

Kolkata 2018

Day 1 – Friday 19th January 2018

A long day, mostly spent sitting in a plane!

I have never been to India before and the furthest East I have ever been has been an inter-railing trip in my twenties (a long time ago!). So it came as quite a shock to the system when I spent two flights and over twelve hours in the air, flying in a south-easterly direction over some familiar but strange names – Turkey, the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Iran to name a few before the last couple of hours transiting the whole breadth of the Indian sub-continent.



Day 2 – Saturday 20th January 2018

A recovery day – learning to live five and a half hours ahead of GMT

On arrival, we spent over two hours getting through customs and getting our bags back. Once out of the airport I was amazed by the sheer business of the place and the further we got from the airport into the heart of Kolkata itself the more my senses were assaulted by what could be seen, heard and smelt (at least I am told this is the case because I have a fairly limited sense of smell!) Driving in Kolkata has been one experience that I will not forget in a hurry and I hope to video it later in the week so that you can experience some of it with me! It is true to say that crossing the road as a pedestrian is one of the scariest things that I have done in my life. Animals, bikes, pedestrians, motor bikes, cars and buses seem to move with choreographed skill driving as if in a race, horn constantly pressed and oblivious to any form of Highway code or manners. The Indian people I have met so far



have been some of the loveliest and most hospitable people that I have met but put them behind a wheel and they turn into demon drivers!

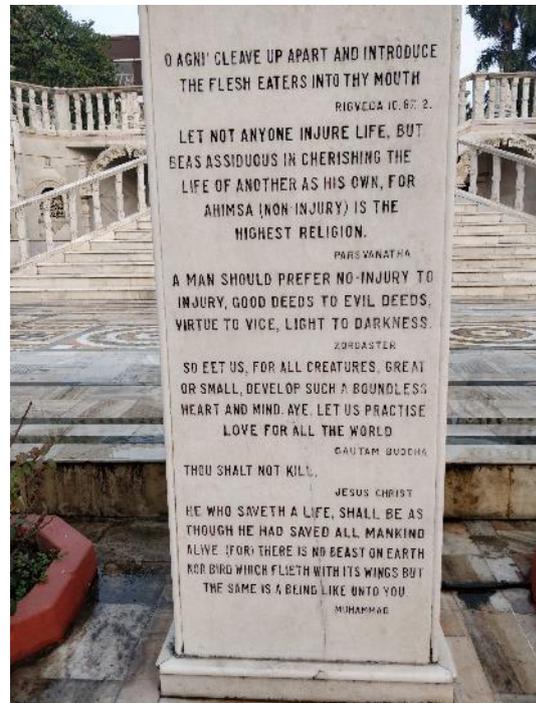
The day was mostly spent recovering from the flight and getting through to the end whilst trying to acclimatise yourself to the fact that you

have lost a complete night's sleep. I managed about two hours of sleep in 36 hours and that is simply not enough for me!

We did visit a Jain temple in the afternoon. The Jain strand of Hinduism focus on 'doing no harm' and making sure that you do not deliberately hurt anyone or anything. This is a great belief to



have and even though I am not a Hindu I really want to take this thought and try to make sure that in my life I try to make sure that I do not do anything that would deliberately hurt someone else - physically, emotionally or in any way at all. Sometimes we can do things that hurt each other but we can all try to make sure that we do not do it deliberately. It reminds me of the song popularised in the seventies – ‘Let there be peace on earth And let it begin with me.’ If we each do our part then we can set an example that others can follow.



We then finished off the day by all going out to a meal on a ninth story roof top terrace. This was a great meal but made a little exciting by the fact that when we had five people in the lift ... it did not. Two then got out and it managed to make it up two stories before stopping half way between floors. After going down a bit, we decided that the best idea was to climb the stairs!!

Sleeping after such a two days was never going to be a problem and indeed, I needed the alarm to ensure that I managed to wake up for Sunday morning and church at the cathedral.

Day 3 – Sunday 21st January 2018

A day to be a tourist The calm before the storm!

Today has been lovely and has allowed the whole group to be tourists and see some of the amazing sights that Kolkata has to offer before the work in schools starts tomorrow in earnest.

We started off by visiting the magnificent Kolkata cathedral, which we were told, was based on Canterbury cathedral back in England and certainly when compared to the other buildings



in Kolkata it stands in stark contrast. We joined a full cathedral for the regular Sunday morning service and after this, we were taken to the wonderful Victoria memorial erected in 1921 at great expense. It is a building and a park, which is admired, by tourists and local alike but it divides opinion in Kolkata. Could the money that was invested in the memorial have been better spent helping the residents or is it something that everyone can be really proud of. As with all matters that divide opinion the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. Although, I can't help but be swayed by all the really obvious and apparent poverty that surrounds you every day here. There are lots of rich people in India as well but you tend not to notice them as much as the poor who are on most street corners.



However, there is no denying that it is a truly magnificent building and for that reason alone I am pleased that it was built but that nagging thought at the back of my mind is constantly there telling me that the money could have been spent in so many other ways!

After this, we returned to the Cathedral to discover more about the work of CRS (Cathedral Relief Services) the charity that we are working closely with this week and the group who run the schools that we will be linking with. CRS have a heart to work with the poor of Kolkata and especially those who live in the many slums surrounding the city. Their mission statement has three strands: giving the children an education that can give them real life chances, empowering women to work towards supporting their families by giving them skills that they can use and healthcare so that they combat common illnesses that affect the others around them. They do an amazing job and help thousands of women and children in the slums of Kolkata and it is a privilege to go some way to support and help them this week.

In the afternoon, we were taken on a cruise along the Hoogley River, which is one of the major tributary of the river Ganges, and in fact, many of the cruises proclaimed that it was the Ganges itself. The cruise was a wonderful experience but the most challenging part for me was when we went to see another amazing temple. I asked our guide what religion had built this temple and he shocked me by saying that this building was shared as a place of worship by three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is true to say that, many of the wars across history have been started in the name of one of these religions and often against one of the others. To have these three world religions sharing and co-



operating together was a real revelation for me and I could not help thinking that just like the Jain temple the day before that we could learn some real lessons from this temple. Can we get on with people that we fundamentally disagree with and even dislike? If we could, then the potential is there to make the world a much better place to be. We could start at Scargill by being kind to one another (even those we do not get on with!) and it would make the school a brilliant place to be.



I big thought to end my first blog entry with. What else can we learn from these lovely and hospitable people?

Tomorrow promises to be a more challenging day as I go to Awami to meet the children of our partner school. I will pass on a big Scargill welcome to them and find out how schools work in the slums of Kolkata. I will try to blog again soon!