

ACTION FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER #13
23 February 2004

God give us rain when we expect sun.
Give us music when we expect trouble.
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
God play with us, turn us sideways and around. Amen

- Leunig

Namaskar and Ram Ram from the North!!

Like this prayer our journey these past few weeks has been precious, inspiring, exciting, mind-boggling, faith building -- and often unexpected. It has taken us through big city Delhi to the peace and serenity of Palam Vihar, to villages outside Lucknow, through the romance of the Taj Mahal, the pink palaces of Jaipur and to the camels and colour of rural Rajasthan.

A journey meeting people, projects, organisations, movements, staying in ashrams, villages, homes and experiencing the excitement of never knowing what will happen next, where we will end up or how we will possibly get anywhere. For all our planning and replanning and unplanning we still found ourselves in moments of despair, yet miraculously followed by situations of amazing grace and wonder. It has been a time of learning about ourselves, about India and about the world around us.

Most importantly it has been a time to reflect and go within ourselves as we are challenged from situation to situation....

'Dirty, half naked hungry children begging for money, polluted beaches, endless slums, scary stories of cheating, intimidation and corruption. It all made me feel so helpless and disappointed. I felt so guilty and struggled with the questions: How can one be happy if all this is happening in the world? How can we as Action for Life help in these situations? Wouldn't it be better to use the money raised for Action for Life to build schools for the underprivileged? Initially I did not want to listen to theoretical speeches about how bad situations are. I wanted solutions and practical action right there and then. It took some time for me to realise that we are not here to solve all the problems or to deal with them directly, but rather to understand why these situations come about and the importance of change within ourselves and every individual in creating change for the world. I have left my 'either /or' attitude behind and am beginning to see that things are not black or white, or even shades of grey, but that there are many more colours and dimensions to life.'

Zoriana Borbulevych, Ukraine

'Through meeting Sushobha Barve author of "Healing Streams - bringing back hope in the aftermath of violence", I have learnt many things about reconciliation and about myself. I have realised that I tend to respond to anger, and aggression with anger and aggression, when to really understand and serve others I need to move beyond the aggressive response to find out where the initial anger is coming from'

Keith Last, UK

'The journey started badly. Our train to Lucknow was delayed by 5 hours. Sitting in a crowded waiting room, loudspeaker blaring, we tried to work out how to save our Lucknow hosts from having to receive us in the middle of the night. As one of the AfL "coordinators", I got into action -- followed some guy who promised to sort out all our problems by hiring a Toyota van from a "reputable" tourist office at MUCH cheaper rates than using sector rail tickets... and get us to Lucknow on time. I went back to the group with this hope. We shouted our views over the noise, checked the figures, then agreed to a "quiet time" to get consensus. Mercifully, the loudspeaker went silent for 4 minutes. Most of the group felt it was right to stick with the train, even though we lacked onward bookings. This insecurity was more in sync with the Indian masses than riding in a flash Toyota. So we decided. Although we arrived in Lucknow at 4.00 am, our host seemed amazingly cheerful, friend s paid the onward travel for the next leg, and we all had intimate encounters with passengers crammed on unreserved seats. 'We arrived back in Delhi having spent 40% less than we would have with the hired vehicle. For me it reinforced a lesson that we saw operating in the NGOs we met -- you can trust the decision of a group trying honestly to find what is right more than you can some plan you'd like to get credit for.'

Mike Brown, Australia.

'Our group has had a few experiences which remind me there is an amazing force at work in the universe. In Rajasthan we had planned a visit to the Ashram of 'Tarun Bharat Sangh' - the not-for-profit group who support community efforts in water harvesting and environmental restoration across more than 70 villages in a large area of Eastern Rajasthan.

'The details of this visit were rather sketchy, and I had been communicating via email and with the help of a Hindi speaker. An impromptu phone call to the Ashram led to a conversation with the elusive and multi-award winning Rajendra Singh who spearheaded this campaign 20 years ago. Rajendra insisted that we join him that very day as he would be visiting the area before leaving again the next morning. He offered to take us in his vehicle. Still rather stunned at this turn of events, I rapidly consulted the team... and about 40 minutes later (having thrown our wet washing into bags) five of us piled into a van with Rajendra, his wife and a journalist researching government and community watershed projects across India.

'Once we arrived, we immediately set out on foot: Rajendra is a man of action! He shared the history of this project as we went on long walks to see the work for ourselves. We were all immensely inspired by the community-driven water harvesting projects - over 7,000 Johad (earthen bunds) have been constructed to recharge nearby wells, store water or prevent soil erosion. The once arid landscape is now an abundance of healthy crops and native vegetation and many of the young people who were streaming out of the district in the 70s and 80s have returned. Women no longer have to walk 9km to fetch water. The once dry Arvari River has permanent water, and agricultural production has doubled. All decisions and rules about natural resource management are made at the village level; and the community created their own 'River Parliament' in 1999 to make region wide decisions and resolve any conflicts. Truly inspirational!'

Natasha Davis, Australia.

'I sought God and I could not find him. I sought my soul and I could not find it. I sought my fellow human being and I found all three' - quoted by a volunteer from Asha.

We met with other passionate movements empowering marginalised communities to tackle corruption and poverty through grassroots, non-violent action for the 'right to information, the right to work and the right to food'.

* Asha ('Hope') - a Gandhian inspired organisation providing education for underprivileged children in rural areas - over 250 projects across India. www.ashanet.org

* Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) - 'The right to know is the right to live'. Promoting transparency and accountability in governance.

* Parivartan ('Change') - meeting with the founder Arvind Kejriwal of this Delhi based citizens' movement and Shekhar Singh from the Centre for Equity Studies.. www.parivartan.com

'God play with us, turn us sideways and around'

* 'We have been lent a very small car and in a moment of noisy desperation we managed to cram all 8 of us inside. 'Engaging others' has taken on a whole new meaning since the car would not start without the help of a few willing pushers'.

* Zoriana finally touches and hugs an elephant. The elephant looked Zoriana in the eye. 10th February 2004 at approximately 1:15 pm.

* The scary bus driver of a public bus who forbade his Action for Life passengers to fall asleep.

* John Freebury comes to the rescue, saving the North team from a pack of ferocious barking dogs, by marking our territory.

* Keith amusing the masses by juggling on trains, on the streets, and over dinner in a plush hotel.

Missing and wishing the whole Action for life team and all our supporters and friends peace and happiness and love from the North Team with the new and welcome peripatetic Bhavesh Patel.

Keith Last, Jisun Jung, Clara Cheong, Natasha Davis, Zoriana Borbulevych, John Freebury, Mike & Jean Brown