



□ DEVOTED: Mother Teresa (above left, in centre) and GOAL co-operate in helping the thousands of street children. Kathy Evans (in both photos above) was struck by the children's overwhelming affection, having been starved of love for so long

Children of a lesser god

NOWADAYS the word charity has become synonymous with the middle-classes absolving their consciences and pop stars "who do a lot of work for charity (but don't like to talk about it)". People have become indifferent to starving children who play the starring role on TV, their tear-stained faces and bloated bellies pricking our consciences for 60 seconds on *News at Ten* before we physically and metaphorically switch off.

Ten years ago the scenes of Ethiopia had us all digging into our pockets, shocked into action by the emotive scenes of a country torn apart by disease. But smiling celebrities releasing ghastly charity records ad nauseam have managed to lull us into indifference. Accusations of misused funds and government corruption in troubled lands have also made us feel justified in our reluctance to give. Nowadays it's OK to say no.

Meanwhile the emaciated media stars of Africa continue to waste away off-camera; orphanages in China continue to be crammed with unwanted baby girls; and, in India, street children as young as four who make their home on station platforms continue to be raped by

'It's terrible to see the children rust,' say the people who help them; in Calcutta kids work as prostitutes to feed themselves, and drown in open sewers. But thanks to a young Cork woman, the daily grind of their young misery is being alleviated. **Kathy Evans** reports from the city of the lost children

platform in an effort to capture our attention. Only when you looked at him close up could you see the faded scars on his fragile body, an attestation of the constant physical and sexual abuse which he had endured for most of his short life.

"It's terrible to see such talent go to waste, to see the children rust," remarked Partharoy, a care worker with the GOAL-funded charity CINI ASHA, who was showing me round the slums of India's second city. "A child should be given love and self-esteem. The street children don't know about either. We've come across children as young as four who have been repeatedly raped. Child rape is a big problem in Calcutta."

Moving on to an area known as

along with thousands like her. Now she can write her name in Bengali and English and recite both alphabets without hesitation.

Anjuna has a future.

Today there are 1,560 children who visit GOAL's drop-in centres on a daily basis, and about 800 youngsters who have been placed in mainstream schools. This is largely thanks to a woman who has been dubbed, much to her embarrassment, the Junior Mother Teresa.

Edith Wilkins came to Calcutta from Cork 13 years ago, initially on a three-month assignment for GOAL. Now — at 37, attractive and single — Edith has devoted her life to the children, shunning the chance of marriage and a family of her own. "There are times when I

Edith. "One of the children was nine months old when I found him and he weighed just 1kg. His bones poked through his skin and he had cigarette burns all over his legs. It was touch and go whether he would live. Now he is a healthy, lively two-year-old.

"Some of the cases here turn your stomach. I've had seven-year-olds riddled with gonorrhoea and syphilis who have been working as prostitutes to feed themselves. One of the children turned round to me once and innocently asked: 'How often have you been raped, Auntie?' Can you imagine a child of six or seven asking such a question?"

Since CINI ASHA was set up six years ago it has become the focus for a staunch anti-child labour campaign and a voice for AIDS awareness. But Edith and her workers have had to tread delicately. The Indian Government is fearful of Western "do-gooders", and the bureaucracy involved in setting up charitable organisations is enough to try the patience of a Hindu saint.

Unlike the missionaries of the past, who have been accused of robbing Third World countries of their religious and cultural beliefs, Edith is by no means evangelical. "The children are encouraged to follow



forms continue to be raped by bored businessmen en route to the next conference.

In Calcutta it was not possible to switch off from the scenes of deprivation and inhumanity. Glancing through the city's daily newspaper, stories which would demand a public inquiry over here made just a few paragraphs: a 10-year-old girl fell down an open manhole and drowned in sewage; a prostitute was unwittingly used as a guinea pig for an AIDS vaccine and fell sick; a wild dog snatched a desperately ill baby from a hospital ward and tore it to bits in the street.

The crayon picture which was being thrust eagerly into my face was typical of any eight-year-old, a crudely drawn house with four square windows, a pointed roof and a driveway leading up to a front door. It would not have looked out of place on the walls of any junior school in Ireland or hung in pride of place in a family kitchen, a testament to the child's subconscious need for the security of a home.

But this painting was not the product of an afternoon at kindergarten. This painting was done by a child who had never seen a proper house in his life, a malnourished nit-riddled eight-year-old whose home was a bundle of dirty rags on Platform 10, at Calcutta's Sealdah station.

Just like any normal kid, the little fellow was immensely proud of his artwork, fighting his way through the rest of the scrawny pack of street children who filled the drop-in centre at the end of the

Moving on to an area known as Kapalibagan, sandwiched between a slaughterhouse and a canal overflowing with sewage, it was as if I had entered the cesspit of the world. The stench caught the back of my throat, rats scuttled through open

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sewers and vultures flexed their wings menacingly on top of rubbish tips. Even the ubiquitous crows, pecking at dead flesh, seemed to have seen better days.

Children worked side by side with the birds of prey, scavenging on the festering heaps for bits of cloth which they could turn into clothes for a few rupees.

Here, among the thousands of cardboard and plastic shacks which pass as homes, GOAL has established one of its many drop-in centres. In a tiny, airless room, about 30 children sat barefoot and cross-legged, learning Bengali and English alphabets so that they could be placed in mainstream education.

Anjuna, aged seven, used to work as a flip-flop maker, 10 hours a day. The faded scars embedded on her dirty fingers reveal the number of years she has sat, hunched with a large pair of scissors on a rush mat,

her own. “There are times when I long for a partner, when I ache for a hug after a bad day, but I have made my decision and I don’t regret it for a minute,” she said.

Edith lives in a place called Ameder Bari, Bengali for “our

home”. It was opened by President Mary Robinson and celebrated its two-year anniversary last month. The four-storey building contains a drop-in centre, sick bay and half-way house, as well as Edith’s living quarters, which she shares with the children placed in boarding schools who have no families to return to during the holidays.

The living room is sparse by western standards, but intangible elements create the feeling of a home: the warmth which hits you when you walk through the door. The affection of the children is overwhelming; they hug and cling to you after so many years of being starved of affection.

“I love them as if they are my own, a fierce, protective love so strong that I would kill for them. I don’t think parental love could come more strongly than that,” said

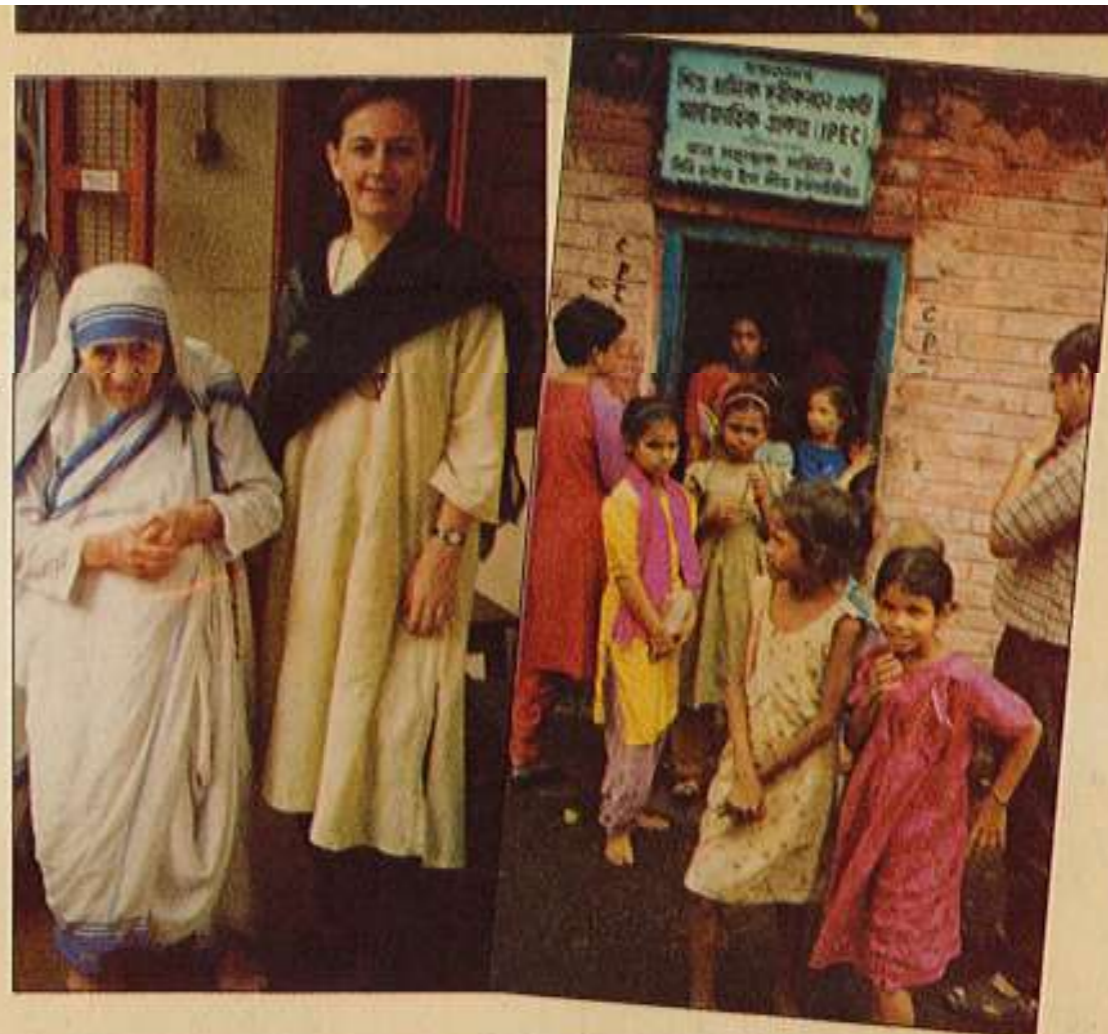
is of the means evangelist. The children are encouraged to follow their own faiths. We have Muslims, Hindus and Christians on our programmes; we find their religious beliefs are important to the children and we respect that.

“I know there are people out there who accuse us of interfering, but we never force the children to stay with us. They are invited to take part in our programmes, but it is their decision to continue with it. Then there are those who bleat ‘charity begins at home’, but my home is here. Man created boundaries, but we live where we feel we belong.

“I get frustrated when I look out of the window and see children on the street, because I realise we are only scratching the surface. I get frustrated when we’ve battled to save a child and it dies. The worst part of this job is burying one of the kids. Then I look at the children we’ve got into schools — one is going on to study as a doctor, another has a promising career as an athlete — and it gets things into perspective.”

It is so very easy to become cynical about the word “charity”, to forget what those glossy charity balls, records and lunches are really about. A child needs warmth, love, food and shelter, the basics of the human pyramid which are so easy to take for granted and are yet denied to so many.

Children are children the world over, with the same basic needs — irrespective of nationality, religion and culture. Edith and her team fulfil those needs.



HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: Among the cardboard and plastic shacks which pass as homes, GOAL has established one of its many drop-in centres (bottom right). Top — some of Calcutta's deprived children. Bottom left — GOAL worker Edith Wilkins with Mother Teresa