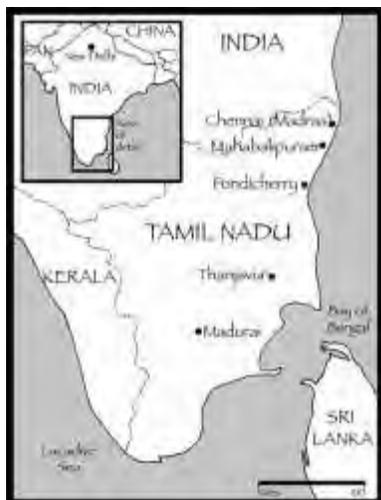


RYS: In the Spirit of Service – part 2

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In Part 1, we were introduced to Fr. Nithiya while he was working on an RYS project during the period of transition in post-communist Hungary. In Part 2, Fr. Nithiya returns inspired to India and helps launch service initiatives and programs reaching the poorest of the poor and receives personal encouragement from Mother Teresa.

Service as a Way of Life



As staff members of the RYS, we were pleased with the immediate results of the project in Hungary. Through hearing from participants in the following years, we gained a growing sense of the power the project had in motivating people toward acts of service, since many shared about the various service programs that they were engaged in. Some were inspired and ambitious enough to set up their own programs. The impact that RYS graduates were making became even clearer when we received word from Fr. Nithiya about his activities.

Two years after the conclusion of the RYS project in Hungary, a fax from Madurai, India arrived in our RYS office. Fr. Nithiya was writing to express his gratitude about his experience in Hungary and share how that experience served to inspire him to further action. He shared that on returning to India he helped organize mobile medical teams that traveled into the countryside and performed eye operations for the poor. These teams were literally giving the blind a chance to see.

Fr. Nithiya continued by sharing about an upcoming Peace Festival that he was helping to build a coalition of support for. The Gandhi Museum and a wide variety of local organizations had agreed to help support and sponsor various parts of the festival. The week-long Peace Festival offered programs that would involve school children throughout the city of Madurai. The festival's busy schedule included drama events, music, sports competitions, games, essay contests, spiritual talks, service projects and a large parade full of marching bands. In closing his note, he encouraged RYS to immediately follow up the festival with a service project. We wrote back our agreement.

When we arrived in Madurai after a long journey, it was very exciting to see the involvement of thousands of students in festival programs. Even though the preparations for the upcoming RYS service project kept us busy, we did manage to enjoy opportunities to observe some of the festival events. At one event, Mr. Pande, the director of the Gandhi Museum, pointed out among the crowds of children a certain group wearing blue school uniforms. "Those girls are from the school where RYS volunteers will be helping. They have been raised in families who work and live in the local garbage dump, but now things can be different for them."

Scavenger Children: A Life of Living with Garbage



In parts of the world, garbage provides human "scavengers" a meager sub-subsistence income that barely keeps them alive. In India, the situation for those collecting garbage is made worse by the social and religious taboos that stigmatize their families. Collecting garbage often becomes a family's destiny inasmuch as grandparents, parents, children and their descendants are compelled across generations to spend their lives scavenging through garbage. Socially and religiously segregated, these scavengers are part of a larger

group known by a variety of names. Some call them Dalits and others branded them as Untouchables. Gandhi preferred the term Harijan because it meant "Children of God." The government simply labeled them as the "Scheduled Class."

At the Peace Festival, those neatly dressed children in blue uniforms came from some of those outcaste families. They had lived and worked among the ragged children who spent their daylight hours picking through large piles of garbage. These children were familiar with putrid smells, rancid debris and toxic waste. Necessity forced them to search for something that could earn them a much-needed meal. Mr. Pande and his fellow Gandhians, in desperately providing critical education, were trying through the school to break that cycle of despair.

The young girls in the blue uniforms had known so little of childhood things before they went to school. Instead of the fresh smell of flowers, regular meals, and sports and games, they faced daily the crushing weight of hunger and family poverty. The only playing fields they knew were the sides of mounds of garbage. Their world was entrapped in a permanent stench. To rise above it all was a dream that many of them could barely imagine.

A School Made Through Love

Through the donations and efforts of the Gandhi Museum and local Gandhi affiliates, a modest school had been recently launched to serve a number girls who had previously been scavenging. The school included several finished and some unfinished classrooms. The RYS volunteers had determined to help finish some of the classrooms.

At the school, teachers provided both academic and job training to prepare the girls to claim a brighter future. One special part of their training brought them boundless joy -- the classes in traditional Indian dance. The students relished the dance classes as an opportunity to train very hard, and those that excelled were selected to perform at the Peace Festival. For the students, this was going to be their first public appearance and they were very excited and nervous about performing for a large audience.

As an observer at the Peace Festival, I looked at the girls from 'our school' go through their final dance preparations. It was important to me to understand something of the journey the girls had made to reach this event. When they walked past us, our eyes were glued to their nervously beautiful faces. The girls gracefully walked on by and onto the stage to make their dance offering. Dressed brightly in simple, pleasing costumes, they moved fluidly to the complex rhythms of the traditional music.

Traditional Indian music is a physical expression of deep spirituality. To perform the dance, the dancer needs to become one with the music -- entering a realm where the dancer is the music. The lean, dark-skinned, graceful girls, smiling with their eyes, spoke inspirationally through their motions. They had mastered a language akin to original beauty as they moved across the stage.

As an eyewitness, it was clear that these were their moments of liberation. Their movement revealed the essence of who they were -- children, dancers, owners of this moment in time. It was pure beauty as we watched them express through dance something timeless.

Prize Winners Forever

More than a dozen groups danced that morning for the large audience of children, parents and spectators. Following the performances, a highly anticipated closing awards ceremony was held in which the top performing groups were announced and received awards. As the crowd of spectators pushed closer to the stage in anticipation of hearing the contest results, 'our' girls huddled together anxiously awaiting the decision of the judges.

Observing the girls, one could read an apprehensive hope and anticipation on their faces. You could imagine their painful self-doubt and self-questioning: "Could we really win? Could we ever be good enough?" The announcement of the winners created a scene of perfect joy. The young girls, daughters of garbage collectors, initially smiled with their body language as well as their faces when they heard the good news. Then the girls began jumping up and down, as they shouted in Tamil, "We won, we won, we did it!"

Displaying a newly earned sense of confidence, the young ladies walked onto the stage to receive their well-deserved awards. They collectively took a bow and heard the audience applaud. Such recognition and appreciation freed them from the deadening gravity of social circumstance. The sounds and sights of this event lifted their spirits far above the drudgery of the past as they saw for the first time the beautiful vistas of possibility and promise.

The lithely built school girls demonstrated an internal strength that would not accept a fate not of their own making. The stigma of being labeled an "outcaste" might conceivably have weighed their spirit down to a compliant acceptance. However, the girls worked hard to show to themselves and others that they had something special to offer. This power and beauty was most visible when they cooperated together. Surely the bright smiles on their faces at the awards ceremony would not remain indefinitely, but the positive experience that they shared would stay forever in their heart.

Mother Teresa's Encouragement

Following the successful Peace Festival and an exciting RYS project, Fr. Nithiya had an opportunity to meet and share with Mother Teresa. During their conversation, Fr. Nithiya spoke about his RYS experiences in Hungary and in India. On hearing about those cooperative efforts, Mother Teresa wrote the following note of encouragement and guidance to the RYS.

To the RYS India Participants (Mother Teresa)

*"I will pray for God's blessing on your beautiful work of love.
Do it for the glory of God and the good of the people."*

Summer 1993

These few words were the essence what of Mother Teresa, St. Francis and Mahatma Gandhi stood for. To do beautiful works of love for the glory of God and the good of the people is a divine mandate and a heavenly call to action for all who have ears to listen and the heart to serve.

Postscript

The path that Fr. Nithiya walked would continue to be aligned with the wise words of Mother Teresa. He went on to earn a doctorate in Rome, doing a comparative study of St. Francis and Mahatma Gandhi's views on the environment. On returning to India, he helped in training and service programs for clergy and lay people, and also set up programs to foment the reconciliation of Pakistani and Indian youth. He offered nine years of service to the Commission of the Bishops Conference of India and spent four years with the Asian Bishops Conference.

Father Nithiya is coordinator of All Franciscan Religious Congregations in India which includes fifty thousand priests and nuns working on the social and medical needs of the poor.

In a recent note to RYS, he shared that in addition to his formal work, he has remained active locally. The projects that he is currently involved in cover many areas of service and are the true testimony to his sacrificial heart:

Refugee Services -- Providing services for war victims staying at a local camp.

Education -- Providing training for school dropouts.

Orphans -- Seeing to the welfare of orphans in both a local boy's orphanage and a girl's orphanage.

Youth -- Offering impoverished youth computer and technical education as well as tailoring and driving services.

Motivational Training -- Targeting university youth to learn holistic excellence.

Medical Care -- Providing free medical help to the poor.

At the end of his note, Fr. Nithiya reminded us of his moving experience in Hungary and then kindly offered his services to RYS as a trainer whenever possible.

In reading Fr. Nithiya's note and thinking back to the RYS project in Hungary, it is clear that a good service project has a 'pay it forward' effect. Fr. Nithiya and other RYS graduates used their transformative experience as a catalyst to contribute further service and this has greatly inspired others. "Beautiful works of love" do make an immeasurable difference in the quality of life in the world we live in.