

ACTION FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER #6

1st - 14th December 2003
Mumbai, India

Welcome to AFL Newsletter Number 6

Don't the weeks go by! It is hard to believe it is Christmas next week. Well, our experience in Mumbai has been incredible and has touched the group of 15 AFL members in many ways. The hours of traveling - in overcrowded buses and trains, taxis designed for short people, rickshaws and even ferrys has tested our stamina. However these journeys have brought us into contact with individuals and groups at all levels of Indian society - from the Indian Minister for Industry and his wife - to school and university students, industry leaders, and people dedicated to educating young Indians, including Muslim girls living in a slum area*, and children still living in traditional Indian villages. The opportunity to visit an 'Adivasi' (indigenous) village was an experience many Indians do not even share.

'We were fortunate to have the opportunity to delve beneath the frantic lifestyle and chaotic pace of Mumbai to meet local change-makers', said Keith, from England. 'The range of initiatives, especially to educate the less fortunate and those forgotten by society has been incredibly inspiring and challenged me to think - "What can I do to help?" I hope in some small way we can find an answer to this question',

Laura came to Mumbai two years ago and thought she'd landed on another planet. 'The poverty, heat, noise and dust... everything blew me away. Coming back again has been incredible and I feel much more at home. Above all, I am constantly amazed by the grace and beauty which persistently shines through - this is epitomized for me by the children in slum schools who are turned out so beautifully in their smart uniforms and shiny, ribboned black plaits.'

The poverty and homelessness has really affected us, particularly the many street children who beg for money. Many of us have struggled in our hearts to know how best to respond - feeling awkward, sad, guilty and unable to help. Hearing the story of a woman at SNDT Women's University inspired Clara. This student of early childhood education noticed that many people give these street children dirty looks or say rude things. So her simple, but profound response was to smile and offer them love. Over a period of time many of the children became her friend. She does not give them money but when they tell her they are really hungry she buys them food. This small act of love can make a real difference to their lives. Min-Hui, from South Korea had her own experience. One evening she was followed by a small boy while walking along the seashore in front of Kumaram - the MRA flat where half the Mumbai AFL team stayed. They started a conversation and she discovered that he has no money for education. The simple act of listening to his story made his day and he left smiling with a 'thank you Ma'am'... Min-Hui said this was a powerful reminder that we can all take the opportunity to listen and care for children in India.

Chris Lancaster was particularly struck by two contrasting visits in one day - firstly to a multi-million dollar company manufacturing affordable medical systems and equipment - Transasia (and reckoning to conduct its business with integrity and vision), and then to a pre-school in a slum area where we met the children and some of those who are battling to find solutions to community problems. In some ways the contrast could not have been greater - yet both represent the reality of India today, and the common link from both these groups has been the inspiration that 'God has a plan and we all have a part'. As with all our hosts, our welcome on both these visits was overwhelmingly generous, and we had the privilege of glimpsing the best of India - integrity, generosity, compassion and leadership,

The pollution and noise of Mumbai is overwhelming - particularly the polluted skies which reduce visibility and literally gets up our noses, the mountains of garbage and open sewers. Natasha, who has been working in water management in Australia for a number of years, took the

opportunity to attend a workshop on water harvesting at the IIT campus, along with Clara, who also has a passion for environmental issues. They were shocked to learn that only 24% of wastewater in Mumbai receives any treatment. On a positive note, there is great interest in water harvesting in India. A community-based project in Rajasthan has transformed the lives of 72 villages and Natasha and Clara hope to visit these projects when they are in the North of India.

A small group experienced an unexpectedly rich dialogue with a Director from the Tata group of companies, which employ 300,000 people across India. Mr. Krishna Kuma spoke frankly about the tension between ethics and boardroom realities- and inspired us with his commitment to a daily hour of meditation, reflection and guidance, even if that means rising at 2am! Even in his hectic corporate world, he still finds the best decisions come from a peaceful heart when he stops 'struggling with a situation' and surrenders to Divine will. The Tata tea company of which Mr. Kuma is CEO has an extensive network of community programs in the South of India providing education and health care. He explained that Tata operate on the principle of 'desireless action' as espoused in the Indian classic the Gita - 'we expect nothing in return from this service.' The four of us who met with him were greatly inspired by his ethical leadership, and the fact that we were unexpectedly whisked away for a magnificent dinner at the exclusive Taj Mahal Hotel. 'See - it works!' said Keith, from England - a recent business studies graduate. 'We had no expectations from this meeting and we ended up having dinner in India's finest hotel!'

On the topic of food - it just gets better and better - Gujarati breakfasts, traditional Maharati feasts, a Parsi banquet, metre long 'dhosa' in street cafes and even the cricket club and Taj Hotel...we've experienced it all! Some of the AFL team members were also privileged to attend the 16th Annual "Sahyoo Awards". The Sahyoo Educational Foundation promotes Indian art and culture, as well as supporting less privileged in the community. The function was attended by politicians and prominent community members as well as Bollywood actors and directors who the AFL team were excited to meet. Zoriana, from the Ukraine was even interviewed by a local TV channel. Of course she used this opportunity to promote AFL - but alas we did not know when it was broadcast.

We have learnt a lot about teamwork on our first outreach program in India, and the strengthening trust, sharing, respect and acceptance between AFL group members has kept us all going when exhaustion creeps in. This community spirit has particularly heartened Vuth, from Cambodia. His country has suffered deeply from civil war and the task of re-building community is a long slow road. 'But the experience of AFL gives me great hope for the future of our country and the world.'

We are extremely grateful to our host families in Mumbai - Reika Shahani and Pummy and S.N. Singh at the MRA flat Kumaram, who have made us feel completely at home,

The final group from Mumbai and Pune will return to Asia Plateau on 21 December for Christmas and New Year, followed by an Open House hosted by AFL from 1-4 January.

We wish everyone a peaceful and joyous Christmas,

Contact us at: aflco@hotmail.com
aflicmra@yahoo.com.sg
Action for Life: www.afl.iofc.org
Initiatives of Change: www.iofc.org

*Note: The Muslim girl's school is supported by a charitable organization called the Greater India Friendship Trust. (GIFT). They would greatly appreciate any support to enable this very important work of providing education and poverty relief, and have a scheme to become a GIFT 'Ambassador of Goodwill'.

You can find out more from:

Website: www.greaterindiafriendshiptrust.org
Email: gift@greaterindiafriendshiptrust.org