

## India's Unwanted Girls

Its hard to be a woman in India. A first born daughter is not welcomed and a second born daughter is considered as a disaster and then imagine if there are more girls in a family? It is estimated that up to 12 million girls have been aborted in India during the last three decades. Families with daughters are expected to pay dowries when their children get married to the groom's family, which is often seen as a financial burden. Despite strict abortion law, number of girls is still declining.

« *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* », « *Save girls, educate girls* » is a social campaign of the *Government of India* that aims to generate awareness and improve the efficiency of welfare services intended for girls. According to census data, the child sex ratio (0–6 years) in India was 927 girls per 1000 boys in 2001, which dropped to 918 girls for every 1000 boys in 2011. The « *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* » scheme launched in January 2015, initially focused multi-sector action in 100 districts throughout the country where there was a low child sex ratio. Our project areas are under these selected districts. This campaign focuses on challenging mindsets and deep rooted patriarchy in the societal system. Its objective is prevention of gender biased, sex selective elimination, ensuring survival and protection of the girl child and ensuring education of the girl child.

Empowerment of women, promotion of girls education and abolition of female foeticide have been at the center of our programs since the beginning. Thanks to



« *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* » !  
The rally in the streets of Asmoli was a big success.

our efforts during the last decade, the mentality of people towards girl children have changed. They care for them and send them to school. In order to spread this news to a larger community in the region, women's groups organized a rally through the town of Asmoli in August 2017. Around 700 women from several villages assembled for this rally. They prepared many placards and slogans.

It is a fact that a poor family cannot take care of the higher education of all their children. They choose to send their sons to school and keep the girls at home and get them marry as early as possible, sometimes even before they turn 18. Our goal is to help the families to educate their girls till they finish their secondary schooling and then help them get at least a diploma in technical training in our ITI or in



There was an important coverage of the women's rally in many local newspapers.





Yogesh's daughters en route to Saint-Anthony's School.

our vocational training center, so that they can become more independent.

Yogesh wanted a son and having five girls didn't make him give up the idea of having a son. Two years ago, he was blessed with a baby boy ! Yogesh and his wife are open to change and they love their daughters and do their best to educate all of them. They are all happily learning and growing ! They are not worried about getting them married, rather getting them on their own feet.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) promotes higher education of girls (starting from class 10) by sponsoring one child per family but only if that child is a girl and is the only child of the family.

### **Picnic of Women's group**

In the month of August, a group of women organised a meeting in one of the villages in our project area. We were present. As usual, meeting started with a prayer song followed by few words of welcome by one of the members. Next was to discuss the points in the agenda. One topic was about a 'Picnic to Mathurai'. The leader of the group looked at us, « *we have not gone beyond Asmoli region, we would like to get out for a day and go to Mathurai. We will be grateful if Œuvre des pains could provide us the bus and take us there* ».

They wanted us to sponsor their trip by providing the bus of the Saint-Anthony's School of Dugawar. Mathurai-Vrindavan is famous for its old religious temples. It is six hours by road from Dugawar. They didn't seem to be afraid of sitting in the bus for more than 12 hours !

We were ready to help them to organize this outing but school buses don't have official permit to go beyond the locality from where they are registered. So, we organized a tourist bus and they all left at 4 in the morning, spend the day in Mathurai and reached back around 10 pm ! The village leader took this opportunity and joined them with his family. They had a wonderful day !

Taking care of their family is what our village women do day and night. Going out for an entertainment is something they could not afford. After joining our project, they broke this tradition and started to gather together at different occasions in the locality. The resource personals of Œuvre des pains who orient them and even the visitors coming from Belgium have made big impact on their thinking.



Visiting Mathurai. The dream came true.



To have a say in the decision making and organizing a trip like this is a big accomplishment. Our women have reached that stage. The thought of a picnic coming from them seemed to be a new start, a new milestone !

### Delhi in red alert !

Delhi, is the fifth most populous city in the world with a population over 21 million people. The air quality of Delhi is notoriously poor and much worse in winter. Panic grips this Indian Capital as residents wake up to the thick gray smog each winter. The official safe limit for tiny particulate matter known as PM 2.5 particles set by the *European Union* is 25 micrograms per cubic meter. The situation has become alarming as the levels of PM 2.5 that enter deep into the lungs reached as high as 700 micrograms per cubic meter in some areas early this November. Excess of this particle damage the lungs, and cause heart disease and other life-threatening conditions.

The heavy traffic, filthy local industries and coal-fired power station make it Delhi's pollution hotspot. This situation soar in winter due to farmers in neighboring states burning stubble to clear their fields. Low wind speeds, dust from construction sites, and firecrackers used in festivals also contribute to increasing pollution levels.

The *Indian Medical Association* (IMA) declared « *a state of medical emergency* » and urged the government to « *make every possible effort to curb this menace* ». The schools in Delhi were shut down for one week. Doctors were recommending that people wear anti-pollution masks outdoors and when traveling on public transport. People with existing respiratory problems had to carry inhalers, take flu and pneumonia jabs, and use air purifiers at home.

A new study on the impact of air pollution on life expectancy by *Michael Greenstone*, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, has found people in Delhi could live six years longer if India just met its national PM 2.5 standards of 40 micrograms per cubic meter. They could live nine years longer if the country met the *World Health Organization standard*, which is 10 micrograms per cubic meter.



In the winter, the poisoned air suffocates Delhi.

Quitting Delhi is the option for those who can, but not many could do it. The people without an alternative are really panicking as they keep breathing in the poisoned air.

Our school projects are situated 4 hours drive from Delhi. They are in rural areas and are not affected by the city pollution.

### Untimely departure of Gulnaz

The preparation for Christmas started both in our schools and in the villages. On this occasion, we cannot forget *Gulnaz*, who used to be the main person to organize it with children.

Six years ago, when *Gulnaz* came for an interview for the post of *Physical Education Teacher*, we were really impressed by her personality. Independent, well built and well qualified ! Seldom we could find such a personality in this region among the muslim community.



She joined the school and worked with us for five years, until she left us all last year for good. Her last working day in the school was a Friday. On Saturday, she called the school to inform that she got typhoid and will be back to school only after few days. After two days, we had hard time to believe the news that she passed away. Later we learned that she was diagnosed with dengue fever and her condition worsened all of a sudden on Tuesday evening. She was taken to a local doctor but he could not give her the right treatment. Her situation worsened and on the way to the main hospital, she breathed her last.

*Gulnaz* could smile in the face of crisis and she could handle very peacefully even the most difficult situations. She used to enjoy planning programs and organizing school feasts. Though children better adapt to the situation with the passing of time, certainly many of them will be missing her terribly.

While asking one of the senior student if he was missing Ms *Gulnaz*, he responded : « *Of course I miss her, but I believe she is watching over us from above.* » The thought that death is not the end, bring us much comfort !

Along with all the children of our schools, and women from our project who are so grateful for all the programs we conduct, we wish you a *Happy Christmas* ! Pray that the year ahead bring you good health, peace and Happiness.



In Saint-Anthony's School in Dugawar, we have now the *Gulnaz Memorial Ever Rolling Trophy*. A sport competition created in the memory of our teacher.

