



## **Project Proposal**

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## **Shantipatha: An Initiative for Social Empowerment in Rural Karnataka, India**

### **Problem Statement**

The World Bank estimates India has nearly 260 million people still in poverty while thirty-five percent of the population is living on less than one dollar a day. A quarter of India's population is still malnourished, with over forty percent of the children underweight and nearly fifty-five percent of the women illiterate. Rural regions, in particular, have not benefited from the recent economic gains of the booming technology outsourcing into India. Although the government attempts to address the problems, these programs have not proved timely or effective and funding is often undermined by corrupt officials. A solution to these problems will require blending basic education with financial awareness, enabling rural people--particularly women--to develop fiscal responsibility and independence.

### **Background and Project Proposal**

On a recent trip to the Indian state of Karnataka, I observed these hardships first hand. For three weeks in December 2006, I worked with the International Human Development and Upliftment Academy (IHDUA), an organization that has had demonstrated success in making holistic improvements in numerous villages around the country. Current programming provides aid for rural literacy, financial empowerment through the micro credit system, and health and environmental awareness. Currently, multi-pronged efforts exist in nearly 64 villages around the outskirts of Mysore, the second largest city in Karnataka. These grassroots programs have made noteworthy progress in only a few years.

The project I propose here, named "Shantipatha," an invocation of peace, entails partnering with IHDUA to enhance current efforts as well as create cooperative projects. I realize that with proper direction and deployment, even limited economic resources can go a long way to make a significant difference. I plan to lead the effort by going back to the Karnataka villages to implement a five to seven week on-the-ground project. The goals of the project are to supply basic educational materials, enhance the IHDUA School infrastructure improvements, provide seed assistance to the micro credit lending program and initiate market development efforts for products manufactured by rural women. I will be present in the villages during the summer of 2007 to ensure proper start-up and progress of the project. I have built a strong partnership with IHDUA, acquired the necessary language skills to communicate, and I am highly motivated to help the people of Karnataka. My project will address the basic educational needs of the children and will provide financial management skills to the villagers, particularly women, of rural Karnataka. Assistance from the Kathryn Wasserman Davis 100 Projects for Peace funds would provide a significant short-term boost to the project while paving the way for long-term progress.

I am eager to lead a partnership effort with IHDUA to help educate village children and enhance the confidence of the rural women. While teaching English at the IHDUA School, I was overwhelmed with the students' enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge but struck by their lack of necessary resources. Students voiced their concern that they are unable to get the best out of science labs or apply for higher education because they do not have adequate competency in English. The school is trying to make certain infrastructural improvements, such as basic classroom facilities (many classes are held outdoors under tree shades) and eventually hopes to develop higher education facilities within the community, but the village's 450 students are struggling to get basic forms of education. Most parents are agricultural workers and many lack basic education. The school is highly dependant upon donated supplies and dedicated volunteer effort. Many teaching positions at the village school are filled by volunteers, as adequate salaries cannot be paid. While the school's headmaster hopes to adopt viable practices to ensure the quality and economic stability of the educational system, there is a tremendous need for basic educational materials.

With the added financial resources, the IHDUA School could purchase books and other educational materials, subsidize teacher salaries and recruit new teachers. In addition, it is my intention to channel

resources in the form of educational tools such as CDs, books and reference materials that can be donated or purchased at low prices through the educational contacts I have made around the United States.

A second part of my proposal is to work with micro credit authorities to expand an existing micro credit program in order to reach more villages. While educational improvements will provide hope for Karnataka's economic future, villagers currently struggle for financial stability in an economic system based on a combination of agriculture and small trade skills. Providing micro credit to motivated but resource-poor villagers is a means of building a solid economic foundation in communities where the only source of credit may be exploitative lenders, whose practices impede rather than nurture clients' opportunities.

With the assistance of IHDUA the village women have been able to cultivate trade skills into economic potential, but these women need much more training to produce a sustainable economy. Many villages receive small donations but no basic money management or investment skills. The IHDUA has begun to integrate the micro credit system into over fifty villages in Karnataka. Women and men in Self Help Groups (SHG or "Sanghas") are able to take out loans for agricultural purposes, put children through school, build homes and apply funds to basic health needs. The SHG program is also used as an effective vehicle to develop the impetus for personal socio-economic improvement and develop political awareness within the community. With the assistance of micro credit, the villages have diversified their income with programs such as tailoring, embroidery, crafting incense and candles, and packaging Indian food items. This program has proved extremely beneficial to the women's sense of confidence, self-sufficiency and hope.

Cooperative networks among villagers, financiers and consumers must be enhanced to ensure the success of the micro credit program. In addition, funding will help develop ways in which villagers' hand-made products can be successfully marketed and sold to other regions within India and abroad. I have compiled a list of industries within India and global organizations which are willing to become partners in this effort.

Financial instability among the poor and less literate in Karnataka impairs the state's ability to develop self-sufficiency and peace in the global society. This kind of sustainability and opportunity can only develop through a gradual process of empowerment of those who lack the financial resources to provide education and economic stability. Even with meager facilities and limited resources, the IHDUA School and the micro credit program have demonstrated success and potential to educate deserving children and free many villagers, particularly women, from unscrupulous moneylenders. Financial resources from partnering organizations are essential to make this effort successful. It is my belief that without proper support, such initiatives might wither on the vine. These humanitarian programs need to be fostered and funded to produce sustainable results.