



Initiatives of Change

AfL Encounters

News from the Road of Action for Life 3

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We have come back home! The weather in Panchgani is getting colder and Asia Plateau will soon run out of spare blankets. We are still waiting for some of our members to come back from an IofC Youth Camp in Orissa. Meanwhile the memories of last days of outreach are helping to warm up the air. We hope they will for you as well!

MUMBAI:

Our second week began with a presentation to children of a slum area school, with carols, candles, the story of baby Jesus and our very own Santa Claus, bringing gifts of Purity, Honesty, Unselfishness and Love. We were sad to farewell our Santa (a.k.a. Ian Heywood) who has returned to his family and farm in Australia after six weeks with AfL.



AfL Santa Claus with children from a slum area!

At another Christmas musical evening at Jaslok Hospital, one doctor shared: "Hearing you singing in Hindi made me feel proud of my country for the first time in my life!" At Kamla High School we had an inspiring gathering with Leslie Nazareth and his friends from the Phase 5 NGO.

Since time was short and we had so many invitations, we decided to connect our new-found friends by hosting a party, to which at least 40 people came.

Sunday: the traditional Bandra market nourished our five senses. We tested our limits through a five-hour journey by taxi, train, boat, bus and rickshaw, to meet a few of the enthusiastic initiators of education programs within Adivasi tribal villages.

We observed the high technology of blood analysis machines made by the company TRANSASIA. Here we heard the inspiring story of the founders - Suresh and Marla Vazirani - who had previously been full time workers with MRA.

Our outreach ended with a lovely dinner at Dr Arun Seth's, sharing songs, stories and learning more about Indian culture.

HYDERABAD:

Two weeks in Hyderabad have left us with many vibrant pictures. Our outreach programs, the community, and the city have touched us deeply. Images remain...

In the community we had small glimpses behind the hijab with strong Muslim women, opening up new areas of understanding within the local community... interactive dialogues with Muslim and Hindu college students, building dreams for India in the next ten years... workshops with over 1000 students, teachers, principles, NGO leaders, and business professionals, whose warmth and willingness to share themselves created transformation.

In the old city we found cobblestone streets and winding alleys full of shiny bangles, leading to small naan shops with glowing clay ovens in the earth... crowds of children touching our hands and clothes, begging us to take their picture... a small boy on a rolling board with polio, legs toothpick-thin, asking for rupees... the five-hundred year old Charminar and Golkonda Fort, connecting contemporary Hyderabad to its origins as a city.

It was such a rich two weeks! Without the warmth and generosity of our hosts, many of these moments would not have been possible. With their support, we were able to embrace these images, and to create a deep and lasting impact with both the local IofC team, and the larger community. Looking back now from Asia Plateau, we realize the influence that this time will have on our next seven months.

PUNE:

Pune has left us with many impressions, too poignant to absorb at once. Here are a few:

-Brother and sister hand in hand, no older than eight years old, sparkling eyes, wide white smile, skip past, their stride full of joy and innocence. (Rehabilitation centre for destitute people, transforming lives, physically and spiritually, by regaining one's respect, dignity and hope.)

–The room is a sea of crossed legs, old, young, well and unwell sit together, upright, hearts open to connect to the rhythm of life. The room pulses and my tummy expands with each breath – “Omm”. The ‘mmm’ part tickles my lips. (Meditation at Cipla Foundation – a centre dedicated to caring for cancer patients, which aims to improve their quality of life by addressing their spiritual and physical well being.)

–A woman with a large basket of grass on her head weaves through buses, cars and rickshaws during rush hour with the grace of a swan. (Bus ride to Cipla Foundation.)

We have seen candles of hope lit through companies, individuals and foundations living out their values and commitment to society, giving hope to the less fortunate. We have experienced the tremendous generosity and warmth of our hosts and the Pune IofC team. Thank you greatly.

GUJARAT:

Gujarat – our last two cities were Ahmedabad and Baroda. The first one, a fast developing metropolitan. The second one, a city with a university of 40,000 students.

In Ahmedabad we stayed with host families and experienced Indian culture from within. With their help we held around eight meetings with various groups (from students to executive bank managers). A follow-up meeting brought together 13 youngsters, eager to learn more about IofC and the current campaign **India, I Care**.



At the exhibition with famous Indian classical dancer!

Memorable was our visit to the exhibition “In Defence of Democracy”, organized by local activists to provide information about Gujarat’s religious and ethnic diversity, as well as the cultural heritage of this state.

Our time in Baroda included meeting with NSS (National Social Scheme) students, who volunteer to serve the community as part of their education, as well as NGOs focusing on social work and women’s rights.

It was inspiring to bring together and give support to old friends of IofC, which we consider to be an important part on our journey.

With a picnic in the park, special music and love story on December 13th, we celebrated Leena and Suresh Khatri’s 30th wedding anniversary.

BARAMATI / BELGAUM / KOLHAPUR:

Eight AfLers were looked after by Neerav Mota and Mayur Shah, whose hospitality and enormous efforts we really appreciated! We were honoured to live in their houses in Baramati, share discussions during meal times and spend evenings with their families.

A visit to a manufacturing industry, Walchandnagar Industries Ltd, allowed the group to see human-centred business. The snack centre was staffed by workers’ widows, giving a salary to around 15 women. A special class on company grounds for rural illiterate women (many aged in their 50s) inspired the group that change can happen at any age.

We were lucky to experience rural India by visiting Veershri and her family on their farm. Veershri shared how she met AfL2 two years ago, and was inspired to take courage to be the first woman in Maharashtra employed as a bus conductor. After her initiative, 10% of the bus conductors’ positions are reserved for women.

“Not people for industry, but industry for people”: we saw this concept in action in Belgaum, where the AfL team was hosted by Mr Hundre in his business ashram. His business showed that honesty is not the best policy, it is THE policy.



In action at a school run by Walchandnagar Industries

Kolhapur saw the team visiting more schools, with one notable student sharing her quiet time thoughts in front of all her peers and stating that she will serve India. We were deeply impressed by this next generation of leaders.

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“Be the change you want to see in the world.” (Mahatma Gandhi)