



Reaching out to Asia

“Scrap all aid! ... Developing countries would be much better off without it.” I looked on from the back as this tall bespectacled, somewhat pear-shaped man, spoke out with such conviction, aided himself by a tri-coloured overhead transparency (This was before the days of PowerPoint). Large red arrows denoted money coming from Africa; smaller blue ones, going towards it: right in some ways, but far too simplistic.

It wasn't the first time I had heard this line. We were in the late 80s, with industrial nations attempting to cool cold-war tensions, while poor-country debt spiralled out of control: two man-made disasters moving in opposite directions; one towards a fix, the other away from it. The debt problem was created when OPEC – the Middle East based oil-rich cartel – sponsored cheap loans to the Third World; loans which turned expensive when interest rates went into orbit.

A more accurate take from the pear-shaped guy would have been: *“scrap the debt and they won't need aid;”* a slightly different, but still attention-grabbing call. Beneath the headline I knew the situation was much more complex than that, involving multilateral

support, trade and tariffs, rampant corruption, offshore accounts for wealthy politicians, and a host of other complicating factors. Debt versus aid was not the whole story.

Looking back, I remember milestones on the road which led me to the point where I was able to speak with confidence and assurity about such thorny, aid-related issues. I was a late starter, my path to enlightenment – to use a well-known phrase – beginning when I came face-to-face with striking cases of injustice and downright bigotry in Australia. Then, I began to question my own well-grounded, but somewhat blinkered way of thinking. Nurture had constructed what it judged to be a preferred world around my being, but the free-thinking nature in the inner me was not fooled, eventually breaking through to say: *“People or places which uphold ‘the haves’, while trampling on ‘the have-nots’, is not for you young George. Reject it!”*.

I began to develop a sense that all people were equal until proven otherwise. In terms of the situation I knew at first hand in Australia, it was my belief that the ongoing domination of a comparatively small population, by a white caucus - over their vast adopted lands *and* the indigenous peoples they had stolen it from – could not be justified, when in nearby Asia, hundreds of millions lived in abject poverty. Captain Cook had usurped Terra Australis 200 years before; corralled it for the *lucky* few, which in my book was unfair and immoral. For people who believe in survival of the fittest, the British Empire and the slave trade, it was fine. To me it was totally unjust!

I recall from the early days of my *re-alignment*, when a critical piece of the jigsaw fell into place. I sat listening to a presentation from a government expert, whom I knew quite well. His address related to the South Australian agricultural assistance programme in Libya. Halfway through the talk I was astounded to see the order in which the speaker had listed the benefits:

1. Benefits to South Australia
2. Benefits to the S.A. Agriculture Department
3. Benefits to Libya
4. Benefits to the Libyan people

I looked again. Did my eyes deceive me? Surely, the points were in the wrong order. But no! The speaker spoke to the bullet-points, and even re-iterated the order they were in. “Amazing,” I said to myself, “*That someone can stand up and say they are running a programme to assist a developing country, but that the main benefits should flow to the rich, predominantly white donor nation.*”

This was a crucial step on my re-education pathway, which underlined the fact that I had a lot to learn about the way *The North* (or so-called developed part of the world) related to *The South* (the large undeveloped bit). At that juncture I was embarrassingly naïve. White people and white nations have always considered benefits to themselves before others. History shows this as a given.

In short, I became interested in *Third World* development issues after becoming disillusioned by the world I lived in: the so-called *First World*. This was prompted by a string of – what I found to be – distasteful incidents within my final job in the globalized corporate world, occurring during my early thirties, and hitting home to a conscience that was rapidly developing a sense of empathy for others. The final straw came when surrounded by a bunch of male colleagues, all high on booze, and listening to them describing Australian Aboriginals as abos and *boongs* and Asians as slant eyed wogs! It was then that I said to myself: “*I am better than this. I am not a redneck and I don’t want any part of this white macho charade.*” The next day I sat down to construct my resignation letter.

But having thus rejected the conventional highway, the alternative side-track I pre-selected was rocky at first: less money, less security, and in part, the cause of my early marriage ending up in the ditch. This was in some ways balanced by a raft of positives: a second degree; a mini-thesis on development in India; joint authorship of a geography textbook ... and a new job in a vibrant field, that mirrored my more lucid thinking.

In the beginning, I chose not to work directly in the overseas aid business, but rather to join an aligned field known as *Global Education*. The reasons for this circled back to the *no more aid* pronouncement in the opening paragraph; I wanted to channel my energies

into helping to change the mindset of white people in *The North*, in order to benefit coloured folk of *The South*. My studies had enabled me to understand that changing the thinking of people like *me* – people growing up wearing the blinkers of a white privileged world - was the more important part of the equation.

Though nobody was game to openly admit it, *Global Education* tended to lean left in its politics, reflecting my own views, which had undergone radical change through the 70s and 80s and on into the 90s: from Fraser to Hawke in Australia, and Thatcher to Blair in Britain. With this transformation almost complete, I travelled to India. I was there for a relatively short time – just six weeks - but it was long enough to change my life. After that first study visit, I immediately wanted to return to the same stage: to learn more about Asian peoples, their customs, and their cultures. And it wasn't too long before I conjured up a new way to do just that.

The vehicle that enabled my second foray into South Asia, this time for real work - not just for study or leisure - was a publication I was putting together for schools in Australia. As well as possessing an avid concern for development issues, I also owned an inbuilt artistic bent, which encompassed a host of different sub-sets such as: writing, sketching, photography and graphic design. All this came together in the form of a full-colour magazine for schools, which I conceived and designed.

Kids Contact targeted 7-to-11-year-olds – judged by many as the most important stage of our formative years – with a focus on local development issues, sometimes with overseas connections. Thus, a four-page piece on actions by school children to curb pollution of the River Murray, or a cartoon-style centre-spread of twin sisters smuggled out of war-torn Eritrea and ending up in Melbourne, were the kind of articles the magazine carried; the aim being to educate and influence its target readership: alert and free-thinking, young Australian minds.

But I was keen to make it even more real, so moved towards introducing direct connections to schools and children in developing countries. This was in fact the very start of a method I continued to use over the years, of influencing minds here at home,

by bringing real, living examples and perspectives from other cultures, into their mindset. The initial idea was put to the test soon after it was devised, with support from two quite diverse directions: firstly, the magazine was advertised internationally, via the United Nations, and secondly, a group of educators from Bombay visiting Adelaide, became interested in my work and invited me to extend the dialogue to India.

The response from schools to the UN publicity was enormous; it came from all over the globe, including South and Central America, Africa and Asia, but the feedback was especially strong from South Asia. Meeting the delegation from India, then confirmed the Indian sub-continent as the focus for the magazine. The fact that I had spent time there, some three years before, added to the case.

A month or so after meeting the group from Bombay, I set off for India, with the idea in mind to visit schools in various parts of the country, thus to generate input for the magazine from Indian children in the classroom setting, much the same as I was already doing in Australia. Little did I realise that this initial journey would lay foundations for a work involvement with India, spanning the next thirty years, and out of that would come life-long friendships with a number of Mumbai-based educators.

My first Indian school – *St. John's, Goregaon* - was a six-storey high-rise affair, built around a small quadrangle, which catered for kids from kindergarten through to mid-teens. To help cater for the crush of children in the surrounding area, it operated what Indians termed a *shift system*, meaning primary in the morning, secondary in the afternoon. I remember on my first visit, watching rather incredulously as a multitude of small kids, splendidly attired in brown and khaki, filed down the stairs for lunch, while their taller counterparts, waited in orderly lines at ground level, to stream upwards for the afternoon session.

Thrown in at the deep end, I was invited to have dinner at home, with Dr Arana, the somewhat fearsome Director and Principal of St Johns. Thus a few evenings later, climbing out of an auto rickshaw outside the gates of her conspicuously up-market compound, I felt suitably down-market wearing an open-necked sleeveless shirt and

sandals. Her newly appointed white-marble apartment was immaculate, and the delectable spread of Indian foods, served in gleaming stainless steel and white porcelain dishes, by her appropriately-turbaned house boy, even more so. She presided over the event like a Queen, and though well past the half-century on her Indian Earth, not one of those jet-black hairs fell out of place, as they tumbled down over her pristine white saree: the advantages of being young at heart ... and having hair dye to hand!

On another occasion during that first schools-oriented visit, I recall standing in front of fifty or sixty children, in a fourth-storey, open-air concrete bunker (commonly known as a classroom in India). The main problem was sound, or my inability to cope with it. Any noise inside the classroom reverberated off the bare concrete walls, concrete floor and concrete ceiling, as if the kids and I were inside a gigantic oil drum! In this particular case, it was all made much worse by the sound of trains, intermittent and lengthy, as they passed by the wide-open windows, into and out of *Churchgate*, one of Central Bombay's main stations, just a couple of hoots and whistles along the track.

"How often does this happen?" I yelled to the teacher sitting alongside, after the third or fourth interruption, as I waited for the noise to subside.

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

Maybe with her voice, that could shatter glass at fifty metres, one would get used to it, but with my low-level baritone, it was hard to imagine ever being able to cope with this cacophony of sound on a long-term basis.

As evening approached and after three or four schools, I would usually arrive back at base totally exhausted, drenched in sweat and with a hoarse throat, thus requiring several cold beers to remedy the situation. The heat, the humidity, the noise: all came together as an unbridled and unmitigated challenge, on a daily basis. But I loved it! The kids especially, made it all worthwhile. Kids were almost always the same, whether in a concrete bunker in Bombay or a magnificently sound-padded showpiece in Melbourne. But I did begin to think that life for Australian teachers was perhaps a little easier than for their Asian counterparts. Aussie teachers I'm sure, would contest that point, bringing

into contention their mountains of paperwork and unruly kids: a classic case of contrasting perspectives ... and a vital part of what my job was all about.

This work at the coalface with schools, began in Mumbai - or Bombay as it was called in those days - and extended to Bangalore in the South. It then grew over a five-year period, changing from those early connections for the *Kids Contact* magazine, to a much broader initiative named *Global Links for Schools*, which by the end of its time had coupled up and coordinated over 100 Australia to India school connections.

As part of my job, I visited all the schools at either end at least once, going to many of those most accessible much more than that. It was hard work in the heat, first of all finding the place, then going through the formalities of meeting the school heads, often followed by a welcoming ceremony, which could amount to anything from the standard Hindu ritual of perfumed flames, flower garlands and red bindi daubed on my forehead, through to a full-blown song and dance concert, for and from the whole school.

I always tried to down-play the ceremonial bent that seemed to be a part of Indian school life, and by the second or third visit, most schools would pick this up, ushering me straight through to the classroom; but on the first visit it was almost impossible to avoid the over-the-top intro. Sometimes I got the feeling that my presence provided a practice run for welcoming some more important – and probably governmental - dignitary in the future, but maybe that's being a bit disrespectful of their efforts for me. More realistically and more often, what I felt happening was an expectation that this visitor from across the seas would come bearing gifts, so with some schools one of the major hurdles to overcome was to have them understand that it was purely an exercise in education and empathy; nothing to do with monetary assistance. Most schools ran with this idea; some fell by the wayside. The smarter school principals of course, could see there were distinct advantages for their school, more important than money, or material gain.

In addition to Bombay and Bangalore, I expanded *Global Links* to include a wide variety of schools, across the four states of southern India. This included the major city of

Madras (later re-badged Chennai), Ootacomund (the tea growing hill station, commonly known as *Ooty* in the Nigiri Hills), as well as rural areas Andhra Pradesh. The initial visit to *Ooty* was suggested by an Indian gentleman, sporting a rather large, black and bushy wing commander-style moustache (along with a similarly expansive midriff), who I happened to meet on a train journey from Bangalore to Madras. I accepted the invite and made a point of visiting *Ooty* later that same year. All the places in the South were new to me, so it was a fast learning-curve in the tropics, that provided a host of memorable experiences.

I recall one noteworthy encounter on arrival from Bangalore, at the train stop for the small market town of Tirripatur, some fifteen kilometres to the north. Standing on the deserted platform and wondering what to do next, I chatted with three boys dressed in rags, as they searched for disused plastic cups, to be recycled as containers for chai. Their gesticulations seemed to say I would find ongoing transport beyond the station gates. And they were right. Outside the station I spotted a very old and battered, cream-coloured *Ambassador* saloon car - the re-badged 1950s *Morris Oxford*, as it was known in England, which became the ubiquitous taxi in India - and threw myself and bag into the back. From where I sat, I could hardly see the driver and his co-driver over the high-backed bench seat; both boys looked to be about 10 or 11 years old, but the one driving seemed competent enough, and the conversation, in broken English, was jovial; so *hakuna matata*, as long as they were able to get me to my destination in one piece, that was good enough for me.

In Tirripatur, I was escorted to schools and shown the town by Sandeep, a small mustachioed middle-aged man, with a characterful craggy face, who seem to know anyone and everyone we happened to come across. On one occasion whilst walking near the centre of town, I spotted a dhoti-clad, Gandhian look-alike, sitting yoga style in front of a mound of stones. "*What is he doing?*" I asked inquisitively. Sandeep's English was at most times fascinating, but usually he managed to get his point across. "*He can see future. You like him meet?*" he replied.

I was intrigued. “OK,” I said. “*Why not?*” So with that, we both sat down in front of the elderly sooth-sayer, who - after a few questions to Sandeep and replies from me translated back to him - proceeded to select stones from his small pile and throw them in various directions: some big, some small; some near, some far. At the end of this miniature bowling game, he started to provide snippets of my past, along with predictions for my future. This was done partly through translation via Sandeep, but also with a variety of elaborate hand gestures.

Looking back, he said some things which were quite astounding. He knew my age for example, and could tell me where I came from, plus some important events from my past. But more than that, the Gandhian guru made predictions for my future, which seemed somewhat far-fetched at the time: that I would live in Africa with a dark lady, and have another child, and so forth. There, on the spot, I put most of what he said into the wild fantasy basket, but in hindsight it is quite astonishing that everything the fortune teller said, that day on the grass verge in the small market town of Tirripatur, did actually come to pass, over the next 25 years!

On a subsequent visit to South India, my intention was to ride the famous funicular train up to Ooty, but found it suspended due to heavy rains and landslides. So I went by bus, which skirted around fallen boulders on the way, making me wonder if any more were due at any moment, to plummet down the hillside onto the road ... or, even worse, onto the bus! On reaching the top of the hill, the cool crisp air was a welcome reprieve from the sticky heat on the plains down below. Tea-growing regions the world over have a unique crispness about them, which I found to be also very much a part of Ooty. Late in the day, I checked into the splendid Maharaja’s Palace Hotel – intriguingly the birthplace of snooker - and towards bedtime a log fire was lit by turbaned attendants, in my rather tattered but palatial suite, to ward off the cold night air. I learned the place was soon to be taken over by *The Taj* hotel empire, and could imagine its uniqueness being consumed by the *Taj* brand. I was lucky to have been able to stay in this historical wonder, before its original splendour was destroyed, never to return.

Perhaps the most memorable welcoming ceremony came near the Eastern seaboard, when I first went to St. Joseph's Girls High School, located on the outskirts of Nellore, a provincial town in Andhra Pradesh, one of the poorest of Indian states. After touring the school, I was ushered to an outdoor auditorium and to my seat – front and centre of a tented podium - alongside the head nun and principal. After the usual greetings, I turned to watch as 4,000 girls in a brilliant array of cultural colour (it was a Friday, their non-uniform day) stood to sing *Jana Gana Mana*, India's National Anthem. I had heard the anthem many times before - and it is indeed quite a stirring song - but it has never before or since, moved me quite as much as it did on that day. A lump appeared from nowhere in my throat and the hairs stood in unison on the back of my neck. It was, to cut a long story short, an astounding experience, and perhaps the number one memory that tops a long list of my Indian favourites.

After their soprano voices had sailed to the heights of the anthem, the girls then put on an unrivalled concert of song, dance and dialogue, taken from their local culture, and delivered in the *Telegu* language. Towards the end, the head girl came forward, dressed as a bearded freedom fighter in an orange jumpsuit, to confront me: the wicked colonial ruler. Her delivery was so forceful and direct that I almost cringed with shame. After it was over, I turned to the principal, to ask: "*Who is that girl?*".

"*Oh, that is Jaya,*" she responded nonchalantly (but I had a feeling my query was telegraphed well in advance). "*Would you like to meet her?*"

And so I met the young lady, *Jaya*: a brilliant young student who hailed from the *Harijan* class (previously known as *untouchables*). She took me home to meet her parents and her equally gifted siblings, then out one day to meet her grandparents, who lived in a small thatched *tent* on the outskirts of town. We became pen-pals and I visited her a few years later, in her second year of an engineering degree at Tirupati University.

So many amazing memories spring from those years working in Indian schools. I visited enormous city schools with 5,000 or more students, taught through the medium of three or four languages; then in contrast, and even perhaps on the same day, might spend

time in a small, evening literacy class, where children from the slums, or beggar kids from the streets, were introduced to the fundamentals of language and mathematics. Like India itself, the comparisons and extremes in my work with school communities, was at times almost incomprehensible.

Part-way through this period of intense involvement with schools in India, I was fortunate to be given the chance to visit neighbouring Bangladesh, for a photo-journalistic assignment that reported on development projects in Dhaka, the country capital, and outlying rural areas to the West, South and North of the country. At first, I was a bit wary; *Bangladesh the Basket Case*, and all that went with that stereotype, came to the fore in my mind. But I should have known better than to believe the derisive hype, because that month-long assignment, with a multifaceted brief, proved to be one of the most remarkable periods in my life. I rode mile after mile as pillion passenger, behind the project manager, or the project doctor, along dry and dusty levee banks, to outlying bamboo and thatch villages; then in contrast, walked through the mud of a city slum to photograph an evening literacy class, along with the poorest of homes built from waste materials. In all cases, urban and rural, there was one common denominator: the beauty of the Bangladeshi people, in particular the children, often steeped in adversity, but each and every one, none-the-less welcoming to me.

This comparatively short visit to Bangladesh was in many ways a life-changer and an eye-opener for my western mind, as it provided a host of unforgettable and first-time experiences, such as: living within a Muslim household on the banks of the Brahmaputra, staying in a Hindu community on one of the delta islands, ferrying across the vast expanse of the Padma River and a death-defying bus-ride, on a bullet-straight road, to the West of the country. Even very simple things such as eating everyday with fingers, rather than knife, fork and spoon, seemed to have an almost liberating effect: the food tasted better and there was less washing-up as a bonus!

After *Global Links* across southern India and photo-journalism in Bangladesh, there was a lull for me in this type of work, as I diverted to the task of *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (known as *TEFL* in the trade), with work happening in Australia,

Singapore and the UK. I had driven myself to a frazzle with development project work and wanted a break. It was an all-consuming sort of existence, whereas *TEFL* seemed to offer an easier alternative: prepare for a class, give a class, then mark the results and wait for the next week when those same students come back again. *TEFL* is more of a day job, where you can separate yourself from the coal-face, unlike anything to do with development work, which seems to be with you day and night, 24/7.

The beauty of language teaching was the classroom itself. It was fantastic to see students progress from one level to the next ... and very rewarding, when at the end of it all, they would (in their most practiced English) thank you profusely for just doing your job: guiding them through to success. For me, it was such an incredibly stimulating job - contrasting locations, high-spirited classroom sessions and students from an array of wonderfully diverse cultures - that I began to think it was to be my path from that point on, for the remainder of my working life.

However, that was not to be. There is something about the development sector which is hard to pull away from; something that remains down there in the depths of one's being, almost impossible to get rid of. And it wasn't until I moved back to the UK towards the end of the millennium, and happened to meet up with a handful of people from a small development organization in Cheltenham, that it all came gushing back to the fore. Language teaching started to take a back seat, becoming confined to summer schools with Japanese students, as my work in the development sector began to regain the momentum I had known in the past. This resurgence of the *Global Education* work I had been introduced to more than a decade before in Australia, took me back once again to old friends in India, but now including new connections with the East African region.

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