



By Annie Smith

India awakens early. In fact, it often seems as if the country never sleeps. The large and busy cities teem with taxis, motorbikes and pedestrians night and day. Wedding parties begin celebration at 4 am and end the following afternoon. Village inhabitants rise before the sun and begin caring for livestock and working in the rice paddies. The noise and activity seems endless and the sheer number of inhabitants can be overwhelming.

It sounds intriguing, but reality for 300 million Dalits (untouchables) is far from an adventure. The Dalits are slaves of their culture. They are trapped outside the caste system. Forced to perform the lowest, degrading tasks and victimized without hope of defense or protection. Even their religious community denies them entrance to their temples and access to their scriptures.

Each medical team that visits India to provide healthcare faces the challenge of crossing cultural, political and religious barriers. Here are a few excerpts from our experiences.

We began our clinics (called “Medical Camps” in India) in the slums of Calcutta. Our friends at Operation Mobilization (OM) had worked tirelessly for days to prepare the narrow alleys, clearing trash and sewage and hiring local seamstresses to sew large, bright tents with individual rooms for each medical and dental caregiver. The alley was quickly filled by long lines of patients of all ages. Loud chatter and large numbers of people pressing around the nurses at the screening table made it clear that it would be a very busy two-day clinic. Next door to the clinic tent was a textile mill, a “sweatshop”, with no safety regulations or protective equipment and children working right along with the adults.

During the first day of clinics, several team members went to make a “house-call” for a woman too sick to come to the clinic. While they were out, another lady begged them to come to her home for tea (chai). During the visit she insisted on washing their feet, and while kneeling on the floor, she drank from the water after each washing to show her gratitude and respect. It was one of many experiences that touched and broke hearts.

Our next stop was in the village of Bhograi, on the eastern coast of the state of Orissa. We stayed at a guest house which had only cold water. We raced against time and temperature, pumping water from a warm well and running up the stairs to our rooms before the water in the bucket became too chilly to use! (Not all areas of India are warm and toasty all year round). Bhograi is the location of one of 100 Dalit Education Centers (DEC’s). These “Good Shepherd Schools” enroll Dalit children, who would otherwise be denied education. OM and the Dalit Freedom Network (DFN) are our partners in this ministry. Supporters in churches all over the US “adopt” DEC students for \$28 per month, which provides everything they need for school (including books and other supplies, uniforms and lunch). All village children are welcome to attend the school, but parents and students are made aware that no caste or any other type of discrimination will be tolerated. So students and their families from all levels of the culture join together in education and community. Jesus Christ is presented on a daily basis. He brings hope to Dalit children and their families trapped by religious hatred and cultural bias. What a miracle! Only God could orchestrate this integration.

Our final clinics were in the village of Bagadia, the recipient of a school and village healthcare worker. My focus was public health teaching; helping nursing mothers understand the need for adequate nutrition for themselves and their infants. What a great day holding all those sweet babies!!!

The final two days of our trip were spent back in Calcutta debriefing, where we laughed and cried and prayed and worshipped; sharing challenges, joys and sadness over the suffering of India; visiting Mother Teresa’s Hospice for the Destitute Dying; hearing the Sisters of Charity sing and pray in the chapel; meeting their terminally ill patients who received amazing care and restored dignity; and finally saying goodbye to our team and temporary family as we went our separate ways in Singapore.

God provided everything needed. God’s hand was moving, sometimes we could see it and sometimes we just believed because we knew it was true.

Thank you for your faithfulness and obedience to God; for your generous and prayerful support and for allowing me to represent you to the people of India.