

I was born in London in 1959 and put up for adoption soon after. This is quite possibly the beginning of the story of Shuktara, which I started in 1999, a home for boys with disabilities who have no families to care for them.

Before coming to Calcutta and starting Shuktara I had been selling vintage clothes and textiles at Portobello Road, but it was on a visit to India to source fabrics that I came to Calcutta and something happened that would change the course of my life forever.

A friend of my mother's had informed me about a project for children living on Howrah Station. She was donating money to this project and thought it would be good for me to see what was happening with her money. The project cared for children who arrived alone at the station, giving them food, education and shelter, with the hope that they would be able to help these lost children find their way home or if not, then admit them to a residential care home in the city.

During this stay I discovered that children with disabilities were often overlooked, and I decided that I would like to do something for them.

I returned to UK, continuing to come back and forth to India, discovering more interesting textiles to buy and sell. Finally in October 1998, I sold up and moved to Calcutta with the hope that my friend Alison from San Francisco and I would be able to start something for children with severe learning disabilities. That did not work out and with Alison's husband we taught typing and computer skills to children from low-income families.

I am not a teacher and my passion to do something for children with disabilities had not left me. By then Alison had decided that she wanted to continue her center and Uddami was founded. (See [www.uddami.org](http://www.uddami.org))

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1999, I received a phone call from a foreigner living in Calcutta who had had two young men brought to his organization by a residential care institution that could no longer care for them.

Anna and Sunil were about 17 years old with learning disabilities and Sunil was also profoundly deaf. I agreed to take them on. We lived in a small flat in a posh area of town above a beauty parlour with Alison and her husband above us. I got help with cleaning, washing and cooking, but apart from that I was alone. These two frightened boys soon adjusted to evenings watching TV with Alison and I and with days spent playing with helpers that I brought in. What was incredible was that neither of them had ever held a pencil or seen a drawing book and didn't know what I was doing when I presented them with these items. I had a lot to learn.

Anna had epileptic seizures and deeply disturbing behavior and Sunil was happily throwing buckets of water from the balcony, over the heads of the permed and coiffed society ladies of Calcutta. We were thrown out.

With two boys and very little money we moved into two ground floor flats in a working class neighbourhood and I took on staff to help. The last of my available money was spent on a TV and fridge and they threw in a 1940's style washing machine for free!! Then I started to write to my friends in London and tell them what I'd done.

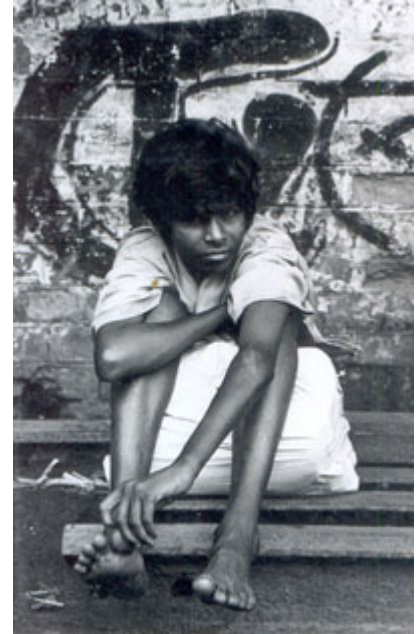
Soon more children were being brought to our home and other organizations who were working at Howrah Station, on discovering children with disabilities or who were deaf, were getting in touch with us.



Anna and Sunil 1999 and in 2005



Our small flat was soon at bursting point with Anna, Sunil, Shantara, Bapi, Sanjay and Bablu Lal. Because we were always being asked if we had space for more children we took on another small flat in the neighbourhood. With two staff and two young deaf boys, Kedar and Ramesh, this was the beginning of another new home. It seemed the perfect setting to take very young children who had been abandoned or left alone and Raju was our first little one.



Shantara 1999 Howrah Station



Shantara 2008



Raju's first day



Raju New Year's Day 2008

Raju Das was born on the pavement at Kalighat, his mother had died and after his father left he was cared for on the street by his grandmother, but she was unable to cope with him. Raju has cerebral palsy and was unable to walk, so he was constantly crawling under cars and into the street, causing everyone deep distress. She mentioned Raju to many people passing by and one day she mentioned her situation to someone that knew about shuktara.

Raju came to us with his grandmother and stayed. She came every weekend to visit him until she died a year later. We soon had railings fitted around the flat to teach Raju to balance and to walk. With physiotherapy he was soon becoming more agile and independent and was admitted to a local nursery school.

It was at this time that we were informed about Sumon, a 6-year-old boy, who was found naked and abandoned at the station. Unable to walk due to his cerebral palsy, the shuktara staff went to pick him up, to find 10 rupees tied to his wrist in a handkerchief. Perhaps a plea from his family for someone to care for him. Sumon was very distressed, very nervous, very untrusting and very very frightened. From a Brahmin family, they had taken him to Howrah Station and just left him there, after removing his clothing and rubbing his body in dirt.

Today Sumon is a happy bright young man attending the Cerebral Palsy Unit of a local school for children with disabilities. Still unable to walk, he is very independent and loves to be in control of what we are watching on TV, with cricket being at the top of his list. He, like many of the shuktara children will never be totally independent as they rely on the help of the staff here for most of their needs.

Soon this small flat also had 6 boys with the arrival of Pinku, a 10-year-old deaf boy and Ashok, who was brought to us by an Irish nurse who was working in a home for the mentally ill in Calcutta. She noticed Ashok and was aware that he had been wrongly diagnosed. In fact Ashok, an intelligent young man with

cerebral palsy, had been wrongly diagnosed all his life. He had been crying out to people that there was nothing wrong with him and finally someone listened.

Ashok cannot speak but he has full understanding of Hindi, Bengali and English. His cerebral palsy affects all his movements, but doesn't restrict him from anything at all. He is totally independent and refuses any kind of help. God help anyone who takes pity on him because he becomes very angry. Ashok is now studying in REACH Cerebral Palsy Institute and with proper enlightened instruction will go far.



Sumon 2008



Ashok 2006

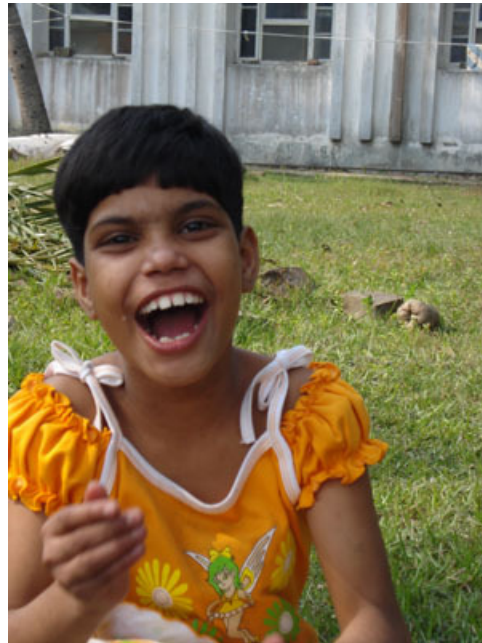
With two small flats and 12 boys, six in each home, we were told that one of the homes had to close because the landlord was taking it over. It was then that we decided to move everyone in together to one large house.

This has been a great success. I believe that the way shuktara started in small family groups paved the way for the wonderful way these (now 15) young men live together. Caring and helping each other with daily activities, taking each other to school and serving food and drink to those that don't have such mobility.

It was with this model that we were able to start a small home for girls two years ago. We have a small flat with three girls - Tamina, Rekha and Ipshita. Rekha and Ipshita are deaf and Tamina has learning disabilities.

We have three married women who share the responsibilities as full-time caregivers and the girls come to the main home to do studies and for joint activities.

We would all like the girls home to grow in the same way that the boys home has. It really seems to have worked, two small groups, living in a family situation in rented accommodation, slowly growing into a group family situation with 15 or more children living together and growing up together.



Tamina New Year's Day 2008



Rekha and Ipshita Diwali 2007

Shuktara will never be a large organization. The whole idea behind shuktara was to create loving family home situations for children with disabilities who had lost their parents.

Our future plans are to buy the houses, one for the boys and one for the girls, then they really will have the security of their own home and that it can never be taken from them.

Another plan now is to fundraise to buy some space that we can turn into a café or guest house, an art space or exhibition center. A place where the children as they grow up can be trained to work. Most of the children as they completed their education in IICP or REACH gained work experience in the centers in catering and we would need to give them some more training in how to make snacks and food to sell in our center.

My life in London was based in and around Portobello Road, where I ran a stall for more than 20 years, buying and selling vintage clothing and textiles. I was able to satisfy this side of my personality by designing throws and blankets for egg in London and dosa in the States, wonderful independent boutiques, who have supported us in all of their purchases.

I have worked with a group of about 100 women who live on the outskirts of Calcutta and who stitch beautifully in a chain stitch style, known as 'kantha'. I only use vintage fabrics, saris, shawls, dhotis and lunghis, all mixed and patched and stitched, creating a quilted feel.

35 percent of our profits come back to running shuktara, which gives us a small sense of self-reliance.

Other donations to shuktara come from a small group of family and friends in the UK.

At the moment with one rented house, one rented flat, 15 boys, 3 girls and numerous staff our current expenses are 1750 GBP per month. This covers everything - wages, rent, electricity, food and school fees.

We have been incredibly lucky to have this money coming in on a regular basis and I feel that I have never had to ask - it has always just come.

In the future, with buying properties for the future of shuktara, we will have to ask, we will have to fill out proposals to big companies and donor agencies, but our hope is that nothing will ever take away the feeling here of the small loving family group that has been created through the love and care that they have shown to each other over the last 9 years.

For most of the children we don't know how they came to lose their families. I have noticed that the girls show signs of distress, in a way that the boys never did. I remember seeing Bapi once soon after coming to us, sitting on the steps of our house sobbing and I see the same with Ipshita 9 years later. This emotional pain of losing a parent and not knowing how to move on. Not knowing where to go or how to express that loss.

All I can say is that shuktara is a safe place to be in that moment and however deep the pain is, the security of being with others in the same situation soon seems to cover it up for them in a positive way.



Rekha, David and Bapi Howrah Station January 2000



Rekha and Bapi  
2007



Stitching in the village



David and Tamina 2008