

Incredible India

Lenses on Linking Latitudes Conference 2007

*A report by
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When one lives with concepts one never learns. The concepts become static. You may change them but the very transformation of one concept to another is still static, is still fixed. But to have the sensitivity to feel, seeing that life is not a movement of two separate activities, the external and the inward, to see that it is one, to realize that the inter-relationship is this movement, is this ebb and flow of sorrow and pleasure and joy and depression, loneliness and escape, to perceive nonverbally this life as a whole, not fragmented, nor broken up, is to learn.

Krishnamurti

Background

Thanks to the Asia Education Foundation (Australia), the Asia New Zealand Foundation, and the New Zealand Ministry of Education, I was a fortunate recipient of a study award to attend **Linking Latitudes 2007 – Delhi and Agra, India. Asia Education Foundation (Australia) and Asia NZ's fourth international conference and fieldwork programme, Sunday 30 September – Thursday 4 October 2007.**

My hope? To *learn* about India and its peoples.



The aims of the conference were for delegates to:

- Increase knowledge and understanding of India
- Use the experience to develop curriculum on India and its place in a global context
- Support the development and implementation of education policy on internationalising the curriculum

- Expand education networks nationally and internationally.



Prior to the conference delegates were able to communicate online through an e-group. This connectivity allowed us to share previous experiences of India for those who had already traveled there, to suggest readings and contribute ideas, and most of all to prepare ourselves for what was to be a true stimulation of our senses.

After the conference, the e-group continued allowing delegates to reflect on their experiences and to develop strategies to support the internationalisation of the curriculum, with a particular lens on India.

Making sense of India first-hand.... eye, nose, ear, palate, skin, foot, mind.....heart.

Sunrise – Awakening



My prior experience of India has consisted of a passion for Indian classical music and dance, for artisan products particularly the wonderfully colourful saris, fabrics, rangoli, and jewellery, a somewhat bemused fascination with Bollywood movies, and a yearning to touch and view arguably the most beautiful building in the world – the Taj Mahal.

We have two Indian restaurants in Sumner, our small village seaside village on Banks Peninsula, and Vanta the manageress knows us well at her regional chain restaurant *Indian Sumner* – our regular dine in and take-away which is reputedly one of the best Indian restaurants outside of Mumbai. My own home cooking includes many uniquely Indian dishes such as Shahi Gosht and Falooda, and the pantry is stocked with produce from Moshim's Indian Supermarket. Surely this would put me in good stead for visiting the source of these treasures – the one and only India!

There is not one India. There are multiple Indias. India has many layers of complexity – there is a multiplicity of cultures, of strata, of economies. There is no one view of India. Do not view India from the IT heroic narrative – India, the West’s “poster boy” for the global economy - but use a larger canvas for the process of engagement. (Mr P Sainath, Times of India, Keynote speaker, day 1)

As my introduction to India, this proclamation set the scene for the challenge that was to lie ahead. This critical, yet kaleidoscopic lens proved the best refractive tool for me throughout my first-hand experiences in India, grappling with extremes I had never yet encountered in my life. My world-view was to change. My passive, safe-haven perspectives of the so-called “third” world were to be challenged. In a few days I had shifted my lens from the most basic ponderings - how do I pack the right “first world” essentials to cope with what I assumed India would subject me to, to how can a country have such incredible contradictions? How can the inequities of wealth and poverty (India ranking 126th in the world for human development) be resolved? How can the nearly 80% of farming households in debt (the agrarian families constituting 60% of the overall population and where 836 million people live on less than 20 rupees - around 50 US cents - a day) be supported so that suicide rates lower and access to education drastically improves? How can India (who rank 2nd in the world to the United States of America according to net asset wealth of billionaires and 4th in the world behind the US, Germany and Russia in the total number of billionaires) distribute economic gains being made in an almost 10% economic growth rate when the “trickle down” is not happening and when international interests in India’s economy are rapidly growing, and tragically not for the benefit of the impoverished? How can the fastest growing thing in India – inequality - be dealt with when a Coalition government is pressured by ideological groups not to instigate change when change threatens embedded cultural, caste, gender and religious practices? How can a country of such artistic talents, historical and religious uniqueness, and beautiful people be interpreted by an untrained western eye? And, in a typically egocentric way, back to me, an educator from tiny, young New Zealand – what can I do to support diverse educational understandings of India and its peoples, and how can I make a difference to the wider global realities that face not only India, but all of the world’s peoples?

India clearly has a large population issue with indicators showing that its population will exceed that of China over the next 20 – 30 years. An outcome of this could see India extending its economic might and improving life for the poor (although there would need to be major changes in funding for health and education to deal with the population explosion that is taking place). However, there will also need to be vastly increased work and education opportunities particularly so that rural communities are able to cope with the inevitable shift to

urbanisation, or in rural areas where large international companies are viewing India for corporate agricultural production thus the likely disenfranchisement of rural landowners and workers. While India's top 10% of the rural population are booming, the bottom 40% are 'experiencing levels of poverty never dreamed of. The situation is worse than Ethiopia'. (Sainath) In addition, it is predicted that it will take 30 years for India's demographics to achieve a vital improvement in the balance of those working to those who are not. The rest of Asia is set to achieve a 2/1 ratio of workers to non-workers within the next 10 years. India falls well behind this target.



The situation for women in India is very different than for men. Women have no cultural right to land yet do most of the manual labour. Some states have begun to allow women's names on land titles but this is not widespread practice. Women's work is not acknowledged as skill so they often will not be paid for the work they do. Young girls are particularly subject to inequality while infanticide of baby girls is still taking place in some areas. Caste plays a particular role in this inequality in a diverse nation where social and cultural bases automatically afford certain privileges. Belonging to a privileged caste/group allows that group certain rites of passage – it becomes the basis for behaviour towards other “lesser” castes.

Another of India's major problems is the environment. Litter in cities is largely left on roadsides. Recycling is yet to be developed. Animals and people live amongst the litter and drink untreated, polluted water. In the worst cases, toxic waste is left unattended. On a larger scale, water is said to be irrationally used, for example, the building of fun aqua parks in drought areas, or the excessive use of water by soft drink companies in areas where farmers rely on that water for their livelihood. Rivers are being privatized for example by mining companies, and, as communities continue to gravitate to rivers for day-to-day survival, human and industrial waste is polluting rivers to toxic levels. Sainath summed up the mentality behind such potentially lethal industrialisation as "we can, we have the technology for it." Sustainability would not seem to be a popular topic in the media or on the political agenda for India.



Education in India

You must learn how to be lucid in all your actions; that is, you must not only be aware of the time, the place, and the circumstances in which the action takes place, but also of yourself, the player, of your body and what is happening at any moment. It is not only a question of seeing things as they are, but of seeing yourself at the same time, and the reactions that take place within you. In other words, you absorb the whole thing within you and you become complete.

Svami Prajnanpad



With regard to education, there are considerable challenges facing the diverse range of formal and non-formal educational settings that are developing in India. There are 2.1 million educational institutions in India for a population of over 1 billion while there are 2.4 religious places of worship. Non-government schools, notably in large cities such as Delhi, now advertise on the internet and have their own websites. These private schools own the land on which they are built and receive millions of rupees in subsidies while government schools are poorly resourced and struggle to retain students and staff. Alcoholism and absenteeism in the teaching profession in government schools are significant indicators of teacher stress. Teachers in non-government schools receive considerably higher wages, although class sizes are 1/50 in both systems. Such 'dual realities' - where a percentage of India is now eating better, receiving quality education and accessing

the available pool of jobs, while the poorest are dying of hunger and millions of children never see the inside of a classroom – typify the spectacular extremes facing India today.

Field Trip Note

One of the most beneficial meetings experienced by the New Zealand contingent of Linking Latitudes 2007, was an afternoon tea at the house of Perya Short and her family, as well as the New Zealand High Commissioner and his wife. Perya is a New Zealander working with the New Zealand High Commission in Delhi under the auspices of the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Perya not only treated us to a delicious afternoon tea prepared by her excellent chef, but shared important information about education in India through a Powerpoint presentation.



The following key findings from her work to date were discussed:

- India's national literacy statistics identify 64.8% of the population as literate, with 75.3% of that percentage being male and 53.7% female
- There are large variations between the states in terms of educational opportunities and outcomes
- There are 189.2 million school-age children. 40% drop out at year 8 even though schooling is compulsory from ages 6 - 16

- India currently has 369 universities and is in dire need of more with half of India's population being under 25 years of age. 1500 new universities are needed now, and an estimated 3000 in 5 years time
- Around 10 million students graduate each year from year 12, but only 7% of those graduates access tertiary education
- Early Childhood education receives no government funding and only 40% of the population can access education for young children. There is a growing number of private providers
- Teachers are not required to have a degree to teach pre-primary, while a Bachelors degree and Teacher's Certificate are required for teaching in the compulsory sector
- Teachers are poorly paid in the state schools eg. Primary teachers currently earn NZ\$300 per month, secondary teachers NZ\$400 per month, while a junior lecturer would receive around NZ\$450 per month
- There is a variety of school types – boys schools, girls schools, and, in larger cities, many private schools which are well funded and where teachers are paid considerably more than in the state counterparts. Many of these private schools have international linkage programmes
- Government schools class sizes are usually 50 students per teacher and private schools have big roles and waiting lists
- There is no Teacher Registration structure in India. Where teachers are underperforming, they are simply moved to another school. Absenteeism and alcoholism are high in government schools
- 150,000 schools are needed now, and 300,000 more teachers are needed by 2012
- The national curriculum is centrally designed and organised as are examinations
- Teaching pedagogy relies on rote teaching for persistent, ongoing testing of students. The pressure to succeed in examinations is immense with an average pass expected of 92% for a student to access tertiary education
- Non formal and after-school education programmes for the poor are increasingly being provided in many regions. The development of such programmes is a clearly a positive initiative. New opportunities are being created, notably using the IT that India has become famous for developing.



Example of an Education Initiative

Intel® Education Initiative - This is a story about the importance of the Intel Teach Program in India and one where the arts and IT played critical roles in its success.

http://www.intel.com/education/index.htm?iid=about_intel+rhc_edu

Intel Prepares Millions of Teachers for 21st Century Challenges. Dr. Craig Barrett, Intel Chairman of the Board, commits major Intel resources to teaching and equipping teachers to use technology effectively.

Intel students' education projects are, according to the website success stories, helping break the poverty cycle, and reduce school dropouts.

'Demanding physical labor and low wages are the all-but-certain future of children who drop out of school in the agrarian village of Karakottai, India. In this rural community, roughly 90 percent of the population works as farm labourers in the surrounding paddies and fields. Because many of the families in Karakottai struggle economically, they often kept their children out of school—or forced them to drop out—so that they could work in the fields alongside their parents to earn money for the family. When B. Magdalene Premalatha, a teacher at Panchayat Union Middle School in Karakottai, became involved in the Intel Teach Program, it was with the vision of expanding future opportunities for her students. One of the key elements of Intel Teach is a project-based learning approach— that is, integrating learning into projects that make the work relevant and more meaningful for students. Premalatha says her pupils were motivated by the process and, as a result, their skill set rapidly grew. Before long, the teacher reports, they voluntarily gave up playtime to engage in schoolwork, particularly when a project involved using technology in the school's computer lab. The students were further inspired when they had the opportunity to take on a social science project focusing on child labour, the issue so central to their own community. Premalatha and the school principal had tried repeatedly to persuade the parents and members of the village council to allow these children to return to school. Unfortunately, few listened. The problem continued to exist. But that all changed when Premalatha's students took the issue into their own hands and made it their mission to make a difference in their community. They started by conducting research on child labour via the Internet, says Premalatha, and discovered a wealth of information, including that "the reasons for child labour were poverty and a lack of awareness." As a result, the students used their new skills to create an awareness campaign. They developed public presentations, including dramatic plays and songs expressing "the condition, emotion, and unfulfilled dreams of child labourers," reports the teacher. They conducted public rallies where they carried educational placards they'd made using presentation and word processing software, and spoke out against child labor, using slogans they had discovered during their research. Because the students knew their audience would not attend events at the school, they conducted these performances on the streets during evening hours. The students even visited the homes of the dropout children, sharing news of the computer facility at school, as well as their excitement about learning and their hopes for the future. Of course, the students faced

challenges along the way. Initially, the reception for their efforts was quite frosty, says Premalatha, who reminded them, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

Recognising the importance of their mission, the students overcame their frustrations and kept working toward their goal: a village free of child labour. At last, things began to change. “The villagers started realising the importance of education,” says Premalatha. The village council decreed that they would work toward Karakottai becoming a child-labour-free village. Parents of the dropout children realised that a shift in priorities and some sacrifices were necessary to give their children the chance for a future without poverty. And one by one, the dropout children started returning to school. Not only did Premalatha’s program make dramatic changes in Karakottai, but the story has inspired other teachers in other villages and has helped villagers see education as an investment in their and their children’s future.

The Arts in Education in India

Brahman is like the clay of substance out of which an infinite variety of articles are fashioned. As clay, they are all one; but form or manifestation differentiates them. Before every one of them was made, they all existed potentially in clay, and of course, they are identical substantially; but when formed, and as long as the form remains, they are separate and different.

Swami Vivekananda

According to India's National Curriculum Framework of 2005, The Arts are to become 'both a tool and a subject taught in every school as a compulsory subject (up to Class X), and facilities for the same may be provided in every school. All the four main streams covered by the term arts, i.e. music, dance, visual arts and theatre, should be included. Awareness also needs to be built among parents and guardians, school authorities and administrators regarding the importance of the arts. Emphasis should be given to learning rather than teaching, and the approach should be participatory, interactive, and experiential rather than instructive.' (National Curriculum Framework, 2005, page 55)

The Arts in the curriculum has been 'repeatedly debated, discussed and recommended, but without much progress in this direction.' (ibid.) The need to integrate arts education in the formal schooling of Indian students is now said to require urgent attention if India is to retain its unique cultural identity in all its diversity and richness.





‘Schools and school authorities encourage the arts of a superficial and popular nature and take pride in putting up events that showcase song and dance performances and plays that may entertain, but have little aesthetic quality. We can no longer afford to ignore the importance of the arts and must concentrate all possible energies and resources towards nurturing artistic capabilities and creating cultural and artistic awareness amongst the students of the vast and varied cultural inheritance we have. The arts in India are living examples of the country’s secular fabric and classical forms of music and dance, theatre, puppetry, clay work, visual arts, and crafts from every region of India. Learning any of these arts would enrich the lives of our young citizens, not only in their school years but also throughout their lives’. (ibid.) ‘It is important...that the curriculum not be biased and judgemental about high or low forms of culture, nor treat classical and folk art forms differently. It would also prepare those who wish to choose an art form for specialized study during the +2 stage, or even consider pursuing a career in the arts’. (p. 56)

This resonates with similar position papers that have been written for arts education in New Zealand over recent decades, and shares philosophical and educational principles with those articulated in New Zealand’s current curriculum documents for The Arts. In 2007, India still awaits the development of curriculum materials and teacher training programmes to enable the creation and implementation of arts education across primary and secondary sectors. Schools have little resource materials, equipment and facilities to support arts education. Key reputable tertiary institutions such as Jamia Millia Islamia provide courses in the classical music and fine arts, and include aspects in teacher training programmes.

Field Trip Note

I was fortunate to visit Jamia Millia Islamia and to briefly meet the Professor of Music and Head of the Educational Research Centre. Unfortunately there was not time to talk individually with staff or students, although we were provided with an extensive Powerpoint presentation on teacher training (which included 67 slides that were methodically read to us for the benefit of those who had their backs to the screen). Two hours later we were presented to an assembly of post-graduate students, with an opportunity for them to ask questions about tertiary training opportunities in Australia and New Zealand at the end of the formal introductions. Despite these adults being segregated – males on one side of the hall and females on the other - one brave young Muslim female, (adorned with burka), asked about pilot training courses in Australasia. No other student spoke until we finished the assembly at which point I was surrounded by students of both genders all eager to have a photo taken with me and to ask about education in New Zealand. This was a wonderful experience, although it meant I lost the Linking Latitudes group who had returned to the coach while I was being taken in the opposite direction by the students. It took me some time to extricate myself and locate the coach through the sea of enthusiastic faces surrounding me.

Community artists are deemed essential in the implementation process in India: ‘Crafts persons themselves should be teachers and trainers for craft, and ways of enabling them to serve schools on a part-time basis need to be evolved’. Similar strategies are under development in New Zealand to support schools and teachers in providing rich arts experiences. It would seem that the so-called “third” and “first” worlds face similar issues in arts education.



Music in India

The divine music is incessantly going on within ourselves, but the loud senses drown the delicate music, which is unlike and infinitely superior to anything we can perceive with our senses.

Mahatma Gandhi

Sound (*nada*) is believed to be at the heart of the process of creation. In Hindu myth, the sacred syllable *Om* embodies the essence of the universe – it is the “hum” of the atoms and the music of the spheres – and sound in general represents the primal energy that holds the material world together.



Classical Indian music is inextricably linked with religion, poetry, texts, life and nature. Music is the embodiment of the world past, present and future, and comes from and returns to the universe beyond. ‘The principles of Indian music are traditionally believed to be already present in the verses and recitation of the *Samaveda*, a collection of *samans* (chants) sung by the *udgatri* priests who officiated at the *soma* sacrifice. Because of their inclusion in the Vedic texts, musical scales, aesthetics, basic rhythms and systems of musical notation are all considered to be sacred. Therefore, the basic principles which govern rhythm, harmony and *raga* (melodic mood) are broadly common throughout the

regional traditions of Indian classical music'. (*India, The Cultural Companion*, Waterstone, 2002, p. 118).

Field Trip Note

I took the opportunity to carry out my own research so that I could experience something of the arts – the focus of my study – while in India.



This photo was taken of me trying to work out the complexities of the sitar in a music shop that was part of a large arts and crafts emporium I visited. Behind are the tabla (pair of drums, the singular drum being a dahina) and other instruments of importance such as the harmonium, and the nagasvaram horn which is heard whenever the gates of a temple are opened or closed, and when a deity is presented to the villagers.

The music of classical India is matched to a phonetic structure, forming a spoken language between instruments. It takes years to sit at the feet of masters to learn the difficult techniques of playing musical instruments such as the sitar....one session was not going to improve me nor curb my enthusiasm for further opportunities.

Bollywood

Another highlight for me, and one that supported my thirst for knowledge about the arts in India, was attending a session given by Dr Kama MacLean (an historian from Australia) on Bollywood – movies with music, dance, drama, and story-telling that are uniquely Indian and hugely popular worldwide. Of interest is the increasing New Zealand interest in Bollywood, with many of these films having been filmed and produced in New Zealand over the past decade.

There are many genres of Bollywood (e.g. The Musical, with a large number of highly popular songs; Masala – a spicy mixture of the musical, comedy, love, and action genres, from the 60 – 80s which was a reaction against western films; the ‘Angry Yong Man’ drama genre of the 70s depicting heroic young men rising up against oppressive situations;) which each concentrate on a theme of national importance. These themes have developed from the need of India’s peoples to build their own nation post colonization since 1947, when, after 150 years of British rule, the population successfully fought for independence. Since 1991 the economic liberalization experienced by India has opened it to global forces and these more market-driven themes are noticeable in the movies of the last decade. The influence of Hollywood (Bollywood of course being a play on the term Hollywood), is however limited, with India producing its own particular genres of film by its people, for its people, and therefore need to be interpreted in a completely different way to western movies.

Bollywood, The Musical, can include from 5 – 14 songs with at least one ‘item’ number. The presence or absence of songs in any of the Bollywood films informs the particular genre of the film and differentiates it from an art film. Bollywood films provide access to music for the masses. Until recent times, a separate contemporary music industry has not existed, however today, you are as likely to hear both contemporary and classical Indian music in nightclubs and music shops around the world, as any other world music. Indian music of both contemporary and classical styles is a rapidly growing industry.

Songs in Bollywood films are used as a narrative device; to display emotion; signify physical intimacy (particularly as this is not permitted visually – e.g. there is not mouth-to-mouth kissing in Bollywood films); as licence to infer culturally sensitive/controversial content; or purely as titillation. Songs therefore are the highlight of Bollywood and are eagerly anticipated and appreciated by the widest possible audience. Bollywood films are the main source of entertainment and escapism for India’s vast population who, no matter their financial situation, are able to access films even in rural communities via make-shift outdoor theatres.

The films inevitably consider the role of the individual versus society and the family, although the will of the individual is minimised as compared with similar themes in western culture. Religion in Bollywood is depicted in relation to the aim of trying to achieve a balance, for example between self-selected love and an arranged marriage. Of late, politicians are supporting Bollywood films as they realise the potential for these films to carry key messages, to affect the masses, and to work towards the goal of national integration.

Bollywood films that come highly recommended for viewing are:

- Lage Raho Munnabhai
- Lagaan
- Sri 400
- Kal Honaho
- Hey Ram!
- Gandhi, My Father
- K3G
- HAHK!

Sunset – Embracing Unity in Diversity

Amidst this chaos there is harmony, throughout these discordant sounds there is a note of concord; and he who is prepared to listen to it will catch the tone.

Swami Vivekananda

My journey was short in time, diverse in experience, yet left me with a sense of completeness. I had seen the Taj Mahal at sunrise from atop of a camel beside the Yamuna river, and touched it at sunset amidst a throng of humanity. I had studied, encircled and revered temples for their architectural glory and artistic beauty. I had connected with generous-hearted, colourful people of different castes, religions, ages and places, and visited Gandhi's memorial and museum on the anniversary of his birthday.





I had eaten the best food I had ever tasted before in my life cooked by vast numbers of male chefs at opulent Indian gala feasts, smelt exotic perfumes, viewed crafts being made by skilled artisans, and was treated to breath-taking live music and dance performances.



Incredible, wonderful India had indeed touched my heart. Chaotic, colourful India had touched my soul. The multiple Indias and the complex issues arising from a changing external world and highly populated, largely impoverished internal world, have affected my conscience. My life will be lived differently as a result of these experiences.

To end on a lighter (but not yet enlightened), more musical note:
My work now is to ‘catch the tone’ and develop more sympathetic vibrations with India back here at ‘Om’ until the next incredible visit to India!



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