

# Lessons for life

*Sheila Keegan is a volunteer with an organisation helping some of the poorest children in India. Here she describes a recent visit to Ramadevi Girls' High School where she discovered first hand the marvellous work transforming life for its pupils*

**P**alli Unnayan Seva Samiti, known as PUSS, is a voluntary organisation for girls in Orissa, the poorest state in India. My partner, Chris, is a committee member of the UK charity, 'Friends of the children of Orissa', which raises money for PUSS, and I too have become involved. Recently, I visited PUSS for the first time.

Under its education programme, PUSS runs a school called Ramadevi Girls' High school. This is not an ordinary school. It was set up in 1984 by a young woman called Kadambini Bhuyan who lived in Bhubaneswar. The daughter of a middle-class family, she decided not to marry

and, after a good deal of persuasion, her father finally agreed to give her the dowry she would have received on marrying. She used this money to start PUSS with her brother-in-law Bhagaban Patra. This was radical enough in conservative Orissa, but Kadambini then visited leprosy colonies, slum areas and prostitution centres in Orissa where she talked with mothers and persuaded them to allow her to educate their children. She would teach them the skills to enable them to find work and support their families when they grew up; they would escape the cycle of poverty. Relatives were encouraged to visit their children and many children returned home in the school holidays. Others were orphans and lived permanently at PUSS.

As the reputation of the school grew, local people began to bring abandoned children to PUSS. Babies had been dumped outside hospitals. Children were found wandering the streets and it was impossible to trace relatives. Some mothers were so poor they could not feed their children and asked PUSS to take care of them. Mostly these were girl children, who are much more likely to be abandoned because they are a burden to the family; they bring in less income and they require a dowry on marriage.

Twenty five years on, there is a different mix of children; out of 401 currently at PUSS, there are 12 boys. Other charity organisations have

moved in to work within leper colonies and with sex workers, but there is a growing number of displaced children from tribal areas in the inland parts of Orissa. The tribal people are finding it increasingly difficult to eke out a living in the rapidly shrinking forest areas where they have lived for thousands of years, long before the Aryans, the Moghuls or the British came to India. They bring their children to PUSS in the hope that it will equip them for a better life.

The school accepts them, but tribal children bring particular problems; many are ill with malaria, dysentery or viral infections. They are not familiar with living in a building, using toilets, sleeping in a bed. Communication is difficult as there are a large number of tribal languages, such as Kui, Santali, Kandha and Munda. When they arrive at PUSS, few of the tribal children speak Oriya, the language of Orissa, let alone Hindi, the language of India.

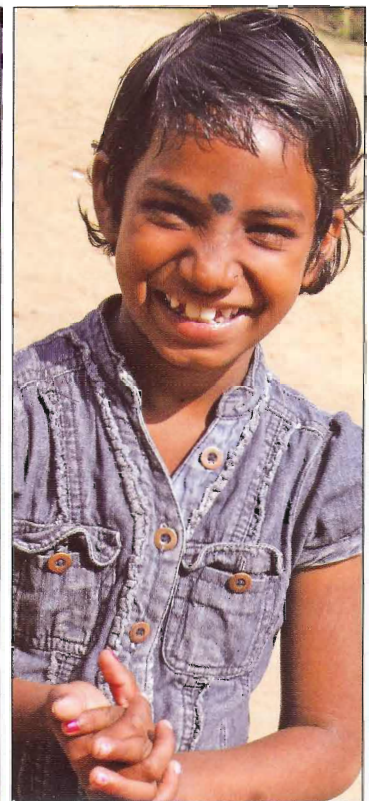
All this may sound depressing, but the reality of life at PUSS is anything but depressing.

We are met at the airport by two bubbly teenage girls, Mandakini and Mamata. They jump up and down with excitement and thrust posies of flowers at us. The girls, our luggage, the driver, Chris and I squeeze into a small Maruti taxi with shouts and giggles and off we bump, horn blaring, to PUSS. Once there, dozens of girls gather around us, grinning, jostling, eager to shake hands with us. It is quite overwhelming.

Kuku Patra, the current Secretary and daughter of the late Bhagaban Patra, is waiting for us, beaming and running forward. Kadambini died suddenly last year at the age of 48, only a few weeks after Bhagaban was killed in an accident. The two of them had worked tirelessly for more than 20 years to build up the school and care for the children. There was initial shock but then Kuku agreed to take over.

The founding principle of PUSS, "So long as children are allowed to suffer, there is no love in the world" is still strong, but the atmosphere is less strict, with more emphasis on mothering alongside discipline.





■ SCHOOL'S IN: Happy children at assembly. Shanti, above right and Lucy, in the panel have been helped by Kuku, opposite holding Annie

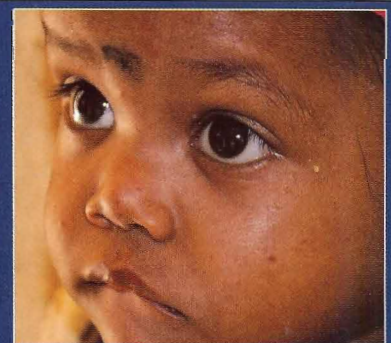
Kuku was keen to introduce fruit into the children's diet; fruit is expensive – a rare treat. Now every child has a piece of fruit once a week, on a Sunday. When I heard this, I felt ashamed at how casually I buy fruit and how I often throw it out because it has gone slightly off. Six young children, five or six years old, are brought in, sit cross legged on the floor, and eat the left overs from our lunch. Nothing is ever wasted. Food prices rose by 19 per cent last year, but Kuku is keen to emphasise the positives; the children now have dining tables and no longer eat off the floor. The beds have mattresses, although the children sleep 16 to a room. They have three vegetarian meals a day. Nonetheless, Kuku worries about how to fix the collapsed boundary wall, whether two sisters, very gifted dancers, could train to become professionals, how to cover medical bills.

Kuku is keen to show us around. A baby unit has just been completed and two babies, Adi and Annie, had arrived shortly before our visit. Adi's mother disappeared from hospital immediately after her birth and could not be traced. Annie's mother, a single parent, could not support her child. Annie was born prematurely and was expected to die but she survived and was brought to PUSS.

Every child has a story. I am introduced to Shanti. She is about seven. Her father was a snake charmer, but both parents died. She was sent to live with her 'Auntie' who sent her out to beg from early morning, without food. When she

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

Even small donations go a long way at PUSS. If you would like to contribute, please go to [www.orissa.org.uk](http://www.orissa.org.uk), and follow the instructions for donating on-line. Or, you can send a cheque payable to Friends of the Children of Orissa, 37 Filgrave, Bucks, MK169ET, England. If you are a British taxpayer, be sure to fill in the 'giftaid' form, so that the school can benefit from the Chancellor's generosity as well as your own.



returned her Auntie told her to go out and find food to eat. Crying with hunger, she had to beg for food from restaurants and hotels.

One day she got on a train. She did not know where she was going or where she came from. She got off the train in Bhubaneswar. She was fluent in Hindi but spoke no Oriya. Police found her crying on the railway station and eventually she was placed with PUSS. She was about six years old at the time. She is settling down and learning Oriya. She is wary, cautious of strangers, but she is gradually coming out of her shell.

There was great joy. Lucy, aged 18 months, had been left at PUSS by her mother who could not feed her; she was severely malnourished, had stunted growth and could not stand.

Now, six months on, her carer came running up to us and Kuku. "Come and see Lucy. Quickly". We ran to the baby unit. Lucy, now

two, was standing shakily, on her own, surrounded by beaming children and staff.

PUSS provides a safe and loving environment for the children and tries to give them the skills to live and work within society when they leave.

Thanks to the recent generosity of a donor, PUSS is planning to set up a computer training suite. Some girls will learn IT skills, which will equip them to work in India's burgeoning outsourcing market.

There are girls who have achieved remarkable success on leaving PUSS; one girl is studying aeronautical engineering, several are training as nurses, many have found tailoring jobs or work as government child care assistants.

However, just as important, are those who have married, had children, who are living happy, normal lives thanks to the experience of living at PUSS.