1. **Balangan Project**

**Summary**: Drksakshi was inspired by a study of the impact of industrialization on the urban poor in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh. Drksakshi is a registered non-profit organization (Drksākshi Welfare Society, Chhattisgarh, India) committed to envisioning humanist and alternative perspectives to hegemonic models of society and development. Drksakshi works on the various issues directly, or supports in various ways those organizations involved with Alternative models of education and literacy, child & youth development, child-labor, environmental pollution, Local indigenous health strategies to name a few. Durg is one of the most industrialized districts of Chhattisgarh, ranks thirteenth amongst sixteen districts in sex ratio and this is significant for Drksakshi’s mission (Census of India, 2001).

The unorganized sector of durg district mainly consists of rag-pickers and casual laborers with limited earnings. This compels all adults in a family to earn wages, leaving the children at home to take care of their siblings and the household work. The choice for doing this work is mostly the girl child.

Ninety percent of the total population in this sector lacks basic literacy and awareness regarding the necessity or the advantages that education can bring. Further, frequent corporal punishments, extreme de-motivation of teachers towards their job, various forms of child exploitative practices and an overall child-unfriendly atmosphere in existing schools leads to a strong apathy among the children towards school, resulting in their poor performance and their eventual dropping-out. Though near-by government schools claim 100% enrollment & 80% retention of the students by preliminary school is far from the truth.

The social norm of craving for a male child leads to the birth of multiple girls in families who then remain relatively neglected compared with the boy child. The situation of girls in this context remains extremely vulnerable. Most of the time the girls are left behind at home to attend to her siblings and do the household chores. This situation is characterized by lack of opportunities for her education, play, and recreation – in short the very childhood of the girl. Further, as they are left alone without any adult supervision or protection, these girls often become victims of sexual harassment or rape by youth from the same or neighboring slums.

Hence Drksakshi’s program, whose **main sponsor and founder is Dr. Balmurli Natrajan**, aims to reach out to the girls in such communities to bring them back into education. To bridge this gap, Balangan (informal school for children; **Director Mr. Ajay T.G.**) came in scène Dabrapara, a working-class neighborhood in Bhilai, Durg district, Chhattisgarh to disseminate education in child-friendly and enjoyable ways. A year later, the Bālāngan has enrolled 16 girl students between the ages of 6 and 16. These children are from very poor families (mostly from the Gond tribal group, Satnamis who are the Dalits of Chhattisgarh or other lower caste groups such as fishherfolk) whose parents work in construction, mining, rag-picking, rickshaw pulling, domestic help or as causal labor under exploitative conditions. All children at the bālāngan have either dropped out of school or have never been to one.

The mission of the Bālāngan is to attempt to aid personal development of children by giving them back their childhood and dignity, and teaching them a livelihood. The long-term objective of Balangan includes creating a social awareness of the importance of education and health among residents of urban slums; to reduce widespread alienation from formal education by ensuring its implementation in a more child-friendly way and improve over all quality of life of these people.

Balangan is opened daily from 8 am to 6pm and there are 3 women who are from the same neighborhood and volunteer as teachers at the bālāngan. After 3 p.m., the children of the local government school from the neighborhood are allowed to join the children from the bālāngan to learn music, sketching, painting or playacting. Once a month, all bālāngan children are taken to a medical doctor for a general checkup and from time to time a health worker will also be asked to visit the Bālāngan. Three times in a year, children are taken on a local study tour. By December 2005, it was observed that many children at the bālāngan suffered from lesions on their skin including the head, and some of them from night-blindness, which was found to be due to malnourishment. January 4th, 2006, Bālāngan began to serve a mid-day meal designed by nutritionists to all children enrolled in it.

The **short-term objectives** of this program will be:

1. to mainstream the children who have dropped out of the formal stream of education through alternative education and “bridge schools”;
2. to prevent further dropout of children from primary and upper-primary classes in government schools;
3. to reduce the employment of coercion and practices of corporal punishment in the process of imparting formal education in schools;
4. to create self-reliance among adolescent girls through appropriate vocational training;

**Funding:** Currently, the Bālāngan is run entirely through personal funds as a result of which teacher, cook and director’s salaries have not yet been made possible.

Current Address: Drksākshi Bālāngan, Near – Ajay Poultry Farm, Supela Purani Basti, PO. Supela, Durg, Chhattisgarh 490023. India.

**Drksākshi Bālāngan Update 2009**

Since the last 6-8 months, Drksākshi Bālāngan has successfully bridged all the children (except for one) from the Dabrapara basti in Bhilai (see details in last proposal submitted to Asha). Bālāngan has now moved to another basti, called Supela Purani basti just a few kilometers away along the same national highway. The director, Ajay TG, has begun this Bālāngan in earnest over the last 2 months and children have regularly started attending. However, due to severe lack of resources, we have not been able to start the mid-day meal scheme as we used to do in Darbrapara. Hence the appeal for Asha DC to release funds as soon as possible.

**Address:** Drksākshi Bālāngan, Near – Ajay Poultry Farm, Supela Purani Basti, PO. Supela, Durg, Chhattisgarh 490023. India.

**Director:** Mr. Ajay T.G. (no salary currently; personal expenses for travel)

**Teachers (2):** Uttara Joshi, and Jyoti (no salary currently; voluntary basis; both are from Supela basti)

**Cook (1):** not yet hired since mid-day meal is currently suspended until funds become available

**Students** **(Age)**

1. Jyoti (12)
2. Maya (6)
3. Taleshwari (15)
4. Sarita (14)
5. Reshma (9)
6. Prabha (7)
7. Devika (11)
8. Vani (14)
9. Damin (8)
10. Puja (7)
11. Lalita  (11)
12. Maheshwari (11)
13. Kaisharun (16)
14. Manju  (16)
15. Geetu (15)