

DINE IN THE DARK: A volunteer journey

When Paresh Jotangia was offered the chance to do voluntary work in India in September 2008, he revealed that he initially refused.



Speaking to a 38-strong audience in a Clerkenwell restaurant as part of AFP's Jagruti Programme to raise awareness about the global poor, the returning volunteer explained that he'd been born with an eye condition called glaucoma. It had reduced his vision to 10 per cent.

Image: L-R- Paresh Jotangia, Punita Shah, Subhu Kumar, Sacha Kumar

Paresh said: "My biggest concern was going to India on my own – how I was going to manage collecting my luggage off the plane, coping with the pavements and the lighting out there."

But the Access Technology Officer for the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) admitted he had a change of heart after a phone call from Bala Thakrar, AFP Director. She reassured him that funding would be sought if he could find a guide to help him during his placement.

Within two months, Paresh was on a plane to India, accompanied by his cousin Hiren Maroo. The pair headed to Bangalore to work with partner organisation Mitra Jyothi, which supports people with visual disability.

On arrival, Paresh and Hiren evaluated the needs of the organisation and concluded that the students were missing one key element – a resource centre. The pair set about establishing a centre equipped with items they'd brought from the UK. This included: an electronic video magnifier; binoculars; talking watches; digital cassette players and electronic DAISY players (talking books).

Paresh said that he was "humbled" by the students' gratitude. The simplest things made their life much easier. They were "full of joy" when they were given a liquid level indicator, which emits an alarm to denote when a cup is nearly filled with a drink. One student's life was transformed by an electronic magnifier, enabling her to make out approaching buses; read cafe menus and see her boss for the first time ever.

Another partially-sighted student, who was struggling to read large print and Braille, also benefitted. Paresh said: “He had struggled to read with even the largest magnifier and almost all options were resulting in a dead end. We showed him the electronic magnifier and once we changed the contrast to black and white, he could actually read. A simple change in the contrast brought about one of the most memorable experiences of my time there.”

Working together, Paresh and Hiren also provided IT training; carried out low vision assessments on partially-sighted students and visited local employers such as IBM to examine how companies were meeting the needs of visually impaired staff. They made recommendations to make the front entrance of Mitra Jyothi’s headquarters more visual impairment-friendly by suggesting the introduction of hand rails, colour signage and better lighting, while Hiren ensured that indoor facilities were made safer by getting rid of loose wiring.

After the talk was over, excitement mounted as the audience was guided in shoulder-led, single file into the restaurant of Dans Le Noir. Any item that emitted light such as mobile phones, bags and digital watches were left outside. As the name suggests, the purpose was to eat a meal in utter darkness. Served by visually impaired staff, the experience aims to raise awareness about blindness and disability.

Engulfed in tar-like blackness, diners had to grapple with knives, forks and glasses as they attempted to drink, eat and identify the food on their plate – with varying degrees of success. Some guessed correctly: courgette and lemon salad, with honey-drizzled figs, butter beans, cucumber, pepper and yoghurt, followed by mains of spinach, ricotta and feta cheese rolls, couscous, and sundried tomatoes.



As the dining room buzzed with louder-than-normal conversation, guests chatted about their heightened senses of sound, taste, smell and touch. One disgruntled diner said the meal had failed to satisfy her hunger as she kept missing her food and couldn’t see if she had cleared her plate, prompting a remark that she could enjoy a “visual KFC” later!

The experience was further enlivened when special guest George Abraham, of the Association for Cricket for the Blind in India, provided a touching rendition of James Taylor’s One Morning in May. To the cries of “More, more!” from the audience, he followed it up

with a Hindi tune. AFP's Sheetal Ramesh Shah finished off the entertainment by performing Bollywood love song Kabhi Kabhi.

Later, in the fully-lit bar area, there was positive feedback about the unusual and challenging evening. Mukesh Shah said: "Because of the total darkness, people were talking more loudly. It made me realise that this is how blind people experience what is going on around them. It can be quite frightening. It must be very difficult for them."

Punita Shah said it was "enlightening". Sacha Kumar said: "It was interesting to hear a different perspective on life."

The final words however belong to Paresh.

"For you this experience might be just one evening. But there are people like me, and millions of others, who are locked into this environment day in and day out. Think about these people – and do what you can to help them," he said.

NB: Since his return to the UK, Paresh, whose vision has deteriorated rapidly in the last six months, said he continues to support the charity. He is participating in a 10km charity race to raise funds for Mitra Jyothi and intends to do another volunteering trip to India.

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