

MY NEIGHBOUR SUPERMAN

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Kuku Arora is taking one class at a time to bring a smile to the faces of Delhi's slum kids

It was an ordinary day. Superman was not wearing his customary red-and-blue costume but a white Nehru shirt and grey checked, straight-fit pants. He was not in his usual zipping around mode or saving the world; he was, instead, waiting for me, an ordinary journalist to arrive and pester him with questions about his secret work—his Sunshine Project. Kuku Arora, our alleged superman (alleged; because I never saw him in his costume) is Superman indeed to his 172 children for who Arora runs a series of never impromptu classes. Arora never thought he will start an NGO, he never thought he would be taking care of so many slums kids. It all started with the intention of helping out one child, a two-year-old baby—Roshni—born with just one hand. The Aroras met Roshni on their way to a friend's house, when she accosted the two begging. They obliged. What began as a singular incident of trying to 'do good', soon turned into a habit, until the day Roshni disappeared. A distressed Arora hunted for her till he spotted her begging on a busy road. Arora took Roshni back to her house and placed a proposal before her parents. The Aroras would take care of Roshni in every possible way, they would provide her with food, clothing and education. The parents were reluctant, their easy source of income was being taken away. "I had to bribe them; I told them that I would take care of their other two children as well, including their only son. That worked," says Arora. This happened 11 years ago. Today, Roshni is a sprightly teen with an artificial hand, with which she 'high-fives' her friends. When the news of Roshni's semi-adoption reached the other children in the neighborhood, they all wished to be a part of Arora's family. "Within a few weeks, my group of three became a group of 17 young people. The other children came looking for a way out of begging, how could I say no?" As the group grew, Arora decided to rent a room in the slum where the children would be taught and get ready for entrance examinations in proper schools. However, the landlord, when he heard of the plan, asked Arora and his pupils to leave. His reason still manages to amaze Arora. "He told me that he wanted to leave his room to his son, like his father had for him and then went on to add, if all slum children became educated, no one would rent his room!" So, Arora, a fashion designer by profession, brought the children to his workshop in Sayed-ul-ajab, a small village near Saket, New Delhi. Today, Arora teaches 172 children—some in their teens and some even younger—and provides them with three, free meals a day, along with books, stationary, school bags, shoes and uniforms. Arora has now added a small resting-cum-sleeping area for the children and a toy-cum-play room for the smaller ones. His house is open for all kids, however, all kids have to follow a rule: No child can beg or work for money. The children are allowed to help their parents but they cannot work independently. This, perhaps, is why Arora's kids look different from other slum kids. Their shoulders are not bent with the burden of earning a living. As numbers grew, it increasingly became difficult for Arora to manage all the children and carry out his business at the same time—so he started to seek out volunteers. That's when his business contacts in Germany came into good use. Now, most of his classes are conducted by both international and national volunteers—nieces, nephews, sons and friends of the people he knows. All that effort have started to show. The children I met were all proficient in English and were students in reputed schools across Delhi, such as DPS, RK Puram, and Amity International. Thanks to international volunteers some of Arora's students also know a smattering of German. Despite all their great work, until last year, Sunshine Project was not even an NGO! And they had no funding as well—four years ago, a German friend started a fund for his Sunshine Project and tied with Lufthansa Airlines which also promotes his work by spreading the word and asking for small donations from its passengers. "More importantly it is the hard work that sees us through," says Arora, "but it is all worth it." The smiling faces of children are testimony to the fact that his efforts are being paid off. "It feels good when the children give you so much love, the satisfaction that comes from making them smile is something one cannot describe. One time, I was sitting with a customer, when a little girl called Firdose came and stood outside the door. I went to her to ask her why she was not in class. She touched my feet and told me, 'today a new life begins'. It was her first day at DPS, RK Puram." As the interview comes to an end, Arora asks me to meet 'his kids'. As I enter the room filled with bustling kids, they notice us and break into a 'good morning ma'am'. When I request them to sit down in Hindi, Arora laughs and asks me to speak in English as they are used to in 'school'. A boy of seven, Aalam, a student of Amity International, becomes my usher and introduces me to his favourite toys. As we are done, Aalam bids me goodbye, he has a fight to pick with another boy who has been bullying him. As he escorts me on my way out, Arora tells me he has to rush upstairs, and resume his work. Perhaps, it is time to shed the corporate attire and don the Superman suit?