

From <http://www.kenburnett.com>

Guardian Abroad 2006

Overcoming poverty in India

When it comes to fighting poverty in the sub-continent, where do you start? Perhaps by recruiting and training hundreds, even thousands of fundraisers, says Ken Burnett.

Though we'd only arrived in the country at 2.30 that morning we were out on the streets late the same Saturday evening to see and meet the homeless of Delhi. It was my wife Marie's first visit to India and I couldn't resist showing her the real Delhi underbelly. So I arranged with friends from a tiny local NGO called Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA) to visit their work among the 168,000 homeless people who each night live rough on the streets of India's teeming, chaotic capital. Young and old, men, women, children and even babies all coexist in this bizarre underworld alongside stray dogs, rats, donkeys and the occasional sacred cow.

The numbers seem no exaggeration, though how anyone counts them is beyond comprehension. There are so, so many. It may be the largest population of the dispossessed on our planet, each snatching at sleep when they can as they crowd and cram together in rubbish dumps, graveyards, on pavements, at the road's edge, on traffic islands, under flyovers, anywhere a fly could land. Here the frail, the sick, the lame and the mentally ill rub shoulders with the barely fit; beggars and thieves sleep alongside sex workers and pimps while predators and exploiters share their limited space beside the vulnerable and exploited. All appear thin as rakes, all united in poverty, discomfort and indignity, all clutching for dear life to what little they've got, just clinging on. In the daylight it looks bad enough. As night falls it quickly becomes a living hell beyond the imagination of Dante.

Just before midnight we stopped by some rickety huts, AAA's night shelter for the lucky few it has rescued from the dangers of the street. Here we met young Samina¹ whose mother abandoned her on the street as a baby when her employer had insisted 'no children'. And 14 year-old Priya, whose stepfather had abused her and tried to sell her body on the street, this same street that she had run to, preferring its tender mercies to the certain risks at home.

Safe and dry inside, the children danced for us to show their pleasure at not being on the street, while outside the monsoon rains thundered down, beating the fragile tin roofs like they were drums, flooding the potholed streets. The children danced on regardless of the deafening din, happy to show their talents while at the hut's window lines of men hung like watchers at a zoo, separated from the vulnerable youngsters only by the presence of our guides, the charity workers. Rain doesn't just fall here, it plummets. The shelter seemed fragile at best, secure, but on a knife-edge.

We'd just come from two weeks in China, where I'd been working as part of a seven-strong international team reviewing the China programme of

¹ Names have been changed

international NGO ActionAid. China has rural poor as numerous and as deprived as anywhere and may have done more than any other country in recent times to lift large numbers of its people out of poverty. But the poor in China seem neat and manageable compared to those of India. In China, overcoming poverty appears simply to be a matter of time. In India in 2006 it's still hard to imagine where to start.

But this could be an illusion, for despite appearances there is a lot going on, even beyond the sterling works of AAA.

The poor, it might easily seem, will be with us always...

'Incredible India' is no misnomer and not just in terms of its multiple wonders, as the TV adverts would have you believe. Along with the fabulous Taj Mahal and the delights of Fatehpur Sikri, the world's second biggest country by population is also home to startling, visible squalor, a place where poverty and deprivation are clearly seen almost everywhere.

So each year donors in America and Europe direct substantial piles of their charitable donations towards disaster relief and development work in the aptly-named sub-continent of India. Even though its comfortably-off number more than 200 million, making it one of the biggest middle classes of the world, India still seems able to gobble up donations endlessly, its appetite for Western largess remains as big and as hungry as the collective stomachs of its nearly one billion poor people. When one looks at India it's easy to believe that poverty is insoluble, that the poor will be with us always. In such a huge, seemingly shambolic society, inevitably the visitor wonders, where do you start?

Where, indeed? Some people are coming to think that if poverty and other seemingly intractable world problems are to be overcome, a different approach is needed, even a different way of thinking. Encouragingly, some such new thinking is already beginning to make a difference.

Paramjeet Kaur, director of Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan explains that her organisation is engaged in policy influencing and lobbying with the Government of India to reform the law relating to homelessness, particularly to repeal those laws which criminalise poverty. Delhi's department of social welfare has come up with a plan proposing creation of more shelters for the homeless, especially for homeless women.

Param is aware there is no single solution to this problem. Large scale migration from rural to urban areas particularly needs to be addressed as a priority. And always, more money is needed than seems currently available.

One radical possible solution to this last problem – perhaps as old as poverty itself – was proposed recently at the South Asia Fundraising Conference, held last September in Agra, India.

At this event 250 fundraisers and not-for-profit activists from across Asia heard Major-General Surat Sandhu, an independent consultant to India's growing voluntary sector, pose the controversial view that the best way for foreign charities to fight poverty in India would be to invest a tiny percentage of their current development aid to the country in encouraging, training and developing an indigenous fundraising profession – something that's almost absent in India today.

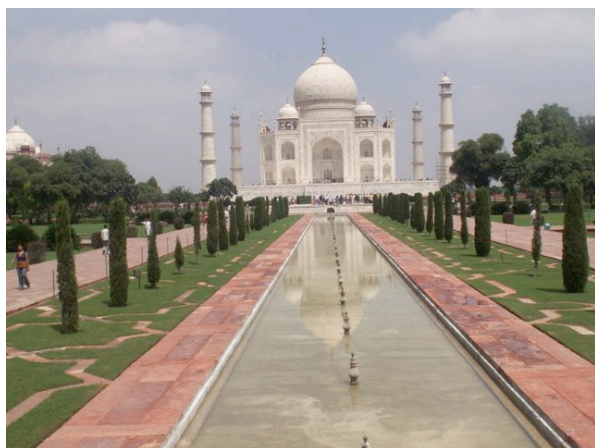
'Twenty per cent of Indians are comfortably off', says Surat. 'There are 200 million middle-class people here. Eight hundred thousand of them are high net worth individuals. Yet we depend on charity handouts from the West. There are no specialist major donor fundraisers to be found in India.'

Indian NGOs can't raise the money that's available here because there are far too few trained professional fundraisers.'

Ironically it seems that western aid agencies are at times still slow to realise that the best route to development is from within – building the capacity of local and national organisations so that they can, in a sustainable way, pursue their own rights and solutions themselves. And its not just the rights to live free from hunger and poverty that India's people need to secure. It's also their right to grow and develop a culture of philanthropy of their own.

All pictures and text © Ken Burnett 2006

Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan can be reached at www.delhishomeless.org. Surat Sandhu can be found on www.safrg.org and surat21@gmail.com. Ken Burnett is author of several books on non-profit management and governance including *Relationship Fundraising*, *The Zen of Fundraising* and *Tiny Essentials of an Effective Volunteer Board*. He can be reached via www.kenburnett.com.



Above and below: India's splendours and mysteries are well known, but lifting its people out of poverty remains the country's biggest challenge. **Below right:** Safe at last, a refugee from Delhi's streets dances for her friends.



Right: Young people love to show their dancing skills.



Left: From behind a barred window, men watch the dance.



Right: Children saved from the street give visitors a warm welcome.

