

ON BEHALF OF NIRVANAVAN FOUNDATION , THANKYOU.

YES Id like to pledge my support with _____ a month.

Please complete this form and send it to: Joanna MacDonald
28 Fitzwilliam Road, London SW4 0DN

My Name: My home telephone number is:
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I want to start making a regular contribution ofa month until further notice, starting
on (Please allow at least three weeks between signing the form and the date of the
first payment).

Name(s) of Account Holder(s)

Bank or Building Society Account No. Sort Code: - -

Name and full address of your Bank or Building Society:
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Instructions to your bank or building society: Please pay The Co-operative Bank the stated amount
by standing order from the above account for the credit of Nirvanavan Foundation.

Branch Title (not address): Direct Plus Beneficiary: Nirvanavan Foundation Trust

(WE WILL FILL IN THESE DETAILS: Sort Code Account number:)

Signed: date.....

GIFT AID

I am willing for my donation to be treated as Gift Aid.

(sign if appropriate).....

The Nirvanavan Foundation Trust

Registered charity No. 1124427



Satvikananda showing how to catch a fish alive (see inside). November 2009.

MAY, 2010

“dreams coming true”

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AFTER FIVE YEARS..... *Richard Roberts (KD) first visited the Nirvanavan Foundation in Rajasthan, India, in 2005. Since then he has visited regularly and he now spends six months there each year. In 2008 he established the Nirvanavan Foundation Trust as a registered charity in the UK. The Trust exists to support the work of the Foundation in India. Richard writes about his latest visit:*

After five years of visiting the Foundation I still find the scenery stunning. Dry and thirsty as the land is, the leaves of the plants and trees provide food for the many herds of goats which are taken out every day, the trees also providing wood for cooking; the children (and birds) eagerly eat the plentiful supply of edible berries from the branches. At this time of the year (December) the mustard crop is flowering; great swathes of the land are covered in carpets of yellow flowers and classes are often held outside in the warmth of the winter sunshine (impossible when spring arrives in late February/March and the cool of the shade is much sought after.) Peacocks wander the hills. The wells provide an ample supply of fresh water: farmers irrigate their crops of mustard, wheat and vegetables while the women and girls elegantly balance earthen pots of water on their heads for cooking and drinking. It sounds idyllic – and in many ways it is. In spite of its beauty however it is a harsh environment and the villagers work hard to survive. I view the countryside with my western eyes, content in the knowledge that I will return to the affluent lifestyle of a rich country, where water comes out of taps and heat from radiators, where I can access free medical treatment when necessary, and where this year the Government will actually start giving me a pension for the rest of my life. Where also each school has equipment at which the teachers and children here would stare in amazement.

ADVAITA GARDEN (the main school of the Foundation, which has 140 children enrolled.)

The three new classrooms built last year are now being used well and it is good to see the children taking care of them. The ground is very dry and stony and they (we) work hard to create small gardens. Unfortunately there are no plants at all which goats will not eat, so everything has to be protected with wire netting and dry thorn branches. Finding this out was a typical Indian learning experience. I asked various people (including the man at the plant nursery) if there were any plants which goats do not eat. I was assured that indeed there were a few. I bought some, only to watch them being eagerly consumed by the goats who were only too happy to feed on my lack of knowledge about their culinary appetites. After many years of visiting India I am still taken aback by this tendency to tell people what they want to hear, rather than the truth. It is not confined to foreigners. Last year I was staying in a village in the countryside near Pushkar. A man in the village had died of a heart attack and his wife was obviously distraught. I watched my Indian friend tell this woman that he had just visited her husband in the hospital, and that he was alive and well (even though he knew that the man had died.) When I asked him why he had lied so blatantly my friend replied that she was not ready yet to hear the truth. So maybe I simply was not ready to hear the truth that goats will eat anything, even if it is poisonous.

Now they are traditionally into prostitution. We met a class containing thirty five enthusiastic children from four years to fourteen. All learning from one dedicated teacher who cheerfully manages and caters for all the individual needs. No child is left out. No child remains unstretched and there is a great effort to meet every child's needs. The children are encouraged to help each other and take a great delight in doing so. If only some of the children in the West who take education so much for granted could see how desperate these children are to learn, some of them walking miles to get to their schools. They may not have much equipment but it is impressive and humbling to see how they use what they have got. Have you ever seen a camel collage made out of goat and camel dung, a Ganesha made out of leaves and a peacock made from beans and broken pieces of bangle? Later that day we went back to Advaita Garden and said our goodbyes. On this snowy day in January I can still hear the laughter of all the children when I tried to teach them the nursery rhyme, with actions, 'One, Two, Three, Four, Five - Once I Caught A Fish Alive'. It went down a storm!

So all of you who are already supporters - I can guarantee that your money is being well spent. It is helping to improve the environment, it is providing a safe haven for the many who use Childline, it is bringing education and joy to those who would otherwise not receive it, and hopefully giving some of those little girls a way out of prostitution in the bright lights of Mumbai and Dubai. Those of you reading this who are not yet individual supporters - then please think about it. Whatever you can give each month from £2.00 - £20.00, or more if you can manage, will be well used! Sometimes people don't pledge a monthly amount because they are embarrassed at the smallness of the contribution that they can afford. Well don't be! We need more money to guarantee the continuance of the schools, to pay the teachers a decent wage, to give the children books to write in and pencils to write with. And we need to build a children's home soon – very soon! There is a desperate need.

The Nirvanavan Foundation is a non-governmental, non-profit, non-denominational organisation and the its four main areas of work are firstly children's rights, secondly an alternative education programme, thirdly ecology and the environment and fourthly culture – street theatre for the street children focussing on social issues such as child marriage, education for girls, deforestation and dowry payments. However much we are feeling the pinch at these times, life is generally good to us. We now have a wonderful opportunity to make life better for others and to see firsthand how our money is being used. Whilst there I had the great honour to be invited to be a Trustee of the Nirvanavan Foundation Trust here in the UK, and I was delighted to accept. The Trust is a UK registered charity started by Richard Roberts (KD) two years ago. (One of the advantages of being a charity is that all donations can be gift-aided which means that we receive 33p from the government for each pound donated. This works out at quite a lot over the year.)

Would we go back there? Yes, we can't wait. It is such a wonderful experience to be with the children. And if any of you can ever visit there then do go, you certainly will not be disappointed!

*Organised by the Foundation this annual event brings together children from the many diverse communities of the district, ranging from the lowest 'outcasts' of the Nat and Kanjer communities to the wealthy children of the local public schools. For a day they share a space together and a purpose – simply to meet and make art work – mainly drawings. They share the space, the lunch and the attention of all the adults present. They are honoured and respected – a rare occurrence for some of them.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROJECT

Two new schools have recently been established in Nat and Kanjer villages in the countryside. Unlike the main school at Advaita Garden these Nat and Kanjer community schools are all single class schools where the teacher has to cater for all ages from 5 – 14. Quite a demanding environment. After years of negotiation land has become available at two of the villages to build new classrooms and an office/accommodation space. This will enable people to visit and to stay longer than a few hours (some of the outlying schools are hours away from the Foundation's base in Alwar city). It is hoped that work will start later this year.

CHILDLINE

Nothing new to report here – the work continues, it is as simple as that. The office is manned twenty four hours a day by a team of workers. Last month they held workshops for the police, rickshaw drivers and firemen to keep them informed about Childline and its work. I also attended the annual cricket tournament which the Childline team organises in the slum district of Alwar. About twenty teams took part this year. I actually managed to overcome my lifelong aversion to the game and actually became quite interested. It's a great way to spread awareness of Childline. I was even interviewed by the local T.V. station about my presence here.

NIRVANA FOUNDATION TRUST UK.

We have been a charity now for almost two years and have just submitted our first Annual Trustees Report to the Charity Commission with a copy of our accounts for the year ending March 31, 2009. Regular standing order contributors will have already received a copy of these documents. If you would like a copy please let me know and I will send by e-mail. The report itself is fairly brief and to the point – rather formal in places as we have to satisfy certain criteria requested by the Charity Commission. (It does not contain as much information as our newsletters.) Right from the beginning, when we first applied to become a charity, the Commission has always been very helpful. Our next report and accounts for the year 2009/2010 will be available this summer. Joanna MacDonald came to visit again in January. She is a Trustee in London and is looking after admin of the Trust while I am away.

OUR FIRST PATRONS

NINA WADIA, who plays Zainab Masood in BBC TV's 'Eastenders'.

SUNNY ORMONDE, who plays Lillian in BBC Radio 4's serial 'The Archers'.

We are delighted to welcome Nina and Sunny as our first patrons. They are both interested in the work of the Foundation and are willing to help. We are looking at how best we can use their support in future so watch this space!

We welcome Satvikananda Saraswati as a new Trustee. Satvik is a long-time supporter and it was great to welcome her and her husband Sam to Alwar last November. She writes about her visit:

On the 19th November 2009 my husband, Sam Davies, and I arrived at Delhi Airport, where we were greeted and garlanded by our good friend Krishnadhyanam (Richard Roberts) and Nirvanavan workers Niranjan and Balveer and whisked off to Alwar by car. It was our first journey to see at first hand the work of the Nirvanavan Foundation. On arrival in Alwar we booked into our hotel and then went straight to the Childline office where we met some of the workers and volunteers and a young boy who had that day been separated from his parents at a family wedding and who was now lost. This incident ended happily when his parents were found and he was reunited with them. But there are many more stories that don't end in this way. Childline offices are being set up all over India to help abandoned, distressed and abused children and the one in Alwar, run by the Foundation, is manned 24 hours every day by a dedicated team. It is vital that these children have somewhere to turn to. This was our introduction to Alwar.

The following day we were taken to Advaita Garden, the main school run by the Foundation. This school serves three local villages. We toured the classrooms, met the teachers and sang and laughed with the children. There are six classes serving the different age groups full of eager children anxious to learn and we felt very privileged to be part of it all. I was reacquainted with Nirvanavan who I had first met in 2003. He is a gentle and dedicated man who is both loved and respected and who works tirelessly for the good of the villagers and especially the children. Advaita Garden is situated way out in the countryside. It is beautiful and very rural. Water comes from the well and last year the school started receiving electricity (when it is available!) Recently a new kitchen was built, replacing the open fire where food was cooked previously. How different it must have been when Nirvanava first made his resolve to help and chose to settle here. Life is much better for these children now but it is not perfect and there is still so much to do. (Only three of the classes have their own classroom for instance, - and next year there will be seven classes.)

We also had time for leisure and for anyone who is thinking of going to Alwar to see what happens there first hand I can only say that you will be made very welcome by adults and children alike. There are wonderful places to go to like the Bala Quila Reserve Forest and its magnificent fort. We also visited the Sariska Tiger Reserve in the hope of seeing a tiger. We didn't of course! The tigers have been extinct there for some years but the Indian Government is now reintroducing them. The Foundation is also involved with various environmental projects including tiger conservation.

On our final day in Alwar we visited some of the smaller schools in the Alternative Education Project, which usually consist of one class and one teacher. These schools are situated in the Nat and Kanjer communities in rural Rajasthan - there are eight of them with another two opening soon, The Nat and Kanjer communities used to be respected court entertainers employed by the Maharajas and other royalty before the British Raj was established.

We have had a setback regarding ownership of the land at Advaita Garden. A local family has made a claim on the land maintaining that it belongs to them. It is a complicated situation which reflects how land is claimed in rural areas here (-basically by erecting a few posts and saying that this land now belongs to me.) The land is actually owned by the government but decisions made in far-off government offices however hold little sway in the countryside and the matter is being settled at a local level by the village 'panchayat' (local government) as well as being taken to the high court. It does mean however that plans for the children's home are on hold at the moment and we cannot yet build a proper boundary to keep out the hungry goats! (Addendum: May – this situation is very close to being resolved. We need to find £4,500 and the land is ours!!)

After five years of visiting this place I am still arrogant enough to throw away things of value. Yesterday I threw an old pair of sandals in the bin. They were finished, I thought, even by Indian standards. A large split in the sole and the insides worn down enough to see the ground underneath in places. Today the caretaker of the school brought them back inside. "For a foreign man these are finished", he said, with not a hint of criticism in his voice. "An Indian man will wear them for another six months." I felt humbled and reminded yet again of the luxury of my life in London.

After five years of visiting this place I still find myself sometimes using water as if it will last forever. We have a kitchen now in the main school at Advaita Garden – complete with bottled gas, a sink, a tap – and running water. The children look with awe at this luxury. In their villages water comes from a hole in the ground. They carry it to their homes. They wash themselves and their clothes and pots on the ground. Their cooking is done over an open fire (as we did at the school previously.) Most of the time I am very careful. But still occasionally I find myself turning on the tap like I do in London. The ground water level has fallen dramatically here in the last ten years. Last year the rains did not arrive as they usually do in July/August, so water is even more precious.

After five years of visiting this place I am still moved by how willingly the children share their food with me. Each day they bring their 'tiffin' to school and treat me as an honoured guest. It is very simple food – basically dry bread (chapattis) and a little vegetable. There are times when it tastes so good, not least because of the generosity with which it is shared. One day Kanaya arrives at school about 7.30am and thrusts a plastic lunch box into my hand. "Gift" he says. His friends repeat the word, taking great joy and pride in their language skills. (For some of them it would be a new addition to their very limited vocabulary of English words.) I hear the words 'art mela' *also being passed around. I am confused. I suddenly realise that the lunch box itself was a gift to him from the recent art mela (gathering) which many of the local schools had taken part in. I peer into the box and see two chappatis and a small container of dhal. I am not sure whether this is part of the 'gift' and whether I have been invited to lunch. I wait to see. (My Hindi is not good enough to ask!) Later on that morning at lunch time Kannaya searches me out and I sit down with him to share his food. I feel honoured and respected. I hope he feels the same.

