

When Kent will dance for Kolkata

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UK-based charity Khushi Feet is raising money for street children in Kolkata by trying to break the Guinness World Record for the largest Bollywood choreographed dance.

The market town of Faversham is what 18,000-odd people call home. Not even one per cent of the town's population understands Hindi but come Saturday June 29, the grounds of The Abbey School in Faversham will see hundreds of people dancing to the song that made locomotives cool again, 'Chaiyya chaiyya' from 'Dil Se' (1998). The mass dance session is courtesy Khushi Feet, a UK charity established by Faversham resident Emily Cook to raise money and awareness for street children in Kolkata.

Cook, as part of summer school, travelled to Kolkata with a team from the Faversham Baptist Church and at 17, it was her first introduction to India and Indian culture. "It was a total culture shock for me," Cook, now 19, admits. In Kolkata, she interacted with other social workers and street kids, and worked in schools for street children run by GNCEM (the Good News Childrens' Education Mission). A Christian organisation, GNCEM aims to provide street children with a basic education. They run seven regular Schools, and two Mobile Schools in and around the following areas of Kolkata: Ajoynagar, Balkapara, Basirhat, Bhagabanpur, Daspara, Godindopur, Hatibagan, Malancha, and Pathershesh. Every morning, the volunteer teachers wake up at 5 am to prepare food for the children. GNCEM then pick up the children from the streets of Kolkata. At the school, the children are washed, given a simple blue shirt to wear as their school uniform, fed and educated.

Every day the sight of the children returning to the streets would make Cook feel miserable. "It broke my heart to see the state in which these kids lived. The teachers had little or no resources but wouldn't charge the kids. I wanted to help and do something and when I came back, that's when the idea of Khushi Feet formed," she says.

Cook decided to call her organisation Khushi Feet after the happy smiles she remembers seeing on the faces of those street kids - khushi in Hindi means happy. "They didn't have anything but I was struck by how happy these street kids were," she adds. Passionate and determined to help, she organised an India-themed Khushi Feet Festival in 2012 - Indian dance workshops and food stalls selling Indian food - raised 5,000 pounds. That money helped build GNCEM school building in Daspara, Kolkata and introduced Faversham to the colour of Bollywood and spice of Indian food.

For 2013, Cook decided to go one step further. She had met London-based dancers Arunima Kumar (kuchipudi) and Ash Mukherjee (bharatnatyam and ballet) in 2012 when she organised the Khushi Feet Festival -- Kumar and Mukherjee did an Indian dance workshop -- and it after talks with them that she came up with the idea of trying to break the Guinness world record for the largest choreographed Bollywood dance. The record is currently held by the city of Mumbai - reality television show Dance India Dance holds the achievement with 4,428 people dancing simultaneously.

"I wanted to make this year's event even bigger and better and more exciting and what's better than getting thousands of people dancing to a Bollywood song," Cook says with a laugh, adding, "Ash is among the most exciting dancers and choreographers in the UK and it was great when he decided to come on board. He chose the song, put up a tutorial and has been really helpful."

For Mukherjee, who's one of the few exponents of temple dance in the UK, the cause is close to home. "Khushi Feet raises awareness and money for street children in Kolkata which is where I was born and my hometown. On top of that, the area in Kolkata where they were operating from was Hathi Bagan in North Kolkata. My grandparents had a house right there, where I was born! The fact that I was drawn there somehow without knowing what it was all about was a marvelous coincidence and I took it to be a sign, as working with and inspiring underprivileged children is a cause very close to my heart," he discloses.

To spread the word and create curiosity, Cook and her friends, including the Khushi Feet mascot, Khushi the cow, organised a flash mob at several locations in Faversham in March dancing to 'Chaiyya, chaiyya'. The Saturday event, called Khushi Does Bollywood, hopes to attract more than 4,000 people. The doors, or the field will open at noon and the record-breaking event will commence at 3 pm. For those late to the party or just for last minute practice, there will also be a one-hour rehearsal class, taught by Mukherjee, for anybody interested in learning the dance.