

Ammi' To A Thousand Children

Zulie Nakhoda has made unusual probables work for her in life. A dedicated veteran social activist for over 35 years, she is devoted to the cause of underprivileged and destitute children. She talks about her passion to Moni Bhushan.



Zulie Nakhoda's genius has its genesis in a slightly unusual background. A dedicated social worker and an educated woman, she did her MA, PhD and Diploma in social work at a time when women even from unconventional families were not so highly educated. Coming from a Bohra Muslim family, the surprise was her marriage to a boy who was just a matriculate! Zulie, 70, is now the Managing Trustee of The India Sponsorship Committee (ISC), an NGO dedicated to child welfare. The ISC, 35 years old, now pioneers the child sponsorship programme in collaboration with child welfare agencies. The concept of community sponsorship was evolved by ISC with a focus on child development and girl-child empowerment through education and vocational training.

The global movement, SAVE THE CHILD was the inspiration for the ISC that has centres in Mumbai, Lonavla and Pune, inhabiting well over a thousand children in all. The *Antar Bharti Balgram, Lonavla* provides the orphan and destitute children with a home, family and the novel concept of a 'foster mother'. It houses eight sadans (homes), each with 10-12 children and one 'mother'. The idea is to make children realise the importance of familial relationships. Vocational trainings have enabled around 500 children so far to lead an independent and respectable life, and ISC's 23 girls are now married and well settled!

In 1967, ISC initiated the Right to Education for underprivileged children and provided their families with socio-economic support. To date 6000 children have been

sponsored through this programme, with the ISC working with families and communities (specially women) to improve the quality of a child's life in every possible way. "I believe education is the best way to help a child. India Sponsorship Committee began its programme with children's educational sponsorship, which means sharing of social responsibility by financing the education of a child from an underprivileged family or community", says the veteran social activist. As I talk to Zulie I meet two of her now 'grown-up' children—Sanjaya and Prakash. "Hello, I am Sanjaya", says a confident lady. "I was one of five siblings. My father, a bus conductor with a salary of Rs.72, could not support all of us. But my poverty was a boon to me, because it introduced me to the ISC

E X C L U S I V E

in 1972, when I was in Std. VIII. The Committee helped me financially and by way of personality development. I have been working at Canara Bank for the past 26 years. I married Prakash. Prakash says, "About 21 years ago, I was myself a sponsored child for some years and received support from Std. VII to Std. X. Otherwise, I would have discontinued studies after Std. VII. Today, I do interior work."

These two children from Delisle Road chawls were sponsored in the first batch when the ISC started the sponsorship programme. Believing in Education as the best investment for a brighter future for children, they pioneered the programme in India and the number of children receiving educational aid increased every year in different states like Kerala, Bihar and West Bengal. "As the programme grew and children developed into self-reliant citizens with the timely assistance, I felt that when so many foreigners were helping Indian children why Indians cannot sponsor Indian kids. That's how a sister organisation called the National Sponsorship Council appealed to Indians to contribute one rupee per day for one child's education" says Zulie. Today about 600 children are being sponsored in Mumbai.

The education of the child within the community is only the beginning. Assistance to the child needs to be combined with a community development approach which is the next step. This can take the form of setting up a home for abandoned and destitute children, particularly

Zulie not only completed her MA and PhD after her marriage in 1950, but also went to USA to get her diploma in Social Service Administration from Denver University, leaving behind a five year old son! Coming from a Bora Muslim family, the surprise was that her husband was just a matriculate!

in rural communities for better care and continuing education.

ISC also helps the slum children to continue education by providing support through classes, health care and counselling to prevent girl-child school drop-outs. It has undertaken various urban community development projects like *Balwadis* and teachers' training, vocational training for girls for income generation, and child development through non-formal education.

Zulie Nakhooda's life has been a combination of unusual people and circumstances, but for the good. Her father strongly believed in the education of girls and not only took pains to send her to a good school but also kept her a tutor at home. Zulie remembers having stood first in class throughout. Her marriage took place under a condition from her father who made an agreement with her husband's family to let her continue her education. Zulie not only completed her MA and PhD after her marriage in 1950 but also went to USA to get her diploma in Social Service Administration from Denver University, leaving behind

a five year old son. After the training she went to Geneva for a meeting with International Union for Child welfare, a global federation for Save The Children fund. They were keen on starting a direct level service to Indian Children and gave her a mandate for setting up an NGO. She founded the ISC in 1967 and as their first administrator, pioneered the programme linking it with a network of global agencies and integrated support services.

Zulie has travelled all over the globe and is known for her dedicated work among global NGOs in this field. Her inspiration? "My husband— who, though a matriculate himself, was a lovely person who supported my education and work throughout. He would keep the paper clippings of all my meetings and photos. He was proud of me. If there is a woman behind every successful man, there was a 'man' behind mine" she says fondly.

Zulie loves to read—these days about Buddhism. With the death of her husband and the son settled abroad she lives by herself. She likes to keep in touch with her son and grand children. "What is life for after all, if not for happiness that comes only through service? I am not alone; my thousand children are with me and I love being with them." For these happy children Zulie is their mother and they all fondly call her 'Ammi'. ❖

Zulie married a boy who was just a matriculate. Her marriage took place under an agreement with her husband's family to let her continue her education.