

# How Scottish Love in Action helps India's poorest children

[Mar 17 2009](#) By Samantha Booth

WHEN Scots nurse Gillie Davidson set up Scottish Love in Action 10 years ago, her dream was to help some of India's orphans escape the kind of destitution portrayed in Oscar-winning movie Slumdog Millionaire.

Children orphaned to Aids, murder or suicide and who had been forced into prostitution, begging and life on the streets.

Or youngsters born into the lowest social caste and who faced a life of abuse and prejudice.

The 63-year-old, from Edinburgh, knew that if she provided food, clothes, shelter and an education their lives would be changed beyond measure.

What she could never have imagined was that 10 years later not only would her tiny operation be funding the care and schooling of hundreds of children, but that five of them would be starting new lives at university.

Gillie said: "These children dream of being doctors and engineers so if they have the dream, why shouldn't they have the opportunity?"

"So we created a further education fund and we now have youngsters starting courses at university in engineering and nursing.

"One boy, who was born in the jungle, is doing fashion technology.

"The great thing is that these youngsters are now the role models for the other children. Maybe it is a folhardy thing to do, but we feel we are doing the right thing by continuing to support them in education. That way we try to make sure all our children have some way of earning money.

"We are so proud of them and they are such dignified, unspoilt teenagers."

Gillie first became aware of the plight of India's orphans and low-caste children when she organised a trip to India to help build an orphanage in 1999.

She said: "I had friends who went out to India to work with Christian Aid and they told me about this incredible man called Dr Premdas who was working with the untouchables, people of the lowest caste in Indian society who are often persecuted.

"I got in touch with him and he asked if I could bring a group of young people to help build a home for destitute children.

"He told me that he had been rescuing children who had been begging on trains, living on rubbish tips and being used as child prostitutes and he now had 120 children to feed and clothe."

Gillie started raising money and organised a group of young people to take the trip, getting them brick laying lessons.

The group went out in 1999 and spent three and a half weeks working in chain gangs, but on her return Gillie realised that she couldn't walk away from these children.

She said: "Every child that we built that school for had a tragic story in that they have seen their parents murdered by people from a higher caste, seen them die of Aids or commit suicide.

"And yet they are all so bright and full of love.

"Dr Premdas said to me after we left that I had lit a candle and I was now responsible for that candle.

"I realised that what he said was true and that's how Scottish Love in Action came about."

SCOTTISH Love in Action now has two homes in the south-east Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where more than 600 children are clothed, fed and educated.

They also help fund a third home in the district.

By our standards the children lead very basic lives. They sleep on hard floors, their food is cooked in huge vats in basic kitchens and their lessons are conducted while sitting cross-legged on the floor.

The jungle around the schools is infested with scorpions, snakes and rats. The children's few belongings are kept in boxes designed to survive monsoons and cyclones.

Prized possessions include toothpaste, which they refuse to use in case they never get any more, burst balloons and school uniforms. Some children even have photographs of their dead parents.

But there is no doubt that the life they have thanks to SLA is a happy one. Gillie said: "It doesn't look like much to us, but these children cherish the few things that they have like you wouldn't believe.

"One little boy has a CD that he found on a rubbish tip and kept even though he didn't have a clue what it was.

"He just liked it because it was shiny.

"And despite it all the children are all so brilliant, positive and resilient.

"They are just beautiful children who still manage to be happy."

One of Scottish Love in Action's children is called Naveen.

He has been in their care for more than six years, ever since he arrived at the home with his younger brother and sister after having walked for miles.

Their mother had died of heart disease when they were small and their father, a policeman, had just been murdered.

He wants to be a doctor when he is older.

One family at the home were brought by their mother who was dying of Aids.

Her husband had already died from the disease and she knew she didn't have much time left to ensure her children would be looked after once she was gone.

Gill said: "After they arrived we nursed her, but she only survived a few days.

"What mattered though was that she knew her children were safe which meant she died in peace."

Another child in SLA's care is Akila.

When she was about eight years old her father fell seriously ill.

As an untouchable he wasn't allowed to be treated in hospital so Akila's mother needed to buy medicine and in order to afford the medicine, she had to borrow money from loan sharks. By the time her father died, Akila's mother had accrued huge debts.

When she lost her job as well, she couldn't take anymore and one morning Akila woke up to find her mother had killed herself.

Jyothi-Priyanka, 14, was just seven years old when her father wandered off one day and left her roaming the streets alone.

He had lost his mind after his wife, Jyothi's mother, was murdered by his family.

She was Dalit, one of the untouchables, while he was upper caste.

They had fallen in love while studying and married against their families' wishes.

After years of estrangement, Jyothi's father's family invited them to stay, but while her dad was out one day, they pushed her mum into a river where she drowned.

Jyothi was lucky that a passer-by took her to the Scottish Love in Action home as she could so easily have ended up begging or even worse.

Gill said: "Every child we take care of has a story like these and many of our children are HIV themselves, which is why we simply can't let them down.

"It is getting harder though with the current economic climate, especially as it is children like ours who suffer most in these situations.

"But we are determined not to let that happen, there is no way we can simply put them back out on to the streets.

"We have done an amazing amount in the last 10 years simply through word of mouth and the kindness of friends and relatives.

"In that time we have raised almost a million pounds without ever having a major backer."

SLA have a range of fundraising events coming up including a Ladies Bollywood Night on March 27 at the Quay in Musselburgh.

To find out more about Scottish Love in Action or to make a donation click on [www.sla-india.org](http://www.sla-india.org) or call 0131 558 7395.