of the home, which is a positive, nurturing one. Furthermore, the child’s physical needs are met, the child’s diet changes radically, which had been bordering on malnutrition to one of a balanced nutritious diet. The child’s health is monitored and it is taught about basic hygiene and the child attends school and receives additional tuition.

BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT AN ORPHAN IS:

In general by orphan we mean a child that has no living parents. There may be exceptional circumstances: In cases where the mother is dead and the father has re-married and has children with another woman and has abandoned the child or children from his first marriage. Where possible the father should be encouraged to take responsibility for these children but it might be that the conditions of life at home are damaging and abusive to the child, for instance, where the father is an alcoholic and there is no mother. Where the mother is the only parent and is forced to work long distances from home, entailing the abandonment of the child to poor supervision and support.

Wherever possible, relatives of the orphaned child are encouraged to take responsibility for the child and all these avenues are explored before a child is taken into care. This includes offering some level of incentive to grandparents to look after the child as well as offering a day care option for the children of working grandparents and single parent families.

Only when it is clear there is no one in a position within the family to look after the child responsibly will we take a child into care. In cases, where there is an elder child in its teens we do not count this child as old enough to take responsibility for its siblings and we will endeavour to support all children of a family and keep them together. No siblings should ever be divided.

By following these guidelines it becomes straight forward to measure the initial success of our work. An orphaned child is given a home.

The second phase to measuring the success of the work extends over a very long period and prevents us from making a final judgement until we are confident that those children who have been under our care have entered the wider society successfully and by that we mean they have some qualification to attain employment, that they are gainfully employed and are integrated, housed and working within the wider community.

The Western approach, or First World approach to child care has held the view that orphanages are an outmoded essentially “Victorian” practice for

decades. In developed countries fostering children is the common practice. These countries have the wealth and infrastructure required to implement such an expensive and time consuming scheme, whose success rate is unequivocal. Based on the notion that every child has the right to a parent, fostering seeks to ensure this right is upheld. Though foster homes do exist, which might be a modern day euphemism for an old practice, they are in large part small and family oriented places rather than old – fashioned institutions.

Given that developed countries universally adopt this model it is inappropriate to cultivate a double standard. There should not be a two tier system that allocates more rights to a child from a wealthy nation than one from a poor one.

In adopting a contemporary approach to child care in India, this project attempts to re – position parochial attitudes to orphaned children. The scale of social injustice in India is enormous and while there is democracy and a rule of law, the fact remains that caste prejudice prevails and informs even the most modern echelons of Indian society. “Untouchability” might have been outlawed in the 1950s but it remains deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche and continues to part of the cultural indoctrination of the society. Given such attitudes have not changed addressing the issue of “orphans” is more complex in such a duplicitous culture – one that might believe in charity but not equality, which might pay lip – service to democracy but does not believe in real freedom. An orphan is an outcast and as such faces more problems in India in the long – term than a child from almost any other country in the world. All the more reason to try and implement a radical approach to child care in the hope that in some small way the issues an orphan faces in India can be re – dressed. The project aims to do nothing “new” of itself, it’s newness lies in the country in which it is being implemented. We hope to change the future now, by treating the future of India – its children – differently.

FOCUS GROUPS:

In the instance of this project focus groups were found to be unproductive as most people who were asked to contribute to a discussion on the subject of how orphans should be looked after responded with a traditional perspective. All those asked thought children were lucky to be taken into care and gave very little thought thereafter to how the child should be looked after in the orphanage. Not had they given any meaningful thought to how a child from an orphanage should be equipped to enter society and non had any idea how best this should be managed.

To that end, the focus group in itself revealed the entrenched attitude many Nationals had to the orphanage system.

When the ideas of this project were muted to them they recognised how radical the approach was – and understood that such an approach was a huge improvement on the current practice.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS:

1/ The external condition of each child prior to its' entry into the home:

- Did the child have any living parents?
- What was the level of care they received from their parent or carer?
- What portion of the day was the child unsupervised?
- Was the child malnourished?
- Was the child attending school?
- Was the child included in family life or excluded?
- Was the child part of the community?

2/ The internal, psychological well –being of the child?

- Was the child present or withdrawn?
- Did the child engage with other children?
- Was the child responsive to affection?
- Was the child responsive to discipline?
- Did the child laugh and play?
- Was the child able to concentrate in school?

3/Long term;

- i/ Addressing the trauma of being an orphan.
- ii/ Equipping them to be employable.
- iii/ Providing them with legitimacy so that they can enter society.

SUMMARY:

There is nothing radical in our scheme to the Western eye. All we are attempting to implement is an environment more akin to a home than an institution and in this bringing India more into line with normative practices long established in the West where fostering and adoption are the norm rather than orphanages. And while the circumstances are different in India, in which poverty plays a significant role in disrupting family life. furthermore, there are a number of instances in which the child has a single parent who is unable to cope with the number of children they have, again, it is poverty which causes the parent to abandon a child. And better they are taken into care than sent to work or sold into bonded labour or married off in their early teens in the case of girls.

The range of issues therefore are different from the West and so while certain practices need to be addressed the need to provide homes of a sort is present, and the sheer force of numbers mitigates against fostering or adoption. And in many cases the families that remain would not want to have their children adopted. In this our homes are more about alleviating the pressures on the families who cannot provide for them and giving the children a supervised level of care which ensures they attend school rather than run truant. In the long term, by providing them with an education it is hoped that they will be able to break the cycle of poverty they have been born into.