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Shelley Seale with the children
of the Miracle Foundation in
Orissa in March 2009



Santosh, right, arrived at the orphanage at the age of two

When Shelley Seale first met Santosh in 2005, he was nine years old – and painfully shy.

He had arrived at the orphanage in Orissa when he was turning two. His mother had died; his father had remarried and – in the trite language officialdom uses to describe what for a small child is a cataclysmic event, the father ‘was staying in another place leaving Santosh helpless and alone, because the second mother of Santosh did not agree to keep the child with her.’

Shelley found Santosh very reticent. “I thought he was too shy,” the writer recalled in course of an extended interview. “But I was wrong. He was simply not used to the attention and had difficulty grasping the idea that someone had come from across the world just to visit him. It is a powerful thing to walk into a place like that and call out a child’s name, to say I am here for *you*, to these children for whom no one has ever come looking. It is a powerful, life-changing thing to be sought out, to realize that someone else knows they exist. To *matter*.”

Just how deep the wounds could run, just how much the idea of ‘family’ could matter, dawned on Shelley the day she, along with the orphanage officials, decided to host an ice cream party for the kids.

Santosh was missing; Shelley finally found him sitting by himself, far removed from the bustle, teary eyed and listless. A house mother took the boy aside to ask what was wrong.

“When she returned she said simply, ‘He misses his mother,’” Shelley recalled. “I felt it in my heart. I knew that Santosh’s mother had died when he was so young he couldn’t possibly remember her, not really. But he was mourning the idea of a mother – that huge absence in his life that felt like a great, gaping hole he could never fill even with all the affection the surrogates in the orphanage lavished on him.”

Shelley Seale, a native of Austin, Texas, is the oldest of three girls – or of fifty-plus children of both sexes, depending on how you define ‘family’.

Her own definition goes beyond blood and is inclusive, vast; it wraps the young of the world in its sympathetic embrace – and it stems from when she was very young.

Her mother Sandra Seale became a foster par-



Teardrops on the cheek of Time

A chance article, a visit to India – of such random acts is life transformed. **Prem Panicker** reports on such change in the lives of the children of India and of a writer who encountered them

ent with the Edna Gladney Home in Fort Worth, Texas, a home for unwed mothers. “More than fifty babies lived with us over the years on their journeys to adoptive parents,” Shelley recalls of her childhood years, “and in 1984, my parents adopted my youngest sister just as I was graduating from high school.”

With that empathetic background, it was inevitable that Shelley would find her *raison d’être* in the world of the very young –

mentoring at-risk teen girls, volunteering with Child Protective Services and as a court appointed advocate, fighting for those children who had been removed from parents due to abuse or neglect.

Her personal epiphany occurred the day, in 2004, when in a local lifestyle magazine *Tribes* she read the story of Caroline Boudreaux who, on a visit to India three years earlier, chanced on an orphanage in Orissa full of children living in incomprehensible conditions. Boudreaux returned home and started the Miracle Foundation, a non-profit to raise money and recruit sponsors to help support the home.

“I began volunteering for the organization, and sponsored a child back in India,” Shelley recalls. “Caroline invited me to accompany her on a volunteer trip to Orissa, and I made my first visit in March 2005.”

Four years down the line, Shelley still struggles to encapsulate the sensory deluge of that first trip to a land she, till that point, knew very little about.

“India was everything I had imagined it would be – only more so: more colors and smells, more noises and people, more everything. It was an assault on all the

senses at once, and I was overwhelmed. But it also felt like an incredible gift, the most alive place I’d ever been in.

“It wrapped itself around me and refused to let go.”

If India invaded her mind, it was the orphanage that left the deepest impression on her heart. She expected a place of infinite sadness; she suspected she had unwittingly let herself in for an emotionally wrenching experience.

“Yes, there were stories behind each of the children – many of them painful and tragic: stories of death, abandonment, abuse, poverty,” says Shelley. “Yet the man who ran the home and his family had made the kids their own in a community of sharing and acceptance. They were poor in wealth but not in spirit; limited in resources but not in joy and laughter. They shared every-

thing with me and gave me an unconditional love, for nothing more than simply showing up. The first day I was there, I knew I would be back.”

Shelley went back. In March 2006 as part of a volunteer group with teenage daughter Chandler in tow; a solo visit in 2007 where she spent a week at the Miracle Foundation and then travelled across the country immersing herself in the plight of its young. And then she went again, in March 2009. “I miss it already, and can’t wait to go again!” she said from her Austin home.

Somewhere along the way, as the children of India inveigled themselves into her mind and heart, and as she found herself altered in ways she hadn’t imagined possible, a book began to incubate.

“The very existence of these children forever altered both the person I was and my view of the world,” Shelley said. “As I bore witness to the harm that lay in each of them because of their pasts, as I discovered the stories behind the faces and the names, there was simply no way to go on with my life afterwards as if they did not exist. I embarked on a three-year journey, researching the issues, travelling throughout India and talking to many professionals and those working in the trenches to uphold these children’s rights and improve their futures.”

“They were invisible children, without a real voice of their own. And that gave me the purpose I was looking for – to write a book that would give these millions of children a voice that could be heard by others in the world who, I was convinced, would be as moved by their plights as I was.”

That idea would in time become *The Weight of Silence: The Children of India*, Shelley Seale’s book under the Dog’s Eye View Media imprint released earlier this month. But before the 300 pages filled with the words that would take the stories of those children to caring humans worldwide, Shelley embarked on a countrywide odyssey to gather material.

“This was probably the most difficult part



Caroline Boudreaux, who started the Miracle Foundation, with its orphans



◀ M2

of writing the book," Shelley recalled. "Although much of the book and children's stories take place at the Miracle Foundation homes in Orissa, the book is spread all over India and profiles many children and incredible adults working on their behalf all over the country. And there obviously is also a lot of facts and figures about the issues affecting these children that needs to be imparted."

Her travels took her beyond Orissa, to Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Nellore, Vijayawada, Hyderabad; among others, she spent time at the Little Hearts Home for AIDS orphans in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh; the Vambay Slum outside Vijayawada; Oasis India, the Salaam Baalak Trust and Akanksha in Mumbai; the CHES Home for Children and AIDS treatment in Chennai; and the CCD Muktaner Home for Boys in Kolkata.

"Ultimately," says the freelance writer who contributes to a plethora of travel publications, "the way I tackled this was to write a story that weaved together the issues themselves together with individual children who are affected by those issues. I do not try to touch on everything; I just try to give enough information to grasp the problems, but mostly to tell the stories of these incredible, beautiful children."

"Their hope and resilience amazed me time and time again; the ability of their spirits to overcome crippling challenges inspired me. Even in the most deprived circumstances they are still kids – they laugh and play, if perhaps less frequently than others; they develop strong bonds and relationships to create family where none exists; and most of all, they have an enormous amount of love to give."

If her encounters with the children plumbed wells of empathy deep inside of her, her interactions with the adults working in the field of disadvantaged youth was to teach her the lesson of humility.

One such is Damodar Sahoo, who runs the Miracle Foundation home in Orissa where Shelley's own odyssey began.

If you ask for 'Damodar Sahoo', chances are no one will know who you are talking about – but ask for 'Papa', and a dozen people will vie for the privilege of taking you to him.

Sahoo is not a man much given to talking of himself – Shelley had to probe gently to uncover the story of how, way back in 1972 when he was working in the area of distress relief, Sahoo discovered the mission that was to consume his life.

"One day, while going about his work after a cyclone had hit, he found an orphaned child lying on the roadside next to her dead mother," Shelley narrates. "Shortly thereafter, a severe flood left another sixteen local children homeless and parentless. Mr Sahoo and his wife welcomed them all into their own tiny home, caring for them in addition to their own daughter and two sons. Over the next twenty-five years the children continued to arrive, until dozens came to know the Sahoo family as home."

Over the years, as the Miracle



Damodar 'Papa' Sahoo, who has been providing a home to orphans for years, inspired Caroline Boudreaux to start the Miracle Foundation

Foundation raised money for the orphanage, building a new wing and bunk beds and bathrooms for the children, Caroline Boudreaux and others repeatedly asked 'Papa' to allow them to make improvements to his own cramped quarters, to give him the wherewithal to make his own life a little easier.

"No, I need nothing," was his usual answer.

'Let me buy you something,' Boudreaux persisted.

Papa' shook his head, and gestured at the new dormitories Boudreaux had helped fund, at the children in their uniforms getting ready to go to school.

'You have already bought me the most important thing,' Papa told her. 'You

bought me sleep.'

'Papa' Sahoo is just one among dozens of men and women working without notice, without publicity, without reward or recognition in this most under-served of social arenas: people like C P Kumar, who runs the Little Hearts home in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh for AIDS orphans.

The work done by Kumar and his ilk are, Shelley found, impossible to comprehend, let alone encapsulate within the pages of a book.

"How do you explain unconditional love?" Shelley said, when we asked about Kumar. "How do you begin to comprehend the forces of compassion, faith and dedication that can so define a person that he will spend the hours of his life loving those

whom no else stops to notice? Those whom he has no obligation to care about, no reason to work for, and no reward other than the knowledge that he is making some small dent in the endless tide of need?"

Shelley recalls standing outside a small, nondescript building on a dusty street in Nellore, watching two dozen once-homeless children rushing out to greet the man who had stood between them and the bleakest of futures.

At one of India's hotspots in the AIDS pandemic, Kumar and his family took in 25 children orphaned by the killer virus. "What was most amazing was that he did not do this as his job, because it was required of him – he did it in addition to a regular full-time position as a government public relations officer. Not only did 'CP' not get paid for his work under HEARTS, but he and his wife Mamatha poured their own money into the organization, and in carrying out their self-appointed mission were now in personal debt."

The children Shelley saw there were young, ranging from four to ten years old. The oldest was an eighth grade girl called Sutrasini.

One day, Kumar read a newspaper story about three brothers who had recently lost their parents to AIDS and had only an elderly grandfather left to support them. The grandfather used to work as a field laborer,

▶ M5

Let me tell you the story of one little girl that illustrates the amazing transformation that can happen in the lives of these kids when enough caring adults intervene.

In 2007, the Miracle Foundation opened a new home close to Rourkela, Orissa. Run by Dr Manjeet Pardesi, the home had only been open a short while but was already past capacity with children. "They found out we are here," Dr Pardesi said, referring to the local townspeople. "The children, they just keep coming."

One night at about two am, there was a loud knocking at the front gate. Dr Pardesi, Caroline Boudreaux and some of the house mothers arrived at the entrance to find a police officer there, holding a baby. The child was naked, emaciated with starvation and near death, bones poking her skin up like poles suspending a tent.

The look in the eyes of this tiny person, less than a year old, was far beyond infancy. Her dark eyes radiated hopelessness and despair – the look of someone who had been erased from the inside. The only thing in the world she possessed was the bean strung on a thread around her neck.

The policeman placed the skeletal child into Caroline's arms. The baby's name was Sumitra; she was nine months old, but the size of a three month infant. Her mother

Sumitra's story

Through the story of one infant, **Shelley Seale** traces the problem of India's uncared for young – and the solution



Miracle child Sumitra, left, when she arrived at the orphanage and a photograph of her taken one year later

had died hours earlier from a simple infection. Caroline would later call Sumitra 'the saddest human being I have ever seen in my life.'

After the officer left the staff tried to feed Sumitra from a bottle, but she kept throwing up. They tried massaging her with oil until she relaxed. She was so weak and dehydrated she could not even cry; she simply had no water for tears, nor the energy to express her despair in that most

basic form.

One year later, I visited Dr Pardesi's home outside Rourkela. As soon as I arrived, a toddler ran up to me like a force of nature. Her short, chubby legs pumped underneath the ruffles of a frilly pink and green dress and her hands clapped furiously. A huge, wide-mouthed grin stole over her face as she jumped around me, and in that smile I sensed the pure joy she felt at being alive.

I was amazed, because I recognized this little girl. Her deep, intense eyes were unmistakable. It was Sumitra – who, a year earlier, was a starving infant who could not even cry.

I have seen countless transformations just like Sumitra's. Attitudes of cynicism or despair can sometimes prevail when confronted by the enormity of such challenges; it is easy to give up, to say the problem is insurmountable, that India's uncared-for young is a problem without solutions.

But the truth I have found over visits to dozens of organizations and hours upon hours of interviews, is that all over India – and beyond its borders – people are striving tirelessly every day in initiatives and programs which, if scaled up and coordinated and funded in full measure throughout the country, would have an immeasurable impact on such vulnerable children's lives and futures. ■



Teardrops on the cheek of Time

◀ M3

but that income was not enough to support three growing boys. He was forced therefore to supplement his meagre salary through begging.

The AIDS label is a double blow: in hearers, it engenders both the fear of death, and the social revulsion consequent on ignorance of the causes – a kind of modern-day scarlet letter that taints not just the infected, but entire generations to follow.

The reporter had written of how these boys were unwanted in the village, and urged the government to do something for them. When CP called about the children, he was told that he was the only person who had responded.

"I asked CP how he could possibly accept the three boys – he was already well past capacity with the twenty-five children living at Little Hearts," Shelley recalled. "He gazed back at me for a long moment of silence before answering. 'If not me, who?' he asked. 'If not now, when?'"

Such seminal encounters change you are unequipped to measure, Shelley found.

Today, she talks of herself as two persons in one: the "before India Shelley and the after India Shelley".

"The experience fundamentally changed me and the person I was," Shelley says. "In some ways I felt more familiar to myself in India, like I was now the person I had been brought there to become. I had arrived, that first time two years before, not really knowing what to expect. I had not come to India to change anything about it; instead, the country and its people had worked a transformational change in me. They had allowed me into the real heart of the place and by doing so, spared me from viewing it with the eyes of an outsider.

"India's rawness of life stripped away the unnecessary in my life – distractions, superficial attachments, trivial worries. Without the safety net of the superficial, my life became fundamental, it was reduced to only the essentials of being. I became lost in order to find."

The book, she says, is as much to make personal sense of her own life-changing experiences as it is to awake the world to a problem not many are aware of. It is, she says, a problem not especially confined to India – all over the world, even in her native United States, today's young grow up in need of one kind or the other.

So, why India when, as her own experiences had informed her, there are needy children closer to home?

Shelley recalls how, in response to an article she once wrote following a visit to India, an Indian reader wrote: 'Why don't you help your own slumdogs?'

And it is not just Indians, who apparently believe Shelley does them a disservice by drawing attention to the problem, who come up with such responses – her American friends ask her why she has to go halfway around the world to do good.

"My simple answer to the question 'Why India?' is, why not? I agree that there are plenty of problems in my own country – and I donate significant amounts of time and money to non-profit organizations right here at home," Shelley says. "I have been a volunteer for years with CASA that advocates for abused children, with Child Protective Services and many other groups that work for marginalized children in the US.

"It's not like I think only India has children in need or that I work only in India.

But I also believe that every life, no matter where it's lived, has equal value. Extreme poverty in India is not the same as poverty in the United States, and there are very little if any safety nets for children there who fall through the cracks. Millions of children in the US aren't generally threatened by malaria and tuberculosis, denied education or trafficked, sold into factories or domestic labor if they're lucky, to brothels if they're not. A childhood cannot wait for the AIDS epidemic to subside, for poverty to be eradicated, for adults and governments to act, for the world to notice them. Once gone, their childhoods can never be regained.

"Why India? Quite simply because those twenty-five million children exist," says Shelley, who in her conversations took great pains to point out that she was not coming from a holier-than-thou pedestal.

"My intention is not to rub India's collective nose in this problem, or to tell Indians how to solve them," Shelley insists. "My only desire was to give a strong and hopeful voice to these children. Foreigners, including myself, do not and cannot know what is best for India. It is not a matter for us to come and instruct or order; for efforts undertaken in that way, no matter how well intentioned, will always fail in their arrogance."

Foreigners, Shelley says, rarely if ever understand the society they seek to 'improve' – and that ignorance multiplies the risk that they could end up imposing their own cultural bias on an alien culture, resulting in negative consequences for those whose lives they seek to change.

"We should come to listen, to learn, to assist where and when asked," Shelley says. "If I were asked, I would say the goal of my book, and of my writings thus far, is simply to allow us to hear what those voices have to say.

"The stories told in this book do not belong to me. They were given to me as a gift, often because I was the only person who had ever asked." ■

The Miracle Foundation (www.miracle-foundation.org) is based at 1506 W 6th Street, Austin, Texas 78703; Phone: +001 512 329-8635. For more on The Weight of Silence, visit <http://weightofsilence.wordpress.com/>

The story of Chandler

Shelley Seale's empathy for children was a gift from her mother Sandra – a gift she passed on to her daughter

At some point before my second volunteer trip to India in March 2006, I began thinking of taking my daughter Chandler with me. One of the volunteers on the first trip was a woman with a teenage son who had been a huge

It turned out she was simply overwhelmed by the culture shock. It was balanced in equal measure, however, with the splendor of intricately carved temples, the majesty of ancient palaces, the smell of incense and curry that wafted on the warm breezes, and the warmth and generosity of the people.

We met a family on the train who immediately made room for us, sharing their blankets and their food. By the end of the train ride we knew all about each other's families, like old friends. "You are a visitor in our country," the matriarch said, "and it is our duty to take care of you."

That evening in the restaurant where we ate dinner, the fans and night air cooling us, Chai and delicious vegetable curry filling our stomachs, Chandler began to perk up. She became talkative again, excitedly recounting our day's adventures as if she had not walked through them in a state of shock. From that moment on India was hers – and she had become India's.

At the orphanage, Chandler was constantly surrounded by her 'groupies' – sisters Mami and Sumi, Rahel and Sima, all younger girls who crowded her lap and played with her hair. They pulled it between their fingers and brushed it; braided it over and over, securing it with elastic fasteners before quickly taking them out to refashion the style.

Older girls, too, hovered near her, adolescents who were much more interested in this girl their own ages than in us adults. But they had outgrown the hand-holding and lap-sitting; by their ages it wasn't cool to show such enthusiasm, and so they stood nonchalantly by, missing nothing. They took any opportunity however to drag Chandler back into their dorm rooms to powder and *henna* her; to turn on Hindi pop music and show off their intricate dance moves. It was a lot like summer camp. We were there over Holi, and we played in earnest with the kids. To this day, three years later, Chandler recounts that as one of the most fun days of her life.

When it came time to leave, Chandler was distraught – and so were the children. Rahel stood silently in front of her, offering up a bouquet of flowers with her eyes cast downward, too sad to look up at Chandler. Rahel's dejection was too much for my daughter, who started to cry. Throughout the following long hours of travel Chandler wept intermittently.

"I don't want to go home," she sobbed that night in the hotel. In the security line at the Delhi airport the next day, tears slowly leaked from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She cried silently on the plane as it lifted off Indian soil and left it behind, carrying us back home again. ■



Shelley Seale's daughter Chandler with a Miracle Foundation child

hit with the kids, because he was close in age to many of them.

I thought about how Chandler would love that experience and be enriched by it, and I also knew it was a gift she would not take lightly. So I took her back with me in 2006; she was 15 at the time.

The first day in India, I was worried. My daughter was quiet and withdrawn, overwhelmed by the streets and the noises and the heat, uncomfortable with the staring. She recoiled on the railway platform when a dozen taxi and rickshaw drivers besieged us the second we stepped off the train, each hawking their services and pushing and wrestling for our bags.

Then she went completely still as two small children, a brother and sister, stood in front of us with their fingers touching their mouths, silently begging. Her eyes grew round and wet, and I was afraid she was going to crumple. I had tried to prepare her for it, but it was an impossible task – like describing a painting to a blind person. I was afraid I had made a huge mistake bringing her.