



## *An Indian education: challenging my norms.*

**My first Indian school was a six-story affair, built around a small quadrangle, catering for kids from kindergarten through to mid-teens. Eight classrooms on five floors: forty in all! I'd worked with Australian schools for many years, most sprawled over large grounds, thus high-rise education was for me a novel concept.**



Another norm to be shattered, was that this school, like many in Mumbai, (then Bombay) operated a 'Shift System', to cater for the dense population. This meant primary before lunch, secondary after. So I watched on incredulously, as a multitude of small kids, splendidly attired in uniform, filed down the stairs, while their taller counterparts waited in orderly lines to stream upwards for the afternoon session.

After visiting my designated class, I was graciously invited to dine with Dr Aranha, the school's no-nonsense director. Thus on-the-dot at eight the next evening, I emerged from an auto-rickshaw outside the good doctor's conspicuously up-market compound, wearing open-necked sleeveless shirt and sandals, and feeling decidedly down-market.

Her white-marble apartment was immaculate, and the delectable spread of foods, served by an appropriately turbaned house boy, even more so. She presided over dinner like a queen, and though well past the half-century, not one of her jet-black hairs fell out of place, as they tumbled down over her pristine white saree.

Another occasion to amplify cultural difference saw me in front of fifty or sixty children, in a fourth-story, open-air concrete bunker (commonly known as a classroom in India). The problem was sound, or more specifically my inability to cope with it; any noise inside the classroom reverberating off the bare concrete walls, floor, and ceiling, as if we were all inside a gigantic oil drum! The situation was made worse by the sound of trains, intermittent and lengthy, rolling past the wide-open windows to and from *Churchgate*, one of Mumbai's main stations, a couple of hoots along the track.

*"How often does this happen?"* I yelled to the teacher during one interruption, as I stood waiting for the noise to subside.

*"Oh, only every two or three minutes,"* She replied. *"You get used to it."*

Maybe with her falsetto voice, which could shatter glass at fifty metres, one might get used to it, but with my mellow tones it was hard to imagine surviving this cacophony of sound on a long-term basis.

A third school I recall very well taught in four languages, with each of its four floors catering for 1,000 students learning in a different medium. As you walked across the quadrangle at ground level, the decibel output from eighty *'concrete bunkers'* was something akin to being trackside at Formula 1!



As evening approached and after three or four schools during the heat of the day, I would arrive back at base totally exhausted, covered in dust and drenched in sweat, plus a hoarse throat to boot (thus requiring several cold beers to remedy the situation).

The heat, the humidity, the noise: all came together as an unbridled challenge. But I loved the work immensely! The kids in both countries made it all worthwhile: whether inside a massive soundbox in Mumbai, or a magnificently sound-padded showpiece in Melbourne, they were essentially all the same!

*Duncan Gregory*

[www.whittlingourniche.com](http://www.whittlingourniche.com)