

Canada can learn from Delhi's slums, Wynne says

Premier impressed by charity's efforts to help poor, says methods could help First Nations people here



Robert Benzie
In India

NEW DELHI—It is an unimaginably daunting journey from the teeming slums of India's capital city to the leafy confines of Oxford University.

But Chandan Singh, a 20-year-old mathematics major at Delhi University and the first in his family to receive higher education, believes he can make it.

His improbable quest to rise from an inner city "slum colony" to the halls of academia is thanks in no small part to a tireless pediatrician's dream of helping some of India's poorest people.

Dr. Kiran Martin, a middle-class Indian, finally saw a slum firsthand in 1988 when treating a cholera outbreak.

CHARITY continued on A9



ROBERT BENZIE/TORONTO STAR

Premier Kathleen Wynne visits Dr. Kiran Martin, top, founder of a New Delhi charity that helps needy women and children with health care, education and finances.

New Delhi charity gives women and kids hope, respect and dignity

CHARITY from A1

Appalled at the conditions in her own city, Martin started Asha Community Health and Development and has helped 500,000 people in 60 urban slums.

Appropriately, Asha means "hope" in Hindi.

The charity assists impoverished women and children with health care, education and their finances, encouraging those who have gone through its programs to aid others, giving it an exponential influence in the poorest neighbourhoods of New Delhi.

"Before Asha, we had no respect, we had no dignity. People thought we were unclean and we really were," Kamla Gauri, a woman who has benefited from the NGO's work, told Premier Kathleen Wynne as the Ontario leader toured the charity's headquarters Friday.

Martin said even the local streets,

which are now paved — albeit hazily — were muddy when Asha began its work, making hygiene a challenge. Electricity was sporadic.

"Before we came in, pregnant women weren't even coming for checkups. There were few vaccinations. There would have been some kids who got vaccinated, but the community just wasn't educated enough," the doctor said.

In an area where those lucky enough to have a roof over their heads can live nine to a room — making university studies and homework a challenge — Singh, who speaks English fluently, stands out.

"They were motivating me to go to college," he said of the scholarship students ahead of him in Asha programs. "Right now, I am in final years of mathematics and I am doing the same for others. Each month, we organize two meetings or three meetings with the college students (from the slums) and ask them what are the

problems they are facing and how can we help them."

Like a proud mentor, the infectious enthusiastic Martin noted that Singh has done so well in his studies that "Oxford University has demonstrated an interest in him."

"So after he's done his (master of science), he's going to apply there. Isn't that exciting?" Martin said. "My hope is that this cohort will become so huge and they will just spread out and (be) the messengers of this good news and they will be able to help incoming students."

For 23-year-old Usha, Asha has been the gateway to university, where she is doing media studies.

"We are from a slum area and our parents are not very educated, so they don't know the value of education," Usha said.

"Even my father didn't want to allow me to do journalism — I'm doing a mass communications course at India Institute of Mass Communica-

tion — because he thought it's not safe for girls and it's not right for girls, it's just for the boys," she said. "But Asha came to my house and talked to my parents and allowed me."

Marvelling at the young woman's spirit, Wynne asked how her father has accepted her being a student.

"There's a big change in my father, my family," Usha told her. "They really feel proud of me. When he meets his friends, he says: 'My daughter is doing journalism. You know the TV persons?' Because they don't really know the meaning of journalism, so he describes the job."

Usha has also been helped by the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi, which sponsors interns from Asha to work with diplomatic staff.

"We need to give a hand to the Canadian High Commission — her confidence improved so much from that internship," Martin said, pointing out that Canada's envoys and their spouses help Asha's clients.

Jess Dutton, Canada's deputy high commissioner in New Delhi, said Canadians here have come together under an umbrella group called Canassist. "It's been important for members of the community, whether diplomats, spouses or Canadians living here, to really give back to the community that gives so much to us."

Wynne, for her part, was impressed by what she saw.

"As I came away from the visit, in my heart what I was feeling was I want them to be successful," the premier said in an interview Saturday.

"We're all going to be better off... if those children are better," she said, adding she has invited Martin to visit Canada because her methods may also help First Nations people.

"We're talking (about) the ability of children and women and everybody to have opportunities. Because I don't think an economy is healthy unless everyone has an opportunity to take part in it."