

Column 12

A Boy's Inspired Dream

—A New Start from an Orphanage with the Help of Japan—

Kolkata, a central city of eastern India formerly known as Calcutta, is facing an increase in the number of street children, many of whom were separated from their family due to poverty and other reasons.

Mr. Suman Das grew up at Don Bosco Asharam, an NGO operated orphanage built with aid from Japan called Grant Assistance for Grassroots and Human Security Projects. He is now working as an official driver at the Consulate-General of Japan in Kolkata.

Mr. Das left his home in Bangladesh after being repeatedly abused by his mother and uncle. He eventually ended up in India where he lived on the street, exposed to the risks of abuse and human trafficking, and was sometimes forced to join gangs loitering around train stations.

Mr. Das's life drastically changed one day, when he met a nun who kindly let him stay at Don Bosco Ashalayam, an orphanage run by a non-governmental organization.

"The life at the orphanage was rather boring at first, as there were no movies, no TV, and no music. My life had been totally free on the street. But I was told to give up that lifestyle at the orphanage, and accept a responsible family life," recalls Mr. Das.

When Mr. Das first came to the orphanage, the building was literally in ruins; it did not have electricity or a proper toilet, and working spaces for the staff were miserably cramped. The walls were so eroded that poisonous snakes crept inside.

Things changed in 1999, when a major renovation took place, financed by Japan's Grant Assistance for Grassroots and Human Security Projects, disbursed through the Consulate-General of Japan in Kolkata. The program afforded facilities such as a new clean dormitory that enabled children to live safely; study rooms that allowed them to concentrate on studying; vocational training rooms for manufacturing of candles and chalk as well as bookbinding; and a dining room where nutritious meals were served.

For young Suman Das, this was his first encounter with Japan. He became increasingly interested in the country from then on. "When the then Japanese Consul-General arrived at the orphanage with a huge vehicle, all of us ran up to it. I was truly excited and dreamt of becoming an occupational driver one day, to drive such a cool vehicle one day," says Mr. Das. He studied hard and achieved excellent results at elementary school, even winning awards from UNICEF and Mother Teresa. "Thanks to Japan's support, I was able to learn reading, writing and other basics of living in society. I even learned Karate."

After leaving the orphanage, Mr. Das went abroad to be trained as a chef, but he could not give up his dream of becoming an occupational driver. He finally realized his dream and became a driver for one of Kolkata's finest hotels. When then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Kolkata in August 2007, Mr. Das was one of the drivers who served the Prime Minister's delegates. This encounter made Mr. Das once again strongly interested to be involved and in touch with Japan. The following month, he applied for the post of official driver at the Consulate-General of Japan in Kolkata. At the job interview, he deliberately refrained from referring to his past association with Japan. He simply demonstrated his driving skills and personality, and won the post over more than 50 other candidates.

Mr. Das got married with a woman from the same orphanage in April 2008, being congratulated by his colleagues at the Consulate. The couple now enjoy a happy family life. Mr. Das, who quit the street life with the

help of the orphanage, came to know about Japan and found his

dream of becoming an occupational driver. He is now a staff member of the Consulate-General of Japan. As a driver, Mr. Das hopes to become a bridge between the peoples of Japan and India.



Mr. Suman Das at the orphanage where he grew up



Mr. Das, with a consulate vehicle

