



◀ Neighbourhood children of Tollygunge, a South Calcutta suburb.

◀ A story-telling session for the children in the Kalighat school. The one-room school is home to children of varying ages and educational levels.

◀ A woman watches her laundry outside her house by the train tracks. Many urban poor live in unfavourable conditions.

text ADRIANNA TAN photos LEE YEOWMING

“Amidst desperation and destitution, the few who care enough to do something about it bring about hope, optimism and possibilities.”

Memories of Sonagachi

Volunteering in Asia's largest red light district

Exactly a year before the documentary *'Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids'* released to critical acclaim at film festivals and theatres and turned the spotlight on Asia's largest red light district, I'd unexpectedly found myself walking through the alleys of Sonagachi. Then a wide-eyed 18-year-old, I'd signed up as a volunteer with the Kolkata-based non-government

organisation (NGO), Sanlaap. The brief: to work with “rehabilitated prostitutes and their children”. Not that I knew what that involved.

Sonagachi, in the Bengali language that is native to Kolkata, means ‘Golden Tree’. Indian epithets for society's taboos usually prove to the contrary, and this was no different: far from the lustre of life implied by its name,



experiencing difficulties you would never come close to witnessing. It was even easier to imagine what your response to them might be: pity, compassion, wanting to do something to make someone's life better. Like many who learned within the first week as volunteers, I found that compassion and empathy are important, but it is never about pity.

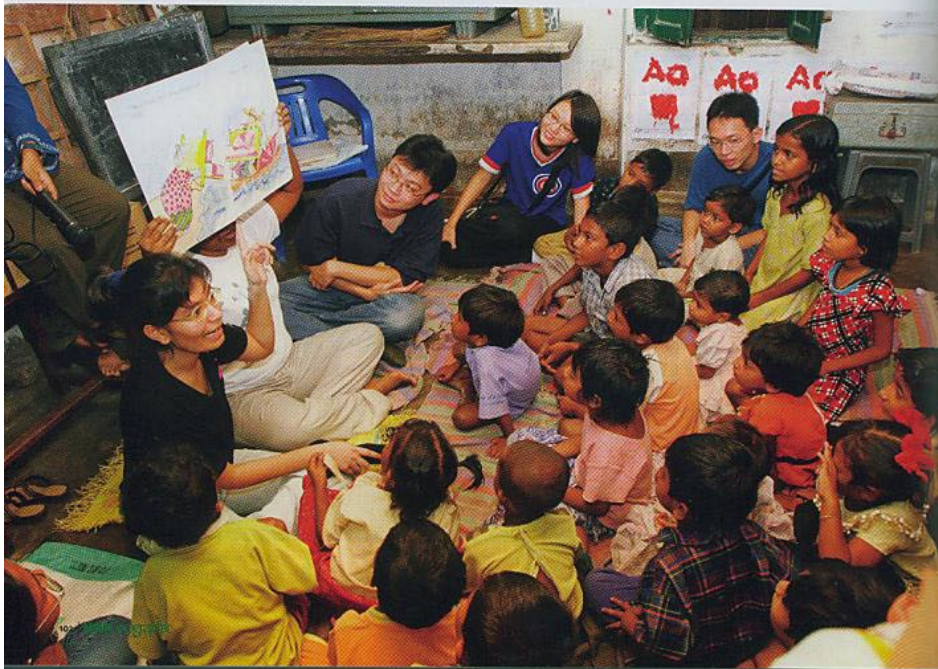
I'd expected to be heartbroken by the sight of thousands of women, some say as many as 10,000, willingly and unwillingly plying the trade each night. Many of them were very young, but they had the air of women far beyond their age. And for good reason. According to Sanlaap's field workers, many of them were trafficked from Nepal, Bangladesh and other parts of India, usually as children or teenagers. Many of them can never return to their villages, from shame; others because they left at such a young age that they cannot remember where their village is, or who their family members are. It's a potent cocktail behind the vicious cycle of poverty and prostitution: a preference for males makes rural families keep trying until they have boys, even if they really cannot feed so many mouths. It is a deeply entrenched poverty that makes having so many children an untenable proposition, and an unforgiving dowry system makes it impossible for most families to afford to marry off their daughters – where marriage is the single bright spark in their daughters' futures. So when total strangers show up to marry their daughters without a dowry, many rural families allow their daughters to go off to the big city with them, without even a basic fact-check of identities or locations.

These girls end up in the big city of Kolkata – mostly in Sonagachi, and find themselves entrapped within the snares of commercial sexual exploitation and the syndicates that run them. Many never leave. The few who do are likely to suffer from severe psychological trauma. Sanlaap's holistic rehabilitation programmes assist with shelter, vocational education, medical and legal advice.

Together with Sanlaap, my group of 20 Singaporean students and young professionals spent three weeks in

a putrid cocktail of alcohol, drugs, and vomit hung in the air. Far from the shimmer of anything golden, dirty sheets put out by hundreds of makeshift brothels in the area, in the darkness of the dimly lit district, reigned. Long lines of young girls stood in a single file in the back alleys, some not looking a day over 15. A few tugged at my sleeves. Men – pimps, and customers, you had no way of knowing – hobbled about, many partially or severely intoxicated, and openly picked their wares.

Sanlaap is an Indian NGO that works with women and children, especially those who have been trafficked, sexually abused, forced into prostitution or otherwise involved in the commercial sex trade. I was an 18-year-old university student and already an avowed feminist then. I'd anticipated my experience working with the children of prostitutes to be all be about painting and building houses, teaching English to the less fortunate, and I'd expected to feel anger and pity about the exploitation of women in the developing world. But it was easy to speak of “the less fortunate” from the safety of the classroom. The “less fortunate” were faraway, unknown entities; the “less fortunate” were easy to imagine: always a different colour, living in a part of the world you'd never see,





◀ One of the young boys from the SNEHA home, and his mother. Travellers can help these 'children-at-risk' through various outreach trips conducted by volunteer organisations.

Kolkata. It was the first time to India, and the first time volunteering for most of us. We worked between 8am and 5pm daily, with each person contributing a different skill to the project: there was a photographer, several writers, some computer experts, several classical Indian dancers and musicians, and several were good at sewing. The ones who could speak Bengali acted as our informal translators. Between us, we set up a youth centre in Tollygunge with computers, sewing machines and a library so that children at risk could have a safe-house to spend their afternoons, evenings and school holidays in. When the centre was ready, we spent many hours reading, sewing, dancing, playing music and working on computers with the youths.

We lived in Narendrapur, a tiny hamlet outside Kolkata, in the SNEHA home where former prostitutes rescued from the trade in Sonagachi and other red light areas received shelter and education. We taught their children English for several hours a day at a tiny one-room school. Perhaps because of the similarity in age, the team could bond with the teens who came to the youth centre. They were identified as children at risk, being from particularly rough families (and neighbourhoods), and for them it was an uphill task to even complete formal education. We painted walls and drew water from the town pump, played football with the boys and took them to neighbourhood carnivals and Hindi movies; and went on walking tours around the slums they lived in.

It is said that most volunteers find that 'moment' that defines the experience for them, and as I love children, mine was in the classroom after I got close to several. It was a truly humbling experience. Shahajada, like many bright eight-year-olds, displayed a tremendous scientific acumen and talent in English. He wants to be an engineer; not particularly special, until you realise that his mother is still a working prostitute in a nearby red light district, and that they live in a one-room shack where his mother's activities are separated from his play area by only a thin veil between them.

"At the end of it all, the thing that changes most is yourself."

I went back to Kolkata the year after, and I found our painstakingly painted walls now faded and stripped, and more ambitious children in precarious situations within their doors, with still no end in sight to the world's oldest profession in Sonagachi and their mothers' involvements in it. I've returned year after year for five, no longer to volunteer, but as an observer. I've found that amidst desperation and destitution, the few who care enough to do something about it bring about the hope, optimism and possibilities that people like Shahajada and those after him, need; and that at the end of it all, even if the schools we build, and English lessons we taught fade and are forgotten, if the volunteering experience doesn't have the world-changing effect we were hoping for – the thing that changes most is yourself. **AG**

Did You Know?

Volunteering opportunities around Asia

Don't just take a holiday, get involved in community development and really make a difference to the world. Visit the following websites to find out about the various volunteer trips you can sign up for:

• Atrium Eco Travel

From building schools for poor rural villages to teaching at a local school, Atrium Eco Travel organises several community-based trips that allow travellers to take part in a unique experience where they can really make a difference to a developing community. www.atriumecotravel.com

• Take Me to Asia

Take Me to Asia offers a comprehensive selection of all-inclusive volunteering programmes in Cambodia, China, India, Laos, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, mostly working with young children and the elderly. www.takemetoasia.com

• Responsible Travel

From dolphin and marine conservation in Greece and Fiji to teaching holidays in Kenya and Sri Lanka, Responsible Travel offers a wide range of choices. www.responsibletravel.com

Getting there: As Kolkata is a major gateway into India for international flights, many airlines have frequent direct flights into the city. Jet Airways and Singapore Airlines fly directly from Singapore to Kolkata's Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose airport. Within India, Kolkata is easily accessible by domestic airlines and the excellent trains of Indian Railways. The travel agency organising your volunteer programme will be able to help make any necessary connections within India.

When to visit: The best time to visit is between October and March each year, when the city is cool and pleasant; the famously hot Indian summer begins by early April, and gives way to the monsoon by July and August. Travellers should check with their travel agency about the timing of volunteer trips, expected weather conditions and tips on how to prepare for it.

Accommodation: Kolkata's wide range of accommodation includes the high-end luxury of five-star hotels, functionality of business hotels and three-star hotels, to the 'hole in the wall' rooms that cater to backpackers and volunteers. Organisations usually arrange accommodation for their volunteers, but those who prefer to do it themselves will find themselves in good company on Sudder Street's cheap digs, which are favoured by long-term volunteers.

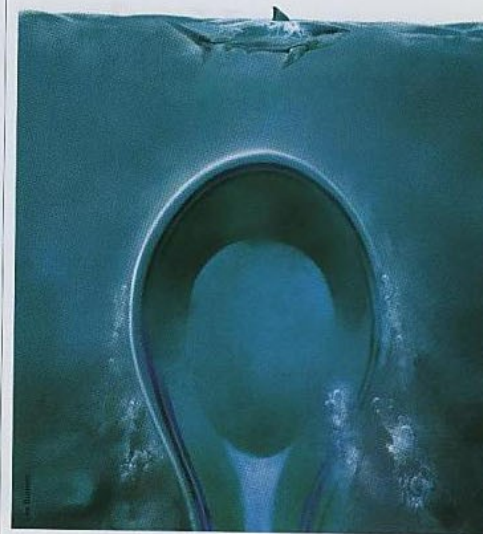
Attractions: Kolkata's history as the former capital of British India means there is no shortage of sights, from the Victoria Memorial, Eden Gardens, Fort William, Belur Math, to the Kali temple, Marble Palace, and many more. The Indian Coffee House on College Street is a Kolkata institution steeped in history, where most major Kolkata luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Aparna Sen, Manna Dey and Subhas Chandra Bose, sat, talked, and charted the course of Kolkata (and sometimes the world) from here. And it still doesn't look any different from when they last left it.

Currency: The official currency of India is the Indian rupee. No other currencies are accepted. For volunteers who may be in India for an extended period of time, it is advisable to take a reasonable amount of Indian rupees and some foreign currency, and withdraw the remaining amounts needed through the ATMS.

Food: The food of Bengali Kolkata is notably different from the rest of India, and deliciously so. Fish dominates the menu, and the best of traditional Bengali cuisine is said to be served at Aaheli, at the Peerless Hotel. The adventurous should attempt the wonderful street food, especially the chicken *kathi* rolls found all over the city. The Bengalis are also said to have the best sweets in all of India: try the *sandesh*, *rossogulla*, *gulab jamun*, *rabri* and *misti doi* at sweet shops all over the city, notably at institutions like Ganguram, Mithai and Balaram Sweets.

Online info: Atrium Eco Travel specialises in arranging tours and travel to off-the-beaten-track destinations throughout the world. They also organise several community-based trips that cater to various activity and comfort levels. To find out more, visit www.atriumecotravel.com. For practical information and excellent travel tips on India, visit www.incredibleindia.org.

Adrianna Tan is a photojournalist and new media producer based out of Dubai and Kuala Lumpur. She has completed a new project called 'Postcards From the Middle East'. www.fortylave.tv



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