

EMBRACE DIFFERENCES
EMBRACE CHALLENGES!

SOUTH DARLEY C.E.
PRIMARY SCHOOL



Hastings School, Kolkata

Working together to make life better

Our Women in Kolkata!

It's lovely to have this opportunity to write about our recent 'mission' to Kolkata. Although it is truly an instance when words and pictures cannot adequately portray the whole picture, I will endeavour to try to convey something of what I saw and the thoughts and feelings that came with it.

It is a city of immediate impact.....

Stepping from the plane, the smell and taste of the permanent haze of smog and dirt filled nose and mouth.

Buildings that, in another era, had signified colonialism at its finest were crumbling and in dis-repair; telegraph poles sagged with the weight of tens of wires draping in all directions and all looking distinctly unsafe!

To western eyes the roads appeared to be total carnage – a constant game of mechanical jousting as vehicles rushed at each other only to turn at the last moment and avoid collision with milliseconds and millimetres to spare. All manner of transport competed for road space – man and his rickshaw alongside battered buses and hundreds of motorbikes weaving their way through the smallest of gaps. There were no traffic rules it seemed, except to keep hand permanently on the horn and



squeeze into any gap, anywhere, at any time!

Vibrant colour was provided from the women's saris and a multitude of food stalls set on the pavements.

The school belonged to a different world and although I have seen slums and shanty towns in China, Mexico and Kenya I had not been part of them as I was in Kolkata, albeit for a moment in time. It was an overwhelming experience in terms of taking in the whole environment through all five senses. Abject poverty was obviously paramount everywhere I turned. Living spaces that resembled little more than mud patches, were surrounded by torn and tattered fabric pieces secured roughly to sticks that provided little or no privacy.

EMBRACE DIVERSITY
EMBRACE CULTURES!

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Belongings were laid on the ground in bundles or 'stored' in any manner of containers

Cooking facilities were moulded out of mud, a dish shaped mound over a hole in which to put the firewood. Hygiene was non-existent and that was confirmed by talking to a doctor who treated the children continually for water related diseases such as dysentery and malaria and also malnutrition. The drone of traffic travelling all around and above us was incessant along with traffic fumes.



The 'classroom' had no roof and only a couple of 'walls' where artwork could be displayed. The 35-40 children aged from about three to thirteen/fourteen years sat in rows on a mat with little room to shuffle let alone stretch out. A wooden door for a bed, raised on bricks, and covered with another mat reminded us that this was a home, borrowed daily from an enlightened lady who recognised the importance of education to these children. In fact, she was there every day watching and even joining in when she thought an activity we were teaching looked particularly exciting!

However, despite all of the hardships the children endured they greeted us each time with the brightest of smiles and genuine warmth. They were so proud of what they had been taught and were desperate to gain our approval and praise. When we were showing them activities, their gaze or attention never wavered from us. They didn't want to miss a thing! Many of the pupils were extremely bright and we could only wonder what they could achieve given a school like South Darley especially



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when we knew these same youngsters were begging in the afternoon or scavenged for bottle tops to try to sell.

They were engaging kids, who like most anywhere, responded to love and praise. Like our children, the older ones looked after and protected the younger ones, making sure they were included in everything.

One purpose of this article is to relate

how proud Jennie and I were to sustain and develop the link between the two schools; it was an easy progression to think of those children in front of us in India as part of our special South Darley family. The positive relationship that Jennie had forged last year with Hastings was very evident in their joy when seeing her again, and we both feel that bond has been re-established and developed further with our second visit.



The children in both schools can see tangible evidence, through everyone's participation and commitment, that this project is taken seriously and with purpose.

The word 'everyone' is used deliberately as children, staff, governors, parents, church and the wider community have given generously, impacting positively on the education of these children.



Particular thanks go to all those who have donated rucksacks, books, blankets and squares, money and equipment and we can truly say that it has and will continue to make a huge difference to the lives of hundreds of children in Hastings and across other slum schools. We hope that Hastings school will be prominent in our thoughts throughout the year and it is our intention, with Mr Wilde's support, to focus on fund raising for them whenever possible.

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The Kolkata Cathedral Relief Service, responsible for implementing the education, women's empowerment and health programmes are hoping to find a building of some kind to house the school and it is South Darley's aim to create a fund ready to help furnish/equip the structure when needed, to provide a fun learning environment. If you feel at any time you are able to contribute in any way, there is a community in Hastings Kolkata who would be eternally grateful.

There was a persistent feeling of being totally overwhelmed with the scale of problems and suffering; several times I pondered on 'what was the point', 'what good were we doing' if any, we were just a drop in the ocean.

Rigg, the man in charge of the Relief Service, explained that a focus on what they could do was the only way forward and to assist even one family was a help, a sentiment echoed by Saint Mother Teresa:

'If you can't feed a hundred people then feed just one'

So, to summarise in a few words, if I can, – it was fulfilling, shocking, memorable, humbling and I'm so glad I had the opportunity to go.

Mrs M (Mrs Maynard)
Governor, South Darley CE Primary School

