

**Project Why  
Site Visit  
Megha  
24 – 28 Aug 2009**

1. [Overview](#)
2. [Planet Why](#)
3. [Project Why – SAC](#)
4. [Places I visited](#)
5. [General operating principles](#)
6. [Things that happened in the last year](#)
7. [Conclusion](#)

## **Overview**

Project Why is an integrated effort led by Mrs Anouradha Bakshi (Anou) to improve the educational and health status of children who live in slums. They currently run 13 separate programs: Creches (2), prep class (1), after-school support for primary (3), secondary (1) and high (1) school students, section for mentally challenged children and adults (1), foster care for 3 mentally challenged adults (1), Library (1), Computer centre (1) and Women's centre (1). These programs are spread across Girinagar, Govindpuri, Okhla, Sanjay Colony and Saritha Vihar slums of New Delhi.

Ms Rani and Ms Shamika are the managers of the project (except Women's centre) while Anou provides leadership and is the primary driver of their fund raising efforts. Mr Dharmendra runs the Women's centre. Anou takes no salary. About 30 people are variously employed by the project and together they support the educational needs of approximately 600 children.

Asha-Seattle has now supported Project Why for 3 years and in their last financial year, our funds supported about 30% of their running budget.

## **Planet Why**

In 2008 Project Why purchased land with the aim of constructing guest houses that could generate income to support their work. This initiative is called Planet Why. In addition to the Guest house Planet Why is envisaged to be a green building that also houses a centre for battered women and abandoned children. The mentally challenged adults currently housed in the foster care are expected to move here for long term housing. Due to tight fundraising conditions and having to pay off loans borrowed to buy the land, no progress has been made on the land.

Asha-Seattle provided 20% of the capital to purchase the land.

Status – Due to the financial crisis and unstable funding condition of project why Anou has not been able to devote much time to fund raising for Planet Why. As a consequence the land continues to remain unused. Anou plans to raise all the funds for the construction and then start building. I have suggested that she re-consider this strategy as getting all the money together might be difficult. Instead, it would be easier if Planet Why, for construction purposes, was divided into three sections – guest rooms, centre for special children, centre for abandoned women. It would be prudent to fund raise and begin construction on the guest room aspect as that is the profit generating section of Planet Why. Based on the traffic of

volunteers I have seen at Project Why itself, I don't doubt that occupancy of the guest rooms would be a problem.

## **Project Why – SAC**

At the time of land purchase a social entrepreneur had volunteered to support the education of 5 children from the slums whose parents did not have the wherewithal to nourish or educate them. With the long term view of admitting the children to boarding school, they were sent to private prep schools and prepared to enter mainstream education. When the social entrepreneur reneged Anou decided that she could not return the children to their original habitat and looked for donors to support their education. Today, part of this effort is supported through Asha-Canada's adoption of the children as a SAC project.

Asha- Seattle currently supports this as a donor specified project.

Status – We (Navin from Asha-Canada also participated in this visit) went to Shanti Gyan International School to see the SAC children. There are 5 enrolled through this program – Aditya, Vicki, Babli, Utpal and Nikhil. Aditya was down with flu-like symptoms and since swine flu paranoia had gripped the city he had been sent home. The other four greeted us with enthusiasm. We met right after their morning break. They looked happy and well settled. Anou had previously shown me their report cards and all of them seem to be doing well academically. Most importantly, their backgrounds did not appear to have held them back from enjoying the school. Babli, who is a year behind academically was pushed forward one class (Std 4) at the start of the new term but she couldn't cope with Std 4 English and was put back into Std 3. She proudly wore the class key around her neck; evidence of her responsible nature as appreciated by her teachers. We were also treated to a visit to the classrooms where the boys study. Neat rows of benches and a small teacher student-teacher ratio were evident. Overall, the children look well adjusted and happy.

## **Site Visit Overview**

This was my second visit to Project Why and it was indeed like meeting old friends. Many things in the project are reassuringly the same while subtle changes have occurred in management and infrastructure. I visited all the centres. I also had a one on one with Anou, Rani, Shamika and the teachers about how they felt about the project and what we could do to make things better. Besides routine chit chat in the classes I visited, I also specifically spoke with the senior secondary school students (girls and boys).

## **Places I visited**

- \* The pwhy office is located in Govindpuri gali no 3 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Pwhy owns the entire building. On the ground floor is the **section for special children and adults**. Shamika runs this section along with Praveen. Two aides – Virander and Pushpa have left pwhy. Praveen previously worked full time with the planet why children and special adults (Manu, Champa and Anjali) who lived across the pwhy office at the temporary foster home. Since the foster children have now moved to their residential school Praveen is free in the mornings to participate in other activities. He has also shown an interest in completing a certificate course in working with special children. This is a full time one year course and Anou is considering sponsoring his course if he commits to stay with pwhy for at least a couple of years thereafter. Having Praveen in the special section has also helped because many of the special adults and children are male and require a

stronger helping hand with activities. In addition to Shamika and Praveen there is Ms Saraswati, a new recruit. Pwhy is also playing for Ms Seema Thapar, a trained special educator to come three times a week to help organize and run this section.

- \* On the first floor is the **creche**. Three autos continue to remain in service at pwhy to pick up the creche children and bring them to the centre as well as to ferry them back. There are 3 teachers in this section – Ms Urmila, Ms Sarita and Ms Vinita (half day). The creche remains a strong way for families where both mother and father are day labourers to afford a safe and enriched environment for their child. This also frees the older children, if any, to go to school. Creche runs from 9 – 5.
- \* Opp this building in Gali no 3 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, is the **foster home** that now houses the 3 special adults. In order to conserve rent the prep class that previously used to run on the ground floor has been shifted upstairs. Mr Chandan also takes his **junior secondary classes** in one of the rooms while a second creche occupies another bedroom. The **prep class** is a bridge section for those kids who, mostly due to migration or illness cannot make the grade for their year in the government school. This class prepares them to enter 1 st standard.
- \* The **foster home** has a full time stay in older lady, affectionately called aunty who cooks and keeps home. Mr Praveen stays there as well, along with Anjali, Champa and Manu. It must be noted that Manu was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of TB recently and was receiving the routine triple antibiotic treatment. Other inmates of the foster home have been tested for TB and are negative.
- \* Moving away from gali no 3 but in Govindpuri itself, is the **computer centre** equipped with about 6 PCs and a mac. The centre offers classes in word, excel and basic computer usage as well as hardware information. Mr Gunjan had left and the centre is now run by Mr Vijay and Mr Mittu. Located above the computer centre is Mr Naresh's **senior secondary class**.
- \* A couple of rooms away, where previously the printing press sat is now a **library and cine centre**. A Frenchman has donated a wide screen TV and DVD player in memory of his father. This along with hundreds of donated books forms the backdrop of the newly formed cine club. The library only contains English books so circulation is yet to pick up since most of the children are only comfortable with Hindi. I did ask a few children if they ever borrowed a book and a shy answer emerged : “Dora, the explorer”.
- \* Moving further away is the **Okhla slum learning centre** which currently caters to 1 – 8 standard students. Ms Sophiya has moved away from this centre and Ms Pushpa, Mr Sanjay and Mr Dipankar teach here now. The Okhla centre has remarkably transformed since I saw it last. The open veranda-like space now has a roof and walls. Ceiling fans make the summer bearable and the large space allows more children to be accommodated. The infrastructure material and manpower was due to a volunteer group that comes out from a French MBA school each year.
- \* Further away is the **Sanjay Colony primary learning centre**. Ms Shipra and Ms Manju teach here. The biggest problem continues to be of dogs in this area. The ground floor class is particularly vulnerable. The doors to the classes cannot be shut as they stifle the children and at times when there is no power the open door is the only provider of sunlight. There is a section on the first floor as well.
- \* Furthest away from pwhy main office is the **Women's centre** which thanks to the ceaseless effort of Mr Dharmendra is a classic example of an organic evolution of service in the neighbourhood. What started as library and centre to house abandoned women has now blossomed to include: a computer centre, creche, classes up to junior secondary level and vocational courses for women (sewing and beauty classes). One of the rooms is also let out for a monthly women's meeting. Meher, a child who was badly scalded and is being operated through donors sought out from pwhy, currently being

housed there. Mr Dharmendra runs a tight but open ship constantly innovating and adapting himself and the centre to provide the best possible opportunities to women and children. By itself, the women's centre is eminently suitable for adoption by a company CSR or organization.

### **General Operating Principles**

- \* Project why is open 6 days a week from 9 – 6.
- \* Children in the creche normally stay till the afternoon and are ferried to and fro, from their homes
- \* the prep class only runs to half a day
- \* Primary (1-5), secondary (6-8) and senior secondary classes (9-12) are held for 1 hour each in batches of 15-20 students. About 4 such sessions are held, then the teachers break for lunch and continue with 4 more sessions in the evening. Girls come in the afternoon since school is in the morning for them and boys come in the afternoon.
- \* All subjects are taught in the 1 – 8 standard range. Maths is the only subject offered for the senior secondary children. Children are provided personal mentoring. If a child reads or understands less than he/she should at their particular standard an effort is made to assist in bringing the child up to level.
- \* Teachers are provided lunch. This is served in the terrace of the pwhy building. It serves as an opportunity for the teachers of different sections to come together. All teachers except from the Women's centre (their lunch is taken care of by the centre itself) and teachers from Okhla (lunch is delivered to them because of distance) attend the lunch.
- \* Teachers are offered the opportunity for personal development by taking courses, classes and are given the freedom to innovate. Project Why has been blessed by visitors and volunteers from across the globe and therefore, the children and teachers are exposed to different methods of teaching constantly. Recently, Ms Nina a volunteer from the US made a concerted effort to improve the spoken English skills of the teachers and provide them with teaching aids to help the children. Few teachers did benefit from her classes and I noticed that some were bold enough to talk to me in English. Its important to note here that most teachers in pwhy have at best, studied to 12<sup>th</sup> standard, belong to the slums themselves and so, this job represents a substantial self esteem boost to them. A British couple also visited pwhy and conducted workshops on creative teaching methods. Although, there has been exposure to alternate learning methods at pwhy, during my visits, I did not observe teachers using them. While I visited, Ms Sandhya Rao from Chennai was busy telling stories to the creche children using books that her publishing house has come out with. I had a chance to look at the books later on and they are adorable, featuring children that are easy to relate to and stories in English that are easy to read.
- \* Classes and the creche are free. Although, exceptionally, tuition fees are recovered from students who can afford it at the senior secondary level. (Rs 300/ month). Anou was keen to provide a service that seemed like value for money and introduced a Rs 1/ day for a family of kids as donation towards the classes. But collection of this money remains an uphill task with parents continuing to have a mindset that since they are poor they should be provided these services for free.
- \* Children with special medical needs are specially welcome at pwhy. The project has sponsored the heart surgery of about a dozen children so far. The special section also hosts a young child with brittle bone disease.

### **Things that happened in the last year**

- \* The most serious development in the neighbourhoods that Project Why operates in is the opening of several Christian NGOs. This is most pronounced in the Sanjay Colony and Saritha Vihar village area. Mr Dharmendra commented that they offered money to the parents and freebies (pencil, notebook, trips to tourist places etc) to the students to attend their programs. I did not see an office or blatant advertisement. But this was the reason given for a lot of children having dropped out of the Pwhy classes. Some students have come back after realizing that their educational needs were not being met. Some times only when parents complained at Pwhy centres that their children's marks were poor that they would realize that the child had slyly dropped out of pwhy to go to other NGOs. Mr Dharmendra thinks this a new trend because of the freebies being offered and will soon equilibrate such that students who wish to study and parents who realize the value of pwhy will continue to flock their centres. As a testament to the popularity of the classes at the Women's centre Mr Dharmendra continues to maintain a waiting list for students wishing to join their classes!
- \* Funding continues to remain unstable. There are now four major groups supporting project why – Asha, Enfances Indiennes, Om Prakash Foundation and Project Why Deutschland. Asha is the only group who is committed to a fixed amount each year. EI were providing € 2000/ month but were unable to meet this target over the summer. Project Why Deutschland release funds as and when they are collected and the amounts vary. This irregularity in funding has left Anou tied up with trying to think of more stable funding alternative. One proposal is to fund raise through a “Sponsor a child” program, somewhat similar to the Asha – SAC. Anou plans for this to be publicized in the US (Ms Nina) and the UK. At the pwhy end, a French woman, Ms Caroline has volunteered to manage the logistics. I did not meet Ms Caroline as she was on maternity break. Given the substantial resources and time required to carry out a successful donor-match program at this time, I think it is not realistic for pwhy to follow up on this. Anou was expecting the French and German donors in September and was keen to explore the possibility of them setting a limit for monthly donations so she could plan her fund raising accordingly.
- \* A German singer, Ms Sabrina Verence, spent time at pwhy and recorded a song with the children. The you tube video is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDDPjJ5ZDI> . Donors can also purchase the song from itunes and proceeds will go to pwhy. Ms Sabrina is also the major donor for the Planet Why kids.
- \* Ms Nina, a volunteer from the US spent about 9 months at project why in various activities. One of her initiatives was to take spoken English classes for teachers. Based on the teacher's suggestion this class was held at 8 am but many teachers did not take advantage of this opportunity, ironically because it was early in the morning. Yet, there are some subtle effects of Ms Nina's efforts because unlike the previous visit some teachers did speak to me in English.
- \* Meher, a young girl who was badly scalded when she fell into boiling hot water due to, what appears to be, gross negligence on her parent's part, is now staying at the Women's centre. Ms Nina has spearheaded fundraising for her operation and during my visit Meher was successfully operated upon for the second time. The plastic surgeons are working to release her digits on the hand and replacing skin on her forehead.

## Conclusion

**Project Why** continues to fulfil its mission. Rani and Shamika are the day to day managers who keep together a motley crew of teachers in various locations committed in their activities. Mr Dharmendra does an excellent job of the Women's centre. Anou continues to be the main

fundraiser. As in all previous site visits the main question is – what will happen if Anou is not able to fund raise? A major lacunae in the organization of pwhy management is that roles of Anou, Shamika and Rani are not interchangeable. Some efforts have been undertaken to change this: Anou now visits the office only during the morning hours, delegating all authority to Rani and Shamika while she is away. Also, Rani and Shamika visited Germany to present to their German partners about pwhy activities so they are being introduced as the public faces of pwhy. These are some subtle changes but a lot more needs to happen to feel assured that project why has a future if Anou were unable to play her role.

In terms of fulfilling its objectives, the project continues to be outstanding and appears to benefit all the participants. When I spoke with the teachers it was clear that many felt that their job was satisfying and adequate. I tried to encourage them to seek opportunities to improve their skills and innovate in teaching methodologies. But given the circumstances, the environments that they teach in and the type of children that they help, the teachers do a remarkable job. I observed that all teachers taught with patience and love. They had an intense desire to see their children do better. Rani and Shamika too expressed happiness at the way things were at pwhy. They were concerned about the funding situation and were hopeful that the “sponsor- a-child” program would take off. It would be more reassuring of course, if they were actually heading a fund raising activity. Most children I spoke with liked coming to Project Why. There is no quantitative assessment of how coming to pwhy improves their learning but certainly, these children, because of pwhy, are receiving some sort of education in a safe, clean and loving environment.

Planet Why is lagging in development. With a restructured fund raising strategy and Anou's plan to step away from daily activities at Pwhy it is hoped that this project will begin to move.

Project Why SAC has been a successful initiative. Although, it is now important to continue funding the children till they complete their 12 standard at least or else, a break in their studies would negate our efforts to provide them with an education.