

## ***Impressions of India***

Dawn begins as a filthy yellow smudge on the horizon, slowly growing in intensity as I watch from the window of our India Rail carriage. The other two Presidents of FreeSchools World Literacy, Sue Tennant from Canada and Geri Johnson from the United States, and my daughter Francheska, are still asleep as we make the 17 hour train journey from India's capital, Delhi, to the town of Bettiah in the heart of India's poorest State, Bihar.

The smudge intensifies, the dry brown of the land lightening, bleeding into an oily brown sky around the horizon, the dust and pollution obscuring the brilliance of the orb itself, smothering it into a nondescript flatness.

Sunrise in this part of the world is never a particularly pretty event – this morning it is exactly the same as I remember it from the morning 16 years ago in February 2000 when I made the same train journey with humanitarian Mark Bloomfield. It is as if the sun itself has adjusted, toning its grandeur to match the dreary and backbreaking drudgery experienced by the countless peasants and their families living and toiling on the land, thousands upon thousands of endless scenes of poverty; snapshots fleetingly caught in the picture windows of the train carriage as it rattled nonchalantly along the track.

The sun rises higher, defining itself, separating the landscape into light and shade as acrid smoke from breakfast campfires curls into the thickening atmosphere, fires fuelled by wood, cow dung or discarded tyres, whatever the women can lay their hands on to cook for their families.

Only about 28 people make the train journey in the relatively comfortable 4-berth cabins of the first class car under the watchful eye of the conductor - we allowed ourselves that small luxury, booking weeks in

advance to be able to do so – but by far the majority travel in second class, or worse, crammed into the smelly, barred, open-widowed carriages of cattle class. The gamble paid off for some of us westerners though, as we nursed our exhausted frames, ravaged by the effects 'Delhi belly', to and from the carriage toilet throughout the wee hours.

Waiting on Bettiah platform, in the morning's relative cool, our in-country partner, the nearly-blind Sister Mary Crescence of the Sacred Hearts Sister's Society, was there to greet us, her assistants eagerly grabbing our bags and shuffling us towards the waiting 4-wheel drive for the short journey to the convent.



A train pulls out of Bettiah Station in Bihar State, India. There are no clouds to be seen in the sky, yet the sky is white.



From left, Nitesh, Sue Tennant, Sister Crescence with Shilpi, Francheska and Geri Johnson at Bettiah Station.



Under the mid-morning sun the heat intensifies. Straight above the sky is cloudless, but only the palest hint brownish-blue is visible even on the best days. Noon and beyond the heat builds unbearably to an oppressive crescendo – reaching its energy-sapping zenith just before the monsoon with temperatures soaring into the high forties, and from whence spread the old adage that only ‘mad dogs and Englishmen’ would be foolish enough to go out into it. The sensible ones soon learnt the only way was to sit it out under a shady verandah sipping a gin and tonic.

After the heat, the streets of Delhi and the rigours of the train journey, the tranquil grounds of the Convent of the Sacred Hearts Sisters stood before us like an oasis in the desert, its two giant imperial palms standing silent sentinel on either side of the entrance gate ushering us into the welcoming grounds. Gaily coloured flowerbeds and hedges adorned the front of the imposing two-story sky-blue convent building where everyone was waiting for us.

The live-in primary and secondary Bridge Course girls swept around us eagerly in waves, regrouping and spreading with the fluidity of a school of fish – particularly enthralled by Francheska who, being fresh out of school, was closer to their age. They gathered in front of us in rehearsed formation, throwing garlands of flowers around our necks, and singing the ‘Hearty Welcome’ song with verses both in Hindi and English.



Buildings and grounds of the Sacred Hearts Convent



Francheska Coenraads surrounded by the Bridge Course girls who live and take classes in a special building funded by FreeSchools volunteer, Saskia Raevouri.

Our aim was to visit some of the world’s poorest schools – schools for children on the absolute bottom rung of society’s ladder, schools in the poorest of villages accessible only by dirt track, schools sometimes without even a classroom and perhaps only a tarpaulin stretched between the trees to shade the children from the ravages of the sun – but they were functioning schools none-the-less. They were our Free Schools and we were proud of them, supported through the generosity of hundreds of our donors living comfortably in Australia, Canada and the US, each willing to do their little bit to make these poor children’s lives better.



Things had come a long way since Mark and I visited Sister Crescence's very first school in the year 2000. To see her warm welcoming face once again, and in such good health and spirits after all these

years, was a wonderful feeling – it was as if no time at all had passed between us, and I, for one, was raring to see the schools, the students and the progress that she had been making.

But first on Sister Crescence's list for us westerners was lunch in the dining hall with the other Sisters followed by a prescribed afternoon of rest in our chambers. With the help of the Bridge girls, rooms had been prepared for us; freshly painted windows decked out with flyscreens, beds with mosquito netting, air conditioning fans, plus an ensuite shower and toilet with towels and soap, and a printed itinerary hung on the wall above our desk and chair outlining our program of activities: A mighty effort made by those whose own rooms were significantly more Spartan than our own.

From the windows of our quarters, daily scenes in the convent grounds played out before us, the sisters and their staff tending the sun dappled gardens,



Freeschools Presidents Robert Coenraads (Australia), Geri Johnson (USA) and Sue Tennant (Canada) in discussion with Sister Crescence in the Convent dining hall.

tilling and irrigating small plots of garlic plants, beans, pumpkins and corn amongst the shady plantations of mango, jackfruit and guava trees – complete with a cow out back supplying the convent's dairy and fertilizer needs.

The new Bridge Course dormitory building and classrooms, built and supported by FreeSchools World Literacy through the efforts of Saskia Raevouri, stood proudly alongside the dining hall. The girls took Francheska aside, guest of honour, into their dorm where, sitting on their sleeping mats all lined up in a row against the wall, they laughed, wrote notes in each other's diaries, and told stories.

Elsewhere on the huge acreage controlled by the Catholic Church, we were shown other gated grounds and fine buildings similar to those of the convent, including various chapels, the Sacred Hearts Convent School, a school for the deaf and blind, the novitiates school, and a public infirmary/women's health and birth clinic being run by the Sacred Hearts Sisters.



Bridge Course girls on their sleeping mats in the dormitory.



Donations to FreeSchools World Literacy go directly to the schools with no losses along the way, the exchange rate ensuring that every precious foreign dollar has maximum purchasing power in India. The way it works is that our donors' funds are used to pay teacher's salaries – each teacher being in charge of a class of 25-30 students – and this means it costs us approximately \$20 per child per year to ensure they receive an education - that life changing education every child in this world deserves. The free schools are secular, meaning all are welcome, although in any circumstance where a choice must be made, preference is given to girls in order to counter the gender disadvantage they already suffer, particularly among the lower castes. And, to the keenest and brightest of our students, we offer scholarships (worth about \$120 to \$180 per annum) enabling these lucky ones to continue on to college and even university studies. The bottom line; educated women typically manage their lives better, starting their families later and having fewer and better educated children. It gave me great pleasure to meet one of these former students, Nancy Vincent, who our family had been supporting, with her scholarship going towards medical text books. Nancy now lectures in Nursing at the university. Her proud parents came to the convent, laden with albums full of graduation photos, and her younger sister too - she had been pen pal with my own daughter over the years.

There were many touching moments during our school visits over the following few days, teachers and students alike dressing in their finest, and most likely their one and only good set of, clothes for the benefit of the foreign visitors, a feast of bright colours, but for me there were two highlights: In one school, the young teacher, Prince, was teaching in the front yard of his parents' home, reading to the class from a colourful picture book (which we obtain for a few cents a copy from Pranthum a not-for-profit publisher). It was a typically oppressive afternoon when we arrived; the children sat cross-legged on the ground under a tarp, heads swivelling to follow



The next generation of students are given a science lesson by former FreeSchools student, Prince, under a tarpaulin in the front yard of his parents home.

us as we took our designated places in a row of plastic chairs. At the end of the lesson we spoke briefly to the children on the benefit of education, our words of inspiration, translated by Sister Crescence, being 'that only the sky is the limit' for those lucky enough to get the opportunity to learn. Upon congratulating the teacher, I discovered that 'Prince' had been one of our original free evening school students, one of those who I saw as a child, who had now returned, driven by a desire to repay the kindness and opportunity shown to him, to share his knowledge with the next generation— giving back to the community to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.





Students and their teachers take a break from their lessons to pose for a photo in front of the Ellen White Free School.

On another day we visited a newly-built two-classroom school packed with primary age children, who at the end of our visit, obediently filed outside for a group photo, standing proudly in front of their school. It was called the “Ellen White School”, because one of our supporters decided that her own house in the United States would be sold when she passed away, and the proceeds used to build a school in India. A bricks and mortar school meant that the poor children of that lucky village, come monsoon, storm or blinding heat, would always have a permanent place to learn. The brass plaque to be mounted beside the school’s front door was still being engraved at the time of our visit.

Back in Delhi, we met with another of our in-country partners, Dr Ashish Amos and Ella Sonawane of the ISPCK. Here we learned that our Ghaziabad Free School was filled to capacity, bursting at the seams with children eager to take advantage of the high quality educational programs being offered there, and that plans were afoot to secure inexpensive land on the outskirts of the city to build a much bigger school to meet the growing demand. The original Ghaziabad buildings could then be used as an empowerment centre where women, often the mothers of the FreeSchools students could learn tailoring and other skills, enabling them to run their own small businesses. Ashish and Ella were anxious to know if our supporters might like their idea and we were able to reassure them that a bricks and mortar project would always have a great appeal – being something tangible, something real that would go on being useful for decades and decades to come, something that donors could know, as Ellen White did, would be around serving humanity long after they were no longer around. Apparently our FreeSchools programs at Ghaziabad were so popular that even middle class families in the neighbourhood were asking if they could pay for their children to attend, and this revelation threw up a whole raft of new ideas for growing in-country funding for some future projects.



Ella shows Francheska and Sue a colourful patchwork quilt made in the Women’s Empowerment Centre where income-earning skills are taught.

Ella was also keen to have volunteers come to work in the schools, teaching the children in the mornings, and the women in the afternoons; English, drama, music, computing, sewing or any other skills that might be useful. Ella felt that such visitors were a great inspiration to the FreeSchools students encouraging them to believe that for them anything was now possible.

In the closing days of our Indian visit, my daughter Francheska gazed over the silhouetted marble domes of the Taj Mahal from the rooftop of our nearby hotel. Mesmerized by the scene, she reached for her camera.

“Look dad, how wonderful! The full moon is rising over the Taj Mahal.”

I’d allocated a few extra days to take her to see the Taj Mahal - truly one of the world’s greatest seven wonders – I wanted her to see what the Indian people were really capable of creating - the magnificence of their real culture beyond her limited view of Old Delhi’s crumbling buildings, tangles of live electrical wiring hanging dangerously low into narrow filthy streets crowded with beggars, aggressive vendors and horn-blaring motorcycles – crushing city population densities reaching Armageddon levels. As lucky westerners, we’d had a pleasant day getting to the town of Agra in the air conditioned comfort of Mr Singh’s taxi, relaxed by his easy, safe driving on the open highway.

I hadn’t seen the Taj myself, having missed that opportunity 16 years earlier when, by chance, Mark Bloomfield and I happened across Dr Amos at the 2000 New Delhi World Book Fair – we had far more important things to talk about back then than our sightseeing plans! It is amazing where a chance meeting can lead.

“That’s the sun, Francheska,” I replied. “See, the moon’s up there,” I added, pointing straight up at the faint silvery half-orb in the darkening sky over our heads.

“I’ve never been able to look straight into the sun like this before,” she exclaimed, adjusting her camera, concentrating on the shot. “Why is it like that?”

“The sun’s rays have to pass through a lot of atmosphere at this time of afternoon – it dulls them right down, and the atmosphere in this part of the world is particularly thick.”

I didn’t want to spoil her moment with additional detail about the permanent thick brown blanket of exhaust and dust pollution trapped behind the massive wall of the Himalaya range, smothering the entire northern half of the Indian continent. After a while you start to get used to it, I mused – even forget that it is there – apart from that nagging little cough every now and then.

“Have you noticed how we’re never getting sunburnt here?” I added, but Francheska was already lost in her own thoughts. I’d already given her enough. She focused on the framing, the angle and best zoom.

“Look at this one dad,” she turned the back of her camera toward me, arrowing through several shots to get to the one she liked best. “Just great isn’t it?” At that moment Francheska was at peace with India, and, therefore, so was her dad.

“Fabulous!” I exclaimed, screwing up my eyes to take in the thumbnail-sized image. “Just wait until you see the ones you’re going to take tomorrow morning. Gates open at five forty five and we’re gonna be the first ones in there.”



Francheska’s late afternoon photograph of the Taj Mahal from the hotel rooftop.