



The gift of dignity

How local Rotarians are helping change Indian lives



Villagers are given information and instruction general hygiene and how to use and maintain the toilets and sanitation facilities.

Born and raised in northern India, Gargi Ganguly knows just how much people in the west take toilets and adequate sanitation for granted. As the Dubbo-based Australian co-ordinator of Rotary's Project Dignity (India), she's driven by a passion for ensuring a change for the better for Indian women, children and society. Late last year, JEN COWLEY visited Project Dignity on the outskirts of Calcutta.

**WORDS
PHOTOS**

Jen Cowley
Jen Cowley & Supplied by
Dignity India project

KOLKATA, INDIA (MID1980S): A young Indian woman, born and raised in the North West province of Bengal, rises at 4.30am. She eats a bird-like breakfast, and steps out her front door at 5 o'clock, as the heaving streets of the famed City of Joy begin to come to life.

By 5.30, she's on a train, bound for the outlying district of Medinipur. She's been appointed lecturer in English at a University and college to west of the city she calls home. She's 22 and it's her first job since leaving uni. The journey there from Calcutta will take almost three hours by train; then she'll climb aboard a rickshaw for the final half hour leg of the daily commute. It's the same on the



way back, and she won't be home again until 7pm. From the time she steps out her front door, to the time she gets back to the safety and comfort of home, she won't go to the toilet. Not once. There are no toilets on the train and the station's toilets are not only beyond filthy, they're unsafe for a woman on her own. The university has only men's toilets. So she'll avoid eating and drinking for the day. And she'll suffer in silence every working day for three years.

That young woman is Gargi Ganguly. Three decades later, the city she now calls home is Dubbo, in central western NSW. It's a long way from her native Bengal, but nothing will erase the memory of being effectively denied that most basic of human rights. And she will never forget how it felt to be deprived of what most of us take so much for granted – basic dignity.

GANGULY is softly spoken and delightfully cheery, but beneath the benign exterior beats the heart of a true suffragette – a dauntingly intelligent woman with a steely determination borne of formative years spent in a country where women have traditionally been, and still are, often regarded as inferior.

Her early experiences, coupled with her escape from the ignominy of an abusive arranged marriage as a teenager, have inspired her to devote much of her adult life, one way or another, to ensuring a better future not only for women, but the communities and societies they underpin, both here in Australia and in her native India.

It's from this heartfelt place of empathy that Ganguly's role as Australian co-ordinator of Rotary International's Project Dignity comes, and the program's title couldn't be more appropriate.

"The whole idea of Project Dignity came from that first job I did in India," she says now from her home in Dubbo, where she's a member and past president of the Dubbo City Rotary Club.

Recently returned from one of her regular journeys back to her homeland, Ganguly says her early experiences were by no means unusual, and that, sadly, 30 years later, the situation has not changed for far too many Indian women, particularly in poor rural areas.

"Access to sanitary facilities is difficult at best, non-existent at worst. Women 'hold on' and that brings with it a whole range of serious health issues in itself – liver malfunction, just to name one – but also the fact that there are no facilities in poor homes and villages means that hygiene and infection control are also non-existent, and that of course adds to the cycle of poverty."

There is a terrible indignity, she says, that comes

with not being able to go to the toilet, or being forced to exercise this basic physiological function on the side of a road.

"And the lack of female toilets is often used or manipulated as an excuse not to hire women," Ganguly says, recounting the tale of her second job at the St Pauls Cathedral College in Calcutta. "I was the first woman ever hired – and the only woman on staff. They tried to dissuade me from taking the job because there was no women's toilet. I just challenged them, and said, well, I will take the job and you will build me a toilet. It took 12 months, but they did finally agree to build me a toilet. But most women wouldn't argue."

From the comfort of modern Australia, it's hard to imagine having to fight for such a humble condition, but Ganguly says these are experiences that have "never left me".

"So when I was granted permission by Rotary International to do a project in India there was no other I could think of that would be more close to home for me – to do something for women and children.

The project had already been established by the Rotary India Humanity Foundation, but it seemed a prophetic fit for the now-Dubbo based mother of one.

"I went to visit the villagers to make sure of what they actually needed and wanted as well, and when I met with them and they told their stories and shared the kind of experiences they'd had – well, it was a no brainer for me.

"The other reason this project struck a chord was that it wasn't only going to help the women but also the children and the whole community through the increased health benefits of a sanitation facility in the village."

Among the concerns of those responsible for Project Dignity's inception is that a lack of access to appropriate facilities is by extension creating a barrier to education for girls and young women, who do not go to school because of the indignity and discomfort of not being able to go to the toilet or tend to sanitary needs.

Ganguly is passionate about the empowerment of women (she holds a degree in women's issues, among other post-graduate qualifications), citing research that shows the value of ensuring women have equal access to society.

"If you have a well-educated mother you have a well-educated family and you have a better chance of the family doing well. That is the evidence, and why wouldn't we want to make our girls stronger? One of the ways we do that is providing them with that opportunity to have a good education, to be healthy, to be strong, and to have strong and healthy babies."

Above, Dubbo Rotarian Mark Horton with Secretary of Calcutta-based NGO Bithari Dishha and Subhabrata Dasgupta, program manager with Rotary India Humanity Foundation.

“

This isn't about feminism, it's about human rights.”

– Gargi Ganguly, Dubbo Rotarian and Australian co-ordinator of Project Dignity (India)



Local villagers are "hands-on" in building the toilet blocks.



One of the completed double toilet blocks funded by Rotary.



In many of the poor villages on the outskirts of sprawling Calcutta, toilet and sanitation facilities are primitive at best, but mostly non-existent.





Dubbo Rotarian Gargi Ganguly, with representatives of the Rotary Club of Chowringhee and local authorities.



Before and after: Toilet facilities are primitive at best, but mostly non-existent.



“

Every last cent of Rotary money raised goes to the project. I do this from my own pocket. I don't take a cent in any way, shape or form.”

– Gargi Ganguly



The Rotary funded toilets are basic, but robust and easy to use and maintain.



Project Dignity is helping to do just that.

FROM the front seat of the aging Land Cruiser, Subhabrata ("Call me Subha") Dasgupta tries to explain exactly what an impact the project has had on the villagers who have so far been the beneficiaries of the Project Dignity toilets.

The Rotary India Humanity Foundation's (RIHF) program manager – a Bengali native who also grew up in Kolkata – is the conduit between the different organisations helping to maintain Project Dignity, and says that after 22 years in the corporate sector, RIHF is "a beautiful platform" for change in his rapidly developing country.

As we hurtle through the seething streets of Kolkata, Subha explains the intrinsic value of the toilet project we'll be seeing once we reach the outskirts of the city (which will take two hours, it transpires) and the village of Swarupnaga.

"Open defecation is still rampant in rural India which results in spreading of various water borne diseases. This lowers productivity and increases the burden on health-services."

This project, he says, has value in that it helps provide toilet facilities, but avoids a "welfare mentality" by setting an expectation that the villagers and families themselves make a contribution, either monetary or through labour for construction.

"The donation of money is an incentive to build the toilet, while their contribution develops a sense of ownership for the toilet and they will take utmost care to maintain it."

With the help of local authorities and a hand-picked local NGO (in the case of the project we visit, this NGO is Bithari Dishha), recipients for the toilets are selected. The criteria are fluid, says Subha.

"But usually the factors like capability of the prospective beneficiary to repay the loan (for the contribution to the building), the number of family members and so forth – things like that are taken into account."

With so much global non-government organisation (NGO) activity in the developing world, the criticism is often levelled that much of the funds raised by well-intentioned donors winds up being evaporated by administration... or worse.

That's not the case, both Ganguly and Subha insist.

"That's the beauty of Rotary," says Ganguly. "When someone in Dubbo gives their \$25 to build one toilet in India, they can know that every single cent will be spent on that toilet. It's not going into admin, or being siphoned off. And that's also one of the benefits of me going back and forth, and when Rotarians like us visit we can make sure of that accountability. Also, everyone from the Rotary perspective is a volunteer. I do this from my own pocket. I don't take a cent in any way, shape or form."

Subha adds that only when the toilet is built does that family receive the incentive payment.

"The money is only disbursed after successful completion of the project and with the full satisfaction of the stakeholders in the project. Acknowledgment of receipt is taken as proof from each beneficiary."

For Ganguly, the holistic nature of the project that holds great appeal and makes this a "hand up, not a hand out".

"The local NGO also helps the local families to learn the basics of hygiene and monitoring health, and they do a lot of community education and capacity building. Then you have the local government that's helping identify the poorest

families and then the families themselves who are providing either a little money or their labour."

As the Australian co-ordinator, Ganguly is keen to ensure the measurable outcomes of the project.

"We are doing an impact assessment going back 6 months and 12 months just to ascertain how, and even if, the project has helped families and whether there are any problems. That's been on my mind because I want to see whether it was just a good idea, or was it even their good idea? The villagers themselves told me this is what they wanted but I just want to make sure that a year from now, the toilet is still needed, valued and used and hasn't just become a storeroom!"

FOR both Ganguly and Subha, the human impact of the project is palpable, both in terms of social and economic wellbeing for the communities in which it's been "rolled out".

As a local, Subha sees a particularly poignant side to Project Dignity's value.

"It has been observed that the present population in rural India and Gen-X in particular, are truly aware of the ill-effects of improper sanitation. Even the women choose their grooms only if there is toilet in their prospective in-laws' houses. Thus the beneficiaries (of Project Dignity) are sure to use the toilet every day and to maintain it. Those who still lack toilet facilities will be motivated to have them in the near future. Gradually the locations will be free of water borne diseases and the children and the women will be expected to suffer less in future," he says.

Then the diminutive Indian strikes a very personal note.

"Honestly?" he says with a self-conscious smile. "This project has given me the opportunity to interact with people in rural places, and to share their stories of every-day living with me as if I was one of them. I have had the chance to mix with the people of India through this project."

FOR Ganguly, seeing the impact first hand is reward enough.

"These toilets have changed their lives. It has brought a smile back to their faces. It has been about providing them with dignity; for the first time in a long time someone has thought of them and their problems, and these facilities have actually made their lives safer. They have some pride restored," she says, adding that a spin-off has been the formation of local women's groups to partner with the project.

"I met one of them and I spoke with the women and it's an amazing informal network they have. It's how they sort out their issues and solve their problems. Those women have also been proactive in advocating the need for the toilet and also getting the men on board."

For all its anecdotal success and warm-fuzziness for donors, Project Dignity is by no means an instant, or even short term, gratification prospect. It will take time, says Ganguly.

"We want to get it right. It has taken us time to start – we began fundraising a couple of years ago – and we want to get everything right. We weren't just looking for quick wins. We wanted to make sure we had all the Is dotted and the Ts crossed and that it was actually going to be meaningful for the villages."

"And this project isn't just aimed at women. This isn't about feminism, it's about human rights. This is about sustainable improvement in communities and general health and wellbeing. It's about the whole community."

help

Would you like to help?

A contribution of just \$AU25 will ensure the building of one toilet, so if you would like to donate to Project Dignity, contact us at feedback@dubboweekender.com.au and we'll put you in touch with the Rotary Club of Dubbo. If you would like more information, go to the Rotary Humanity India Foundation website to follow the project's progress.