

desiderata

trying not to lose it in India

Saturday, 26 September 2009

The tailor of Qutb Minar

Sometimes, here in this aggressive, rude, often violent and almost always misogynistic city of Delhi, you meet someone, or have an experience that makes it all worthwhile.

I met Kuku Arora in a fairly unremarkable way: I needed a dress made for a ball I'm going to tomorrow night; he is a tailor recommended by someone on the expat forum. I went to his studio in one of Delhi's 40-odd urban villages, not far from some of the city's important heritage sites (as opposed to the unimportant ones; Delhi is a city that literally has a Mughul ruin on every street corner). Kuku, a gently-spoken man with a permanent smile, told me of the London boutiques his workshop provides garments for, and the celebrities who've worn those garments (Uma Thurman amongst others).

Once my sartorial needs were fixed, we got chatting. "Are these your children?" I asked, pointing to a photo above his desk. "Well yes they are my two biological children, but I have more than a hundred others," he said, smiling and pointing at the wall. From the other side came the hubbub of a classroom, sounds that had until that point been merely white noise.

Turns out, Kuku has taken custodianship of around a hundred of the local slum children - he schools them, feeds them three meals each day, clothes them, and provides for them in every way - except they go home at night to sleep.

Kuku's mission began about six years ago when a young girl who appeared around the same age as his eldest son - then two years old - began hanging around the alleyway outside his office. She had no right hand, and was usually begging. Kuku began musing on the vast gulf of opportunity between his own son and this little girl, and started bringing her food in every day - sometimes a sandwich, sometimes a banana. Numbers swelled and soon Kuku found himself bringing half a dozen, a dozen sandwiches or bananas in each day for the local underprivileged children.

After much consideration, one day he approached the girl's parents, and asked if they would permit him to look after her as his own child: to provide food, education, medical care and the other childhood necessities they were unable to give her, however she would remain their daughter and go home to them each night. They said no. Kuku pressed on, offering to also help out their other daughter. Still, the parents said no. Only when he agreed to take on their son as well did they acquiesce.

Over the course of the conversation a group of children had gathered around. Take me too! And me! they said. So that's where the school began.

Since then, the children have become an integral part of Kuku's family. August 24 is when they all celebrate their birthdays (most don't know their birthdate; that date is his son's birthday). They get cake, clowns, balloons, and presents. Monday was Eid, and all students - Muslim, Hindu, otherwise - celebrated accordingly. Next month is Diwali and again, a festus is in store. There'll be sweets, firecrackers, sparklers and gifts: each child will receive a blanket, as winter is approaching.

The school, which occupies a large part of the floor next to Kuku's office, is staffed with teachers and the usual array of peons and office boys. These kids are bright: I sat with them for a bit yesterday when I went for a fitting and was treated to their English reading skills, got to see almost impeccable report cards, and shook lots of little hands proffered by beaming, healthy kids.

A handful of the brightest kids are actually enrolled at a program at one of the city's top schools, [Delhi Public School](#), meaning each afternoon they receive instruction from that school's teachers and get to use its facilities.

What's most remarkable about this is that it is self-funded. When I asked Kuku whether he's considered setting up as an NGO, he waved it away. Too much trouble, it's better as it is. Do his biological children ever get jealous of the time he spends with the other kids? It's all they've ever known, he replied. In fact, his elder son does a bit of teaching at the school.