

A group of young girls in pink traditional Indian attire, with one girl in the foreground looking directly at the camera. The girls are wearing pink blouses with intricate gold and colorful embroidery. The girl in the foreground has a yellow headband and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. Other girls in the background are wearing blue and yellow headbands and are looking in various directions. The overall scene suggests a cultural performance or a group portrait of children.

**Deepalaya's**

**India**

Enabling Self Reliance

# Day 1.

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## A visit to Ramditti J.R Narang Deepalaya School, Gole Kuan School, and the Duvall-Deepalaya Father and Daughter Alliance Program.

*When you think of India, what comes to mind? Elephants? Tigers? Yoga? Great food? There are many different perceptions of India in the United States. Some of them come from the news, others from books or Hollywood movies. However, my first trip to India was experienced through the eyes of Deepalaya; a private development organization working on issues affecting the urban and rural poor, with a special focus on children. After eight incredible days filled with hope and inspiration, I will forever remember India as a place of strength, resilience, and hope.*

The first visit on the trip was to Ramditti J.R Narang Deepalaya School (RJRND). The school was established in 1995 with the enrollment of five girls. It now hosts education from kindergarten to eighth grade for close to 500 children, including children of refugee families from Afghanistan.

While all of the children attending this school are from the impoverished Jagadamba camp and Panchsheel Enclave, their education is full and bright--having a student to teacher ratio of an incredible 26:1. The school follows the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) syllabus and further provides education in art, music, and embroidery. In addition to classes, the children are provided with medical attention twice a week from a visiting physician.

However, the real gem of the school is its staff, especially its warm-hearted principal, Ms. Gitanjali Krishnan. Anyone who meets Ms. Krishnan, and has the wonderful privilege of seeing her interact

with her students, will walk away knowing that each child is in great hands, and their future will be a little brighter because of her dedication and that of her teachers.

Ms. Kishnan and I discussed many things, and throughout our conversation, it remained clear that she loved the children of RJRND and would single-handedly see them through every trial and challenge if she could. She led me through the school, and I was elated by the little smiles that greeted me in each classroom; each one a hopeful opportunity to change the cycle of poverty through education.

The school functions from 8am to 2pm, but remains open to run an Adult Literacy Program and embroidery courses for young girls of the community for three hours daily after school hours.



*Ramditti J.R Narang Deepalaya School*

Location: Jagadamba camp, Panchsheel Enclave

Contact Person: Ms Gitanjali Krishnan

Contact Number: 011-29541137

Commenced From: 1995

Funding Agency: Children of Tomorrow Foundation

(Netherlands), Abercrombie and Kent Ltd

Beneficiary Number: 466 as on July, 2011

Annual Budget: Rs 37,000,000

Number of Teachers: 19

Non Teaching Staff : 4

Student Teacher Ratio: 26:1

**Need:** Funding

**Helpful:** Books for Library







### *Deepalaya School - Gole Kuan*

My next stop was to Gole Kuan, a school established in the Gole Kuan neighborhood. My visit to this school was very different from my visit to RJRND because as Mr. P.T. Varghese, the program director for the Duvall-Deepalaya Education for Girls program, said; “we’ve just visited a school that serves under-privileged children from a nearby deprived neighborhood. We will now visit a school within a deprived neighborhood.”

Anel, our driver, parked just off to the side of a busy street, and we walked the remainder of the way to the school’s main office. My attention quickly shifted from place to place as I took in the bustling of the street --cars, people on foot and on bikes, cows, and stray dogs seemed to fill every inch of space around us. With every step I took down the side street the size of a large sidewalk, I realized what the children of Deepalaya and their families must overcome to absorb their education, if education was even possible.

It is difficult to describe the neighborhood without feeling as if I am taking something away from those who call it home. However, its description only enforces the admiration I have for those working towards a better future. After all, I do not believe our circumstances define us, rather it is our response to them that should be held in account.

In my short walk to the main office of Gole Kuan, I stepped in and around raw septic running down the street, piles of trash that provided shelter and food for a dog and her puppies. Families living in shanty tents, or rooms the size of a 5x5 storage unit, and unschooled children playing in the dirt with sticks. Apparently, these neighborhoods are home to thousands of Delhi’s residents, as they are rent-free zones provided to the disadvantaged by the government.

Once I arrived at the main office I was introduced and









welcomed by the school's Principal, Poonam Takur. She is notably yet another amazing team member of Deepalaya that has dedicated herself to educating the most disadvantaged of New Delhi. As customary of every location visit, I was greeted with water and warm tea. Mr. Varghese and Ms. Takur began sharing the history of the school. It was one of the first six formal schools established by Deepalaya. While the property formally belongs to the government, the authority to allow Deepalaya to establish a school belongs to its residents, which to my great joy is given with excitement.

The school educates children from kindergarten to eighth grade. It also provides computer technical training to young adults looking to increase their employment opportunities.

In another building, there are vocational training services for women interested in becoming seamstresses; the women learn to make their own patterns and sew beautiful garments that will give them a better opportunity of securing a job.

Lastly, Gole Kuan hosts medical and vision screenings for the children and the elderly, as do all of Deepalaya's programs. Many residents have been dia-



gnosed with cataracts and have had their vision restored thanks to a partnership established with a local hospital to provide cataract surgery, free of charge, to the disadvantaged. Not surprisingly, this was the school that provided me with the words that would stay with me for the remainder of my trip.

“Two men look out prison bars. One sees mud, the other sees stars.” D. Carnegie.

Walking through the neighborhood--and visiting the men, women, and children that make these opportunities possible-- felt as if I had seen the stars, up close and personal; an experience that I will carry with me through the rest of my life. It is my belief that no matter how great the challenges that present themselves through poverty, one thing remains, “the last of human freedoms, to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” Viktor E. Frankl

#### *Deepalaya School - Gole Kuan*

Location : Near F-33, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase I, New Delhi

Contact Person: Ms Poonam Thakur

Contact Number: 011-26810295

Commenced From: 1999

Funding Agency: Mentor Graphics

Beneficiary Number: 317 as on July 2011

Annual Budget: Rs 19,00,000

Number of Teachers: 11

Student Teacher Ratio: 30:1

**Need:** Funding

**Helpful:** Vision exam machines useful in small rooms.

#### *Deepalaya School Sanjay Colony*

Location: S/69 A, Sanjay Colony, Okhla Industrial Area Phase II., New Delhi

Contact Person: Ms Renu Loomba

Contact Number: 011-26389141

Commenced From: 1992

Funding Agency: Amway

Beneficiary Number: 500 as on July 2011

Annual Budget: Rs 38,081,83

Number of Teachers: 18

Student Teacher Ratio: 30:1





*Robert Duvall-Deepalaya Education for Girls  
(RDDEFG)*

After lunch, I arrived at my highly anticipated destination, the Robert Duvall –Deepalaya Education for Girls program in Sanjay Colony. The Robert Duvall Children’s Fund has supported this program since 2010. The program seeks to reach out to unschooled girls in Sanjay Colony. It also strives to promote equality in education for girls by encouraging stronger relationships between fathers and daughters. The program has been very successful in transitioning its first group of little girls into formalized schools and welcoming a new group of girls into the program. It has also strengthened the lines of communication between the girls and their fathers.

My arrival was welcomed by the musical talents of one group of girls while another stepped up to pres-

ent a beautiful handcrafted welcome card. From there, the afternoon continued as usual for the girls. Most of them, having been unschooled when entering the program, have caught up to their grade level according to their age and have made the transition into formal schooling. After school each day, this group is picked up by a bus that brings them back to the RDDEFG program, with the new group of previously unschooled girls until five in the evening. This is done to ensure their success in government schooling by providing additional academic assistance and moral support where necessary.

Once they arrive at RDDEFG, the girls assemble outside in a beautiful covered patio. The pillars that run along each side of the patio add an almost mystical feeling to the peaceful environment. The students begin each afternoon with a touching prayer that easily translates to any one of the three main





religions celebrated in India: Hindu, Christianity, and Islam. Their prayer is one of thanksgiving and a petition to God to keep them safe from harm.

After prayer, the girls recite poems that encourage self-confidence and integrity. It is a beautiful experience to watch as they recite the words with their heads held high in unison. Afterwards, the teachers open up the floor for their daily news session. During this time, the students are encouraged to step forward to share news from their neighborhoods. This session is utilized to encourage confidence in public speaking as well as opening the lines of communication between the children and adults regarding the challenges they may be facing at home. One little girl came to the front to discuss one of the neighborhood's alcoholics, and how his actions affect others. The teachers went on to talk about the consequences of abusing alcohol and the importance of remaining sober and vigilant. The discussion ended with unanimous applause from the girls, as if they all knew, perhaps too well, the face of alcoholism.

After assembly, the girls break up into their groups and report to their classrooms on the second floor. All of the present unschooled girls attend class together. Each group consists of 20-30 students and each teacher is responsible for executing various lesson plans according to the grade level of her students. To assist in the process, the teachers will break students up into subgroups to better ensure the effectiveness of the lesson plans. They utilize many visual tools, including a smart board that was donated by a local attorney.

Once class is dismissed, the children are invited to snacks and a craft/play hour. This is done to promote creativity, unity, and self-confidence within the girls. The program ends each day between 5:00pm-5:15pm to ensure that the children will get home before the sun goes down in consideration of the girls safety as they are walking home.



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# Day 2.

## Gusbethi: Microfinancing, Health, and Refuge

*An introduction to Gusbethi, a rural village outside of Dehli's busy streets where Deepalaya has established a microfinancing program for women, a hospital, and a youth hostel for at-risk youth.*



During the second day of my journey, I was introduced to Gusbethi, a rural village outside of Delhi's busy streets where Deepalaya has established a microfinancing program for women, a hospital, and a youth hostel for at-risk youth.

During our first stop in Gusbethi village, we attended one of the women's microfinancing group meetings. Close to 30 women attended the meeting to discuss their progress in the program. The stories shared by the women were incredible and reflected strength, resilience, and success. I was especially touched by the stories shared by Sham, the group leader, and one of her associates. Thanks to Deepal-



aya, and their well-rounded microfinance program, the women have not only been able to establish businesses of their own that many times employ the men in their family, but also have created a sense of equality at home with their with their husbands. One woman recounted her struggles at home before she entered the program. Her life consisted of domestic work, and abuse from her husband. She recalled the beatings she used to suffer at the hands of her husband when he found out that she had joined Deepalaya's microfinancing group. Unfortunately, her husband, like many others, did not understand a wife's desire to work outside of the home. She remembers having to lie to her husband





to avoid beatings each time she wanted to attend one of the microfinance meetings by saying that she was going to go out to collect firewood. Now, she has a thriving business, and instead of having to stay in the kitchen when her husband arrives from work, she sits at the table with him while he asks about her day, the group meetings, and her business.

Another woman spoke up about domestic abuse. She recalls a time when no one in her neighborhood would have sought assistance from the police out of fear. Now, thanks to Deepalaya's self-defense training class, this woman meets with police on a regular basis to request assistance for friends suffering from domestic abuse. There is pride in her expression as she talks about how she has saved three marriages through her partnership with the police as the group cheers her on, calling her a hero. Yet, rather than basking in the validation of her friends, she humbly declines being called a hero, saying that all of them have the strength to do the same; knowing that it is their right to do so. After the meeting, there was a spontaneous celebration as the women broke into song and dance before leading me to their stores around the corner of the meeting site. The stores varied with some selling women's accessories and others selling food.



*Gusbethi School for Children*

Our second stop was to the Gusbethi School for children. This school educates children from Gusbethi and neighboring villages. All of the children are from economically challenged farming families. It is also the school for children living in Deepalaya's youth hostel for run-away children or those from broken homes placed there by the government. After a quick visit to the school, we followed the children back to the hostel for lunch. The hostel is a safe-haven for over 100 children. There are separate buildings for the girls and boys, but they gather for lunch. Each child is responsible for contributing to the hostel through daily chores. Depending on the schedule, the children are assigned to help with the cooking, cleaning, and serving. In addition, each dorm has a designated dorm leader that is responsible for overseeing that the rooms are tidy. The dorm leader will also help with conflict-resolution if problems arise amongst dorm-mates. It is a big responsibility but an honored one that also encourages a sense of responsibility and integrity.









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### *Gusbethi Hospital*

In between our visit to the school and the hostel, we stopped for a quick visit to Gusbethi's Hospital. It is a grand hospital, equipped with surgical units, birthing units, treatment and recovery rooms, x-ray machines, and even a traveling clinic vehicle. However, there is one thing missing – a doctor. Unfortunately, finding a doctor willing to work in rural villages has proved difficult to find and sustain. Deepalaya is currently seeking a female physician willing to work for at least two-years at this location.







# Day 3.

## Kalkaji School, Sanjay Colony Special Unit, & the fathers of the Robert Duvall- Deepalaya Girl Education Program

### *KALKAJI*

During the morning of my third day with Deepalaya, we visited its biggest school, Kalkaji. Kalkaji hosts education for over 1,000 children from local neighborhoods. Its two-level infrastructure contains many classrooms, a large play-area, a greenhouse, an expansive library, and a beautiful theater complete with theater lighting and a sound system. The school received recognition from Central Board of Secondary Education (C.B.S.E) in October 2008, and is recognized by the Directorate of Education in Delhi. The school is currently seeking to receive government approval to expand its classes from kindergarten to 8th grade, to kindergarten through 10th grade, the highest level before college.

### *Clowns Without Borders & Deepalaya's Special Unit*

Later that afternoon, we returned to RD-DEFG for a meeting with the fathers' of the girls attending the program and a play presented by Clown Without Borders; a nonprofit organization seeking to promote the spirit of solidarity in deprived communities by way of laughter. For more information on Clown Without Borders, please visit <http://www.clownswithoutborders.org>.

After a wonderful and comically brilliant performance from my new favorite clowns, I was given a tour of Deepalaya's Special Unit for children with disabilities. The unit serves children with various disabilities, including cerebral palsy, ADD, Downs Syndrome, and others, including the hearing impaired. Deepalaya strives to educate the community on the capabilities of these children. Unfortunately, it is a common belief that a child born of disabilities is a burden on the family and the community. Many times, these children are abandoned. Deepalaya's program is de-











signed with the understanding that these children can lead normal lives with access to efficient resources, aids, and vocational training. Each child's education is tailored to fit their specific needs.

The program has been hugely successful. Its most recent success story is that of Lalita. Her mother, Malti Devi, recalls how she felt when the doctor explained that her daughter was deaf at the age of three. "I went blank when the doctor told me that my eldest daughter cannot hear," Malti states. Her husband, like many others in India, saw this diagnosis as a curse, and feeling his daughter's life would never amount to anything. However, Lalita, now 20, has not only graduated from formalized education, she has recently returned from the Winter World Games in South Korea where she won a bronze and silver medal in Alpine Skiing. This is all thanks to Lalita's hard work, her mother's support, and Deepalaya's program and partnership with the Special Olympics in Bharat.

### *RDDEFG Father's Meeting*

After my tour of the special unit, I was taken to a room to meet with the fathers of the RDDEFG girls. I was amazed with the wonderful turnout. Over 30 fathers left work early to attend the meeting. There were also some mothers that attended in representation of the fathers that could not attend.

The meeting began slowly, but picked up when the fathers were asked to share their views and feelings on their little girl's education. Many of the fathers talked about the improvement they have seen at home in regards to cleanliness and behavior. One man said that his daughter had changed so much that her improvement had encouraged her younger siblings to follow suit. As a result, not only is their behavior improving, but the father has agreed to send her little sister to the program as well. One mother talked about how her and her husband had talked two of their neighbors into sending their daughters into the program as well. This is an astonishing turn of events, seeing as many people in these communities devalue the importance of educating girls.





The meeting ended with the fathers expressing their appreciation to Deepalaya and the Robert Duvall Children's Fund for giving their daughters an opportunity to receive an education. The program has also brought these fathers closer to their daughters. Now, many of the fathers are happily contributing their hand-made products to sell for fundraising purposes. They, also, spend more time with their daughters making crafts together.











# Day 4.

## Deepalaya School Titron, Saharanpur

On the fourth day of my trip, we traveled five hours to Deepalaya's school in Titron. This village, like many others, has fallen off the government's radar due to its rural nature. Before Deepalaya arrived, there was no school for children to attend. Now, Titron's school hosts education for over 200 hundred children, 100 of them being girls. This was greatly due to the villages' residents who devoted themselves to secure a location for Deepalaya to establish a school.

During my visit, a community meeting was held to discuss the needs of the villagers now that a school has been established and sustained. I have never before seen a community more enthusiastic about creating opportunities for themselves through education and vocational training. Many of them asked for programs to help secure jobs. One woman, in particular, asked if a computer lab could be established where they could receive computer proficiency courses. Another woman asked if they would expand the school to 10th level to prepare their young women for college. Furthermore, a couple of young women stood up and asked for financial assistance to attend college, with one of them hoping to become a physician. There was even a discussion about establishing a special needs unit for children with disabilities. The day ended with a visit to a potential site where the village hopes to expand Deepalaya's educational services. This was a great possibility that Sudah Ps, the Communication's Director for Deepalaya, entertained with great excitement as she looked over the vast property that was being offered.

# Day 5.

## Breaking International Barriers

January 21, 2013 will forever hold a special place in my heart as being the day that international and language barriers were broken for a group of fifth graders in the United States and a group of little girls in India. For weeks, the fifth grade class of Wakefield School in The Plains, Virginia and the girls of the RDDEFG prepared to meet by way of SKYPE. The Wakefield students and the RDDEFG students have been in communication for over a year thanks to fourth and fifth grade English teacher, Joel Enoch, and Wakefield's Drop Everything And Read Program (D.E.A.R.): A program that promotes charitable giving through reading. The Wakefield fourth and fifth graders have raised over \$4,000 for the RDDEFG program in the past two years through their reading program and fundraisers. It was now time to introduce the two groups to each other. Thanks to the planning and coordination of both the Wakefield and Deepalaya's staff and volunteers, the event was a huge success.

When I arrived that morning, the girls were ready, anxious, and excited to present their uniforms, crafts, and musical talents to the Wakefield children. I watched as both groups of children came up to the camera to show off their talents while the respective group applauded and shouted words of praise and encouragement to one another. I can't help but feel both honored and proud to work with both of these groups of children: each one amazing and unique in inspiring ways.

When the event was over, the camera was turned off and smiles were seen on the faces of all those



who had witnessed the exchange. For the children in India, communicating with children in the United States was something they never could have imagined. It was clear that the exchange had served as enormous encouragement for these little girls to continue studying. The staff and board members that attended from Deepalaya were so excited they began discussing the possibility of introducing the fathers to the children of Wakefield School through Skype in the future.











# Day 6.

## Bittersweet Goodbyes

The last day of my journey was bittersweet. Getting to know India through the eyes of Deepalaya was by far one of the most inspirational trips of my life. Those in the nonprofit world know all too well of the challenges that are presented each day when addressing issues surrounding poverty. After all, if there were a quick fix, poverty would become a thing of the past. Yet, no matter the challenges that are faced, and the disappointments that are at times experienced, Deepalaya, like many others, faces them with dignity, strength, and courage. We spent the last day of my journey in celebration of all that has been and will be accomplished through the RDDEFG program. I was dressed in a sari, the most appropriate attire for such an occasion, and the children presented a beautiful recital with costumes, dancing, singing, and poetry: all of which were performed with a confidence and joy that has been cultivated and nurtured by the exceptional members of the Deepalaya team.





