

COLOURING UP THE GLOOM

Satyen K Bordoloi attempts to turn the spotlight on the issue of malnutrition as he recounts a fun-filled paint job

Photos: **Utsav Kedia & Satyen K Bordoloi**

Some months ago, when Caitlin McQuilling, the Director of the Malnutrition Project of Real Medicine Foundation (RMF) heard of the Wall Project in Mumbai, he asked for volunteers to paint a malnutrition centre in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. My friend Priyanka, who has painted quite a few walls in Mumbai, jumped at the opportunity and when she told me about it, I couldn't resist doing it either. The only problem with me was that I hadn't held a paintbrush in two decades. And yet, as they say, what you lack in skill is often made up by passion and enthusiasm.



Jeevan Jyoti Hospital where the Malnutrition Rehabilitation Centre was painted

The location: Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh.

The scenario: The place has the country's highest percentage of tribal population (85 per cent to be precise) and with it comes the highest percentage of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition. More than half of its 1.2 million tribal inhabitants live as marginal farmers below the poverty line.



Mixing the paints

The task: Jeevan Jyoti, a private hospital has been providing health services to the rural population of the district for over a decade now. A corner of the hospital has been given to the RMF to start a malnutrition centre where the malnourished kids would stay for a few weeks till they completely recover (a malnourished body gets into a shock if treated suddenly; complete recovery takes several weeks). The idea was to make this centre colourful and educative for both the kids and the mother.

The painters: There were four of us from Mumbai — Priyanka Borpujari (the only one with painting experience), Neetha Thomas, an HR executive and clinical psychologist, Utsav Kedia, a financial whiz kid and me. Then there was Anjana, a volunteer at the Centre, three students from Germany who were there as part of their one year Peace Corp work, Gauri and Shreya, two NIFT Delhi Students, Donovan Bailey from the US, Nyamat Bindra from Delhi and of course, Caitlin McQuilling.

Shadow on the wall: Priyanka making outline of sunflower on the wall

The job: Anjana, though she had never painted on walls, replicated her mehendi skills to turn the pillars in one room into a beautiful floral design. Neetha made the base for the lobby and painted the children's room with images of the sun, the moon and the stars. Shreya and Gauri made the other children's ward into a circus with animals and tents while Utsav painted fish and letters of the alphabet. Priyanka made a motif of a woman breast feeding her child on a bed of flowers and sketched some sunflowers and butterflies in the lobby.

Donovan painted an animated water droplet.

Caitlin, Nyamat, the German boys and I were the assistants to all. On the second day I, too, dared to make two cartoon characters on the walls.

Some students from a residential school nearby got inspired and promised to finish what we couldn't.

The beginning: Chaos and doubt were the operative words as no one had any clue what to do and how to begin. However, some quiet moments and a little brainstorming later, we finalised a few things.

The lobby would be transformed into a garden with sunflowers. One of the children's wards would be a room with celestial stars and clouds, while the other would have circus, kites and rainbows.

The big room where the kids and mothers would spend most of their time would be decorated with letters and foliage, inspiring mothers to breast feed.



Priyanka makes the mother, while Caitlin makes the flowers

Real Medicine Foundation (RMF) is an International body working in Asia, Africa, Americas and Europe providing humanitarian support to people living in disaster, post-war and poverty stricken areas. You can help build a strong, healthy, and hopeful future for India's children by participating in their projects. For more information on this initiatives and how you can help, visit www.realmedicinefoundation.org or contact the Director of the Malnutrition Eradication Initiative in India, Caitlin McQuilling, with your question, comments, or suggestions at Caitlin.mcquilling@realmedicinefoundation.org

The experience: "I came to enrich the walls here, but I am going back enriched myself," said Utsav who had never done anything like this. "It was like a trip back to my childhood. I shall return to Jhabua to finish the job," said Neetha. Caitlin, who got all of us together says, "The idea was to make the place bright and cheerful for the kids, but a lot more happened. I made some new friends who have expressed their desire to do more for the cause in the future and this is most welcome."



Circus on the wall



Donovan giving finishing touches to his animated water droplet

The awareness: In our struggle for daily existence, we often forget about those who struggle at the fringes. It took just two days to paint the Centre but the most important outcome was the awareness about malnutrition. We all came back determined to do something about raising the level of awareness. And when a problem is so acute, even a little bit goes a long way.



Neetha painting her sun, moon and smiling stars

Malnutrition in India

Malnutrition is the biggest crisis of the nation. A staggering 46 per cent of all children under the age of five in India are underweight. This means, 60 million children (three times the population of Australia) are undernourished.

Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states, carries the largest of this burden with

60 per cent of its children under the age of five being malnourished.

In Madhya Pradesh alone:

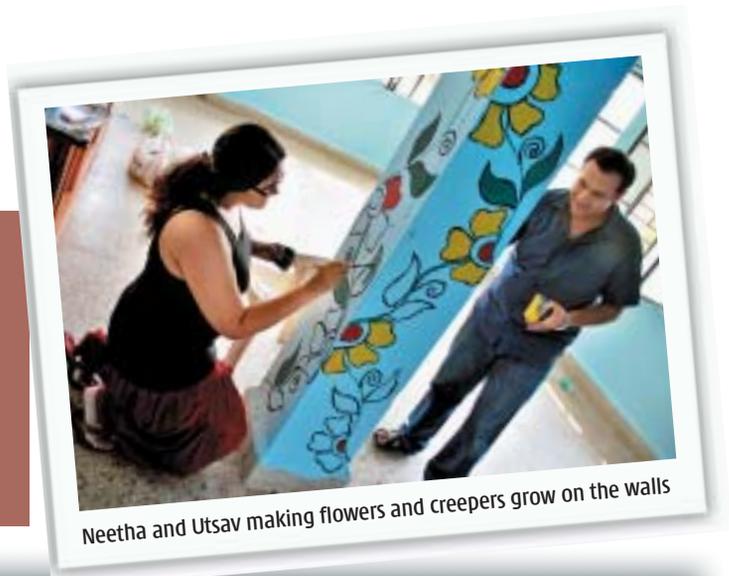
Malnourished children: 6 million

Worst form of acute malnutrition: 1.3 million

72 out of 1,000 children in die of malnutrition every year!

THE WALL PROJECT

A modest project started by a few enthusiastic people who decided to do something about the blank white compound wall in Bandra. So far, they have collectively managed to do more than 60 pieces all over Mumbai. www.thewallproject.com/about.html



Neetha and Utsav making flowers and creepers grow on the walls



Cheers to Happiness: Neetha and Priyanka with tribal girls of the residential school



What can YOU do?

The most obvious thing you can do is donate money if you feel for the cause. While money is essential, more important than that is to donate your time and efforts. There are plenty of things the Centre needs help with – others who have time can go there and work, others can raise funds or collect goods (medicines, clothes etc.) If you're a writer, write about the issue of malnutrition. If you're a filmmaker, make a video. If you're a doctor or a nurse, you can work there. In short, no matter what you are good at, there's something you can do to help rid the nation of malnutrition.



Priyanka with her masterpieces, *Mother And A Healthy Child*