

Charmaine's Diary

22nd February 2010

Monday

The media team arrive to India to join in on this field visit with Irish charity, Suas Educational Development - journalist Tom Lyons and photographer Brian Meade, both of the Sunday Times, as well as Newstalk's Chris Donoghue. The boys are straight off the plane but are hungry to get right to the job at hand. Travel out to the Southeastern part of the city and reunite with Development Action Society (DAS), a partner of Suas, with whom I worked with in 2003 as a teaching assistant. Am chuffed that there is a poster inside their office saying "Welcome Charmine". When they notice the error in spelling my name, they tell me it's the Indian spelling! Hear about the great progress that DAS are making and learn more about their projects. With some difficulty, dress myself in a sari; it's essentially six metres of material and much skill is required to wrap it around the waist and to drape over the shoulder elegantly. Walk into a restaurant to meet DAS staff for dinner. Lovina, a DAS teacher, quickly pulls me aside into the bathroom to dress me properly and they all get a kick of me wearing an Indian outfit. Lovely to reminisce with those I worked with in 2003.

Tuesday

Go to Anandalok school and meet a teacher, Lalita, with whom I worked closely when I was a Suas volunteer. My Bengali being appalling and her English being limited, we instead embrace and chat through gestures. She tells me of getting married and of having a four year old daughter. All of the children that I worked with in 2003 have now moved on to either mainstream government schools or are married with their own children. Feel old. Visit the community of Makaltala, a village of about 400 people who live on Kolkata's main dump. They make their living by rag-picking on the dump – collecting plastics, metals, glass, wood pieces – anything that they can sell for a few rupees. Some even rummage for food. Men, women, children alongside cows, pigs, wild dogs, vultures and millions of flies, scavenge together. 80 per cent of Kolkata's hospitals dump their refuse straight into municipal tips that are delivered to Makaltala dump. Villagers work with no protection – if not barefoot, they wear flimsy plastic flipflops, they wear no gloves, no masks. Unsurprisingly the health of the village is poor with people suffering cuts, bruises, infections and internal ailments from the toxic waste. The village lacks the basic facilities of public transport, piped water, sanitation and electricity. DAS have set up an informal school here, educating the children who are all first generation learners. Many of the children ragpick before and after school. DAS have also helped the women of the community set up a Women's Community Group; together they have successfully campaigned to a local counsellor to have an illegal alcohol shop closed down. Substance abuse is a big social issue within the community amongst both men and children. The women speak with passion; they see education as the way for their children to hoist themselves out of this dire existence. Am inspired by the aspirations these women have for their children; they want their children to become "self-dependent", to pave a happy and peaceful life for themselves and to not suffer the life of their parents. One lady tells of her hope that her son becomes a doctor but that he also has compassion to do something about the health of the people of Makaltala. Suas volunteers work here every summer and I admire their hardiness – it is by no means an easy placement.

Wednesday

Arise and shine at 5.30am as the photographer wants to get some photos taken before the light is too strong. Meet Mayo woman Catherine and her husband Malcolm, two academics who fell in love with cultural literature and each other in UCD, and now live in Kolkata. Catherine dresses me up in one of her most ornate saris for a photoshoot in Kalighat market, one of oldest and most typical of Kolkata's neighbourhoods. I get some funny looks and Bryan from Suas gets some nods of approval - I think that the locals thought we were marrying. Great excitement in Vikramshila, a Suas partner, about "the celebrity from Ireland visiting" and upon entering the office I am crowned with a wreath of roses and have gifts of flowers, chocolate and local handicrafts bestowed upon me. The staff put in a huge effort to learn the words and tune of the Rose of Tralee and sing the song in wonderful Indian accents. Shupra, Director of Vikramshila, gives us great insight into their work. She stresses that although Kolkata has seen a huge boom over the past few years, these advances only touch a very small percentage of the population; the problem remains that 37% of West Bengal (state of which Kolkata is capital) is still illiterate and 53% still drop out at primary school.

Thursday

Last day in Kolkata and all in the group claim that they are feeling fine after the raw chilli eating contest the night before. I am not convinced. Visit another Suas partner - Sabuj Shanga - who work with migrant slum communities along the railway tracks connecting rural areas to Kolkata. Take a train to one of their education centres where we are dazzled by a repertoire of songs and poems that are clearly learned from the Suas volunteers. The children thrive on performing and are delighted when we join in on some of the songs. On the way to the airport, stop by Salt Lake City, the hub of Kolkata's IT industry, and am dazzled at the juxtaposition of skyscraper and cycle rickshaw. A new and modern Kolkata seems to exist easily alongside Mother Theresa's Calcutta. Baffling. Fly from Kolkata to Delhi. Miss my connection to Abu Dhabi.

Friday

Arrive back in Dublin, 35 hours after I have said goodbye to my co-travellers in Kolkata. Attempt to dolly myself up and attend the inaugural Trinity College alumni ball for Management Science and Information Systems Studies, my undergraduate degree. Great to catch up with old friends though I fade quickly and retire early.

Saturday

Watch the rugby at home with my parents - a most memorable victory in Twickenham. Although the hope of a double Grand Slam has been quashed by France, our sights can still be set on the Triple Crown - thank you England! Attend the selection night for the Kildare GAA Rose in St. Laurence's Club. A real trip down memory lane as this is the community into which I was born and lived for seven years. There are excited rosebuds, slick escorts, a Rose float pulled by a vintage tractor, a piped band, a red carpet and, of course, Rose participants. In all the excitement I manage to stab my hand with the tiara and actually draw blood! Local parish priest, Fr. Siochrú, presents me with my baptismal certificate and the community spoil me with mementos of local handicraft to mark the occasion of the community having produced a Rose of Tralee. Gráinne Corrigan, sister of one of my best and longest friends, is chosen on the night. She will now participate in the Kildare final selection night.

Sunday

Catch up on much-needed sleep and try to battle the onslaught of a head-cold.