

Friends of Calcutta Cathedral Relief Service

Kolkata Trip Report



The visiting Friends with some of Rig's team showing some of the 10 boxes of goodies that they took with them as a relief contribution - see below.

Team of 10 visit Relief Team

Between 6th—12th November a team of 9 of the Friends visited Kolkata with a two-fold purpose; to see for themselves the work that the relief team is undertaking; and to demonstrate the commitment and support of the Friends in the UK for the work undertaken. The Friends were joined by Rajat Singh, a Rajasthani friend of Adrian Whalley, the Honorary Secretary who arranged the trip.

The Friends found a vibrant and active team led by an able Director in Rig David who has now been in post for a little over 2 years. Rig's positive influence in the great work that is being undertaken—please read on to see more— is both apparent and welcomed by the relief team of around 70 staff who work with a sense of dedication and distinct enthusiasm.

The ethos of the relief team is in line with current development thinking of the adoption of a rights-based programme to lift the colony dwellers out of extreme poverty through the use of education, the provision of health care and through the creation of an awareness of empowerment and the powers of community action.

The Friend's Itinerary

Adrian Whalley

Rig had prepared an intensive programme for the week with the team. On arrival in the early hours of a Sunday morning, the first day was spent getting bearings and a leisurely walk in the pleasant sunshine in Victoria Park. The team went to evening service at the Cathedral and returned to the hotel— the "New Kenilworth"— for dinner.



In the following days, the relief team kept us firmly on our toes. On the Monday morning in the Cathedral side chapel, Rig and his team gave a superb powerpoint presentation of the objectives of the CRS, namely the provision of education, health care and all of the opportunities for women under the self-help strategy.

The overarching principal of that strategy is to help the communities in the colonies to appreciate that they a right to be recognised by the state as being individuals with an equal need and right to education, health care and individual respect just like the rest of the Indian population.

With this in mind, we visited around 10 colonies during the week - 8 within Kolkata and 2 rural communities which, by our standards, could only be

described as "primitive". At Balarampur, for instance, which took 3 hours to get to by road, the colony here is completely self-sufficient - the buildings made from wood, dried grass and animal pats with limited bricks - with the only intervention having been by the Government to install 2 manual water pumps so the people can collect water by bucket for domestic use and for washing.





The pre-kindergarten school

Children in uniform



Children collecting lunch in tiffin tins



Women's empowerment group - there are a growing number of these.

Contrasting Scenes

Mary Heath

1. A one room house in Bibibagan slum, where the bed takes half the room. Tin spoons and dishes, a cupboard and little else. The bed has been raised on bricks and underneath a little woman crouches and cooks something. A very narrow street with people preparing food, washing cooking and playing. A school and self-help group in a small building.

2. A school at the edge of a village in Haryana state*, in a field provided by the village elders. Children running and playing, dragging desks outside for a lesson in the sun, classrooms with space to do action games, homes in the village perhaps small and poor, but in an open rural farming setting.

In both cases the need is similar - to raise people out of their poverty by education, skills training, empowerment. The natural advantages of village life brought home to me the wisdom of CRS taking their skills into villages, to enable people to improve their situation but stay in the village environment and the communities that they themselves have created.

The View of a School Governor

Margaret Lee

To see the schools in the bustees was an absolute joy. The rooms used are small, but both the teachers and the children are enthusiastic. The age range is from 3 to 9 years, but there was evidence that even the smallest are taught the English alphabet and numbers. The children were polite and greeted us "Hello". They performed poems, songs and dances and were so excited to be given sweets, balloons and cuddly toys. Comparing the children with those in England there is a pride in being smart and clean. They have not got many possessions, but they value what they have.



Impressions of a Cambridge Student

Sally Clough

Driving through the centre of Kolkata, the most pressing thought on your mind might be the bus about to cut you up, or the taxi with no lights, or the hand pulled rickshaw travelling at half your speed straight ahead. As you weave your way through four lanes of traffic it is hard to keep your mind on anything but survival. Yet only yards away from the busy streets of the city centre are the "bustees", the slums of the city. Stepping down their narrow lanes you find yourself weaving between goats, beggars, women cooking dinner and chickens scratching in the dirt.

The rural areas around Kolkata are very primitive, and this has led to a huge influx of people into the city, in search of better jobs, better amenities, and better opportunities for their children. The bustees are crowded places, overflowing with people clinging on to life. Whole families live in single concrete rooms barely large enough to hold the raised bed they all share. And yet in these cramped conditions the people maintain their dignity. They keep themselves clean when they have nothing but water from a shared pump to wash in. They leap at any opportunity to do work and be paid for it, and their children have a drive to succeed at their education against all the odds.

The Cathedral Relief Service schools try to improve these odds. By taking children with no education and training them up to a level where they can enter the state-run school system, they are providing a life line out of the bustees. Despite almost overwhelming need and a lack of resources - their small schools are full to bursting with bright eyed children sitting crossed legged on the floor - they provide a basic education in Bengali, English and maths through traditional methods and a range of stories, dances and song. What they are doing already to encourage the many talents of these children is incredible, what they could do with more space and more money would be miraculous.

Life in a rural bustee

Catriona Mackay

On November 10 we visited the remote village of Balarampur. After the 'jeep falls down ditch' incident without which no such adventure would be complete, we finished the journey by bicycle cart: the roads were too narrow for motor vehicles.



CRS had helped Balarampur and nearby villages by building a school, training teachers and helping local women to form their own jute-making business. This had become so successful that they were currently discussing how best to expand: whether to buy a second jute machine or set up a fish farm.

Wherever we went, we met with kindness and hospitality, and this was no exception. Children from the school set up by CRS gave us roses, and performed traditional Bengali songs. The women of the village cooked a delicious meal of daal, rice, fish and vegetable curries, which we ate in the traditional way, with our fingers.

At Least One Benefit of Women's Empowerment!

Catriona Mackay



A leader of one of the women's empowerment groups spoke about how they had dealt with the problem of alcoholism among their husbands by banding together to break their illegal liquor stills. When one man punished his wife for this by locking her up and beating her, the other women turned up at his house and threatened direct action unless he stopped mistreating her, which apparently worked well. There is nothing like self help when the police are unable or unwilling to assist!

Life in BD Colony

Eileen Brookes

It is the middle of the day and the family are showering at the communal pump outside their tiny home just feet from the busy road. They are laughing, the woman fully dressed in a beautiful blue sari.



Next door is a small two-roomed concrete building with a few benches and plastic chairs and two or three treadle sewing machines. Here the women meet for their self-help groups and classes. They are able to take an eighteen month certificate course in, for instance, tailoring, knitting or embroidery. They show us their sample books with pride. The skills they learn are not only useful for their families, but they give pride to women who have had a very low status in society. They are encouraged and helped to sell surplus goods to neighbours or markets.

The building used to be the school, but just down the road is a new bamboo-framed school built about two years ago. It houses five small classrooms, including two pre-school classes and must be very hot in summer with its one tiny fan per room and very wet in the monsoon season with its fragile open-trellised walls. It's 250 pupils are sitting neatly on tarpaulins in cramped rows with their books (or slates for the younger ones) on the ground in front of them. Like all schoolchildren they are excited at having visitors and a break from learning, especially when they are offered balloons and taught how to inflate them.

Next year a new concrete two-storey building will be erected on what is now the playground. It will not only be the school, accommodating 500 pupils, but will also act as a health centre and meeting place.

These inhabitants of BD Colony are the lucky ones. They have been helped by the CRS for 15 years and they are served by a local Counsellor who, in spite of a father who wanted him to work as child labour, was persuaded to attend the first school here and is now a qualified physiotherapist. He is helping CRS improve the lot of his neighbours and their children. There is a long way to go, but judging by the smiles and waves as we left, he has made a good start.



Reflections on Women's Empowerment

Jackie McGuirk

Having only recently become a contributing member to the friends of CRS it was with some trepidation that I, along with my fellow 9 travellers set off for Kolkata. What was going to happen? What should I expect? Having been involved with charity work in the Third World for a number of years I knew that poverty could be dire and sanitation poor.



Kolkata did not let me down. Poverty abounded but with it a serenity and dignity that far outshone the surroundings. We were greeted day after day with rows of women and young ladies as eager to meet us as we were to meet them, to share with us their triumphs, successes and growing confidence. They wore their finest clothes and meet us with smiles running from ear to ear, they treated us like royalty as we sat and listened eagerly to their stories. Tales of how they had broken up illegal drinking clubs, they asked the police for help but they were unwilling to intervene, so the ladies rolled up their sleeves and did it themselves. This had caused some of them to be subjected to beatings from their husbands but they knew they were doing right and the drinking rings were demolished. They were truly inspiring.

They were proud to show us their newly acquired skills of embroidery and dress making. It was only when driving home in the dark that you

appreciated that many of these activities were carried out at night after the children that they so affectionately loved had gone to bed. As they sat in the street, with their sewing machines under gas lamps, the only lighting they had, and yet produced such exquisite work.

Their children were spotless, their uniforms pristine. This was even more amazing when their bathroom and laundry room was a standpipe at the end of the road. Bath time really was communal.

As I travelled home at the end of an amazing two weeks I realised, yet again, that we who are so "rich" are in reality so poor. They have so much to teach us, and as I loaded my washing machine for the third time my mind strayed back to those happy and content faces and I wondered what they would make of our western world.

The Indian Perspective

Rajat Singh

It was not a new thing to me to see how people live in the slums and the poverty that they suffer. But the new thing to me was to see and know that there are people that care so much for the women and children who are in such poverty.

I don't know how to say but it is so very good to provide education and health care for the poor children and to show the women how they can be



self sufficient. Then there is the training for the disabled people in the print shop.

After this my first visit to Kolkata, I feel only this that how great these people are who love, care and help these children and women.

I have only one line in my heart for all the members of the CRS: "Thank you so much". Regards, Rajat.

CRS Executive Committee

Adrian Whalley

When the CRS Annual Report 2004/05 came through the post, I decided that it was about time that I actually met the members of this committee. After all, this is the committee to which Rig is ultimately accountable. There were a number of names that I did not recognise so I asked Rig in advance if he could arrange for a full committee meeting to be called whilst we were there so that Ray and I could address the meeting. The Committee is chaired by the Bishop of Kolkata, Bishop Raju.

It was good to have the opportunity for Ray and I to meet an almost full committee, of which there are twelve. But I wanted to be more certain as to the extent of active participation that the committee offers to assist Rig and his team.

Indeed, I wanted the committee to be in no shadow of doubt that such active participation is expected by the Trustees in the UK, particularly now that the

Friends are the main funding provider. I wanted to explain and make sure that the fashionable western notions of "accountability" and "transparency" were appreciated and understood.

I see that the committee has a role to play in the effective monitoring of the effective use of the funding we raise and I wanted to leave them in no shadow of doubt as to the importance of the interests of the CRS taking absolute priority over the funding that we are providing. This was brought on by the fact that the Trustees had become aware relatively recently that the relief team has been required to pay a small rent for their limited office space. The Trustees wrote directly to Bishop Raju about this and shortly afterwards, the rent was waived. I wanted to make sure that this does not happen again.

In addition, on the theme of accountability, I wanted to establish some points of contact on the committee of which the Friends can be aware. Mr Mukarjee has agreed to be the Friends principal point of contact on the committee. Kevin Roberts, a Quality Assurance and Education Consultant who is also Treasurer of the Diocese of Kolkata, has agreed to be responsible to the Friends for the CRS finances. Kevin can be contacted at Bishop's House, 51 Chowringhee Road, Kolkata, 700 071, India (email: krcal@cal3.vsnl.net.in or kevin_roberts9@hotmail.com). Dr Alfred is to undertake a formal monitoring exercise at a selection of colonies where the relief team is operating on at least an annual basis. I shall make sure that this actually occurs and will report back.

I finished the meeting by giving unreserved praise for Rig, who, we are all agreed, is undertaking a great job in a challenging situation. It is more than clear that Rig is dearly liked but respected by his team. So the meeting yielded very positive results. The committee and Bishop then took all of Friends out for dinner in Kolkata which was tremendous. The Trustees are convinced that the CRS, its purpose and funding are in safe hands.

Over and above this, Ray and I had meetings with 3 local politicians. I wanted them to know that the Friends are watching closely what is happening with social developments in Kolkata and that we are wanting to build links to work together with the politicians as a unified team to make the planned improvements happen.

I told them that we will be back....which we will. I intend to follow this up.

Sponsor a Child as a Christmas or other present

Adrian Whalley

Taking some hints from Christian Aid, if you are stuck for an idea for a present for that friend who has everything already, why not let the CRS, through me, have a cheque for £40 which will sponsor a child such as these below for their education for a full year in one of the CRS schools. In return, I will send you a card which has actually been made by one of these children in their school using the pencils, colouring pencils, crayons, biros, paper and watercolours that we took for them in the 10 boxes on the first photograph.

It is now commonly accepted that to sponsor a named child can be divisive for children who are not sponsored. So it is far better to sponsor a "virtual child" although many of the cards I have here do contain the artist's name and a short message.....in English, of course!

So why not give it a go? These pre-primary children would not have any education at all were it not for the CRS and there are loads more of them who need our financial support. It is best, of course, if your commitment can be ongoing so that the child's education can follow suit. I enclose a bank standing form with this Newsletter so if you feel able to react positively to this request, I will be even more delighted to hear from you.



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whalleyallegro@hotmail.com)

Week 2 in pictures:



Summing up

The trip was a great success.
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time at : Adrian Whalley, The White
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