



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: India

Chennai: In the presence of Papa...

In the heartbeat of Chennai, the bustling, polluted city that used to be called Madras, there are many compassionate stories to be sold. Some of them focus on a man known as Papa Teresa. The fiery sun was about to descend on the horizon when I arrived with Prasadi, another Indian friend to visit the children of Udavum Karangal a home, school, and facility for 2,000 destitute women, children, persons with HIV, the physically and mentally challenged.

Papa, a social worker by background, began his life's mission by taking in and caring for one person who was living off of meager street earnings. That was over twenty years ago.

We were greeted by Shuba, a sweet girl in her twenties. In the summer of 2004 my mother and I visited Udavum Karangal and met Shuba. She had told my mom that though she had recently began working, she never wanted to leave this place. As we toured, her love for the children radiated in her eyes. She picked up babies and spoke to them in Tamil like a caring older sister. She was familiar with many of the histories and medical problems of the children.

We walked to the baby ward with a few babies sitting up in their cribs on the floor. "The babies you met last time are toddlers now, they are outside playing," Shuba pointed out. We went outside to a grass carpeted playground with a swing set. On a mound of a small hill we saw toddlers playing. Their caretakers were sitting underneath a nearly full moon talking softly. There was a waist high fence that surrounded the playground. When we began to wave, the children came running, all at once to shake our hands. I've had beautiful moments in my life—this definitely was one of them. No words were spoken but there were smiles on all our faces.

We went to the ground floor of a nearby building. I recognized some of the older children's faces. They were eating their dinner of curry and rice. "This is the HIV ward," Shuba flatly told us. Life did not seem fair to these children. Often when I feel a wave of sadness come over me—I try to consider the current moment and see the positive side. These children had a shelter, medicine, food, playmates and a loving environment.

We climbed the stairs to the next floor--the ward for mentally challenged children. A child came up and gave me a hug. It was wonderful, like a homecoming. They are used to having many visitors come and see Papa's home. I was surprised that one of the caretakers, Miss Lakshmi, remembered me. We had taken a photo together. Everyone asked "Where is Aunty, where is Aunty?" referring to my mother. I told them she was home with my brother and that she missed and remembered the children and caretakers and would come back soon.

Shuba brought me baby Vijaya. She is challenged by a cranial disorder in which her skull never closed. I felt relieved that at least she was doing all right and gave her a hug.

After being with the children, I was shown various crafts that the children had made—beaded necklaces, pieces of art made from recycled CDs, and paintings. It was inspiring. I remembered the famous story of a man that Papa nursed back to health after being very sick. Though he was paralyzed and did not have the use of his limbs, he was gifted as a painter and painted holding a brush in his mouth. I have one of his paintings in my kitchen, of a bullock cart with two figures riding over a hill and the sun in the background of the landscape.

**Notes by Levani March 2005. Field Notes & Photos © Ananda Foundation.
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