

Michael Jackson, Rajnikanth & Me – Our Journey in India

Priyesh Pattni's talk about his volunteering experience with AFP

Wednesday 23rd June 2010, Development House

"Why would anyone want to volunteer?" was the opening question that AFP returned volunteer Priyesh Pattni asked his audience. Guilt, to gain experience and to see another culture were some suggested reasons, and for Priyesh, like many new graduates, it was what he initially thought the cliché thing to do after university. In his talk, he gave an honest account of the journey of how his perceptions of volunteering changed through his experience and the challenges he faced with the children he was teaching in the Silicon Valley of India.



Priyesh shows his audience photos

"I thought I'd volunteer in India – but I'd never been there before".

Priyesh described how AFP supported him by matching up his skills to partner organisation Hope Foundation School in Bangalore and providing pre-departure and in-country training, which brought his "zero knowledge" of development up to scratch. But this was only after going through an intense AFP interview.

On arrival to India and during in-country training in Bangalore, Priyesh visited a village school outside of the main city. Some children walk for miles to get to school, and to his surprise Priyesh found that positive initiatives, including a cycle scheme, had been funded by the government to support the children to get to and stay in school. Hope Foundation School itself is situated in a slum, which Priyesh expected to be miserable, yet he couldn't have been more wrong. *"My initial impression of Kaval Bysundra was that it was smelly, but it had a community feel and the school is picturesque and idyllic."* Hope Foundation School is attended by migrant children whose parents are day labourers, many of them having a lot of personal issues such as alcohol abuse and poverty. *"Over the first few days lots of things were going through my head and I saw that people didn't let the issues stop them from getting on with life."*

In spite of his experience of working with children in the UK, Priyesh's biggest fear was how he was going to bond with the children and what he would talk about with them. This fear was heightened with language being a barrier. Common ground was found when the children enquired about the death of Michael Jackson. *"They didn't know any of his songs but children from that environment knew that he's dead and that this is important to the world."* With the same effect, the children got very excited that Priyesh had heard of the popular south Indian actor, Rajnikanth. This example was the inspiration behind the title of Priyesh's event. Something else that surprised Priyesh was the children's love of wrestling – media impact was prevalent, even in a slum in Bangalore, yet ironically, the residents did not even know that pizza was available just outside their slum.



With the school kids



On placement – teaching IT

Priyesh's volunteer role was to put together an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) curriculum for 11-14 year olds. He developed simple lesson plans that teachers can utilise to improve IT skills of the children. When one of the teachers left to go on maternity leave, Priyesh was asked to take over the class, but with this promotion came its challenges. He explained how the children perceived him as a supply teacher and, just as children in the UK would treat a supply teacher, the children ran around and did not follow instructions. The audience laughed when Priyesh described a situation when *"One girl*

even told me to go back home! The kids made fun of everything, my hair, my accent and the way I dressed. It was frustrating because they didn't respect me like they respected the other teachers because they responded to the cane." Traditional methods of discipline like the cane combined with traditional teaching styles and rote learning was one aspect of the placement that Priyesh found difficult, but with contemplation decided it was not his role to say what's right or wrong. *"You have to put things in context. Traditional methods of discipline are widely used in India to manage behaviour. But the school provides the children with what is often their only meal of the day. The teachers themselves come from marginalised backgrounds and haven't necessarily had the best teacher training. But they are good people."* Instead, he used alternative methods such as rewarding good behaviour.

Priyesh reflected that Bangalore city was one where you could find amazing buildings, designer shops and intellectual people, yet poverty existed in that same city. But poverty is closer to home than one would like to believe. Canary Wharf is a beautifully developed area, yet the surrounding areas are inhabited by a different community leading a very different life. *"As a foreigner, you judge people in India. But the volunteering experience got me thinking how much do we actually do for people here? I don't judge people anymore."*

The audience was keen to ask Priyesh lots of interesting questions including the impact of his work. Nearly a year on, there now 3 computers at the school, and both children and the teachers are more confident in using them. Local adults are coming into the school to learn IT and this is generating an income for the school. Another audience member asked why the IT corporate could not support the schools. Unfortunately the problem actually lies in the CSR policies which mean that employees are made to come to the slums when they have no interest. AFP is working to encourage national volunteering.



A captivated audience

Ultimately, everyone wanted to know what this young person is doing now that he is back in the UK. Priyesh currently works on the AFP Naitika project, working with young people and raising awareness of the plight of garment workers in India. He will be heading back to India for another placement in September.

Finally, when asked about why people should volunteer, he replied like a true AFP volunteer:

"To be part of the development process, to make a lasting difference and not just to be able to tick something off a list. I had no idea there was a development sector. I didn't even know that I was part of a diaspora. My placement was a steep learning curve for me. I see the world in a different way and think about how my actions impact the world."