



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: India

Trichy: The chance to be a child & visit to Ananda School

I was excited about returning to Tiruchchirappalli. Try saying that five times! Also known as and (easier to pronounce), Trichy was where we launched our second project in India in June 2004 - - Ananda School for 54 children of laborers of the stone quarry and Ananda Surabi; a microcredit initiative that enables parents who work in the stone quarries to obtain small loans from twenty to two-hundred USD dollars to start their own business and to supplement their meager income. Having this type of income generating mechanism would enable these women to maintain their households and provide their families with food as many of them only afford one meal a day.

I walked around the quarry and caught glimpses of the unjust life, entire families that are bonded for life, not much opportunity came their way. Some women in their sixties and seventies held out their hands for me. I put my hand in theirs. It felt like sand paper, not flesh. I took out my cocoa butter cream and tried put it on the creases and folds in their hands. Their palms were so scaly and dry, that the skin could not absorb the moisture. As I stared in shock into their eyes, I couldn't comprehend why they still had to work at their old age. The concept of retirement did not exist here. You worked until you died and paid your debts. I asked what would make their lives better.

“We don't mind working,” they said, “We want to do something else. We want to raise cows and goats, we can't do this work (stone cutting). We are not young anymore. We can't bend over all day.”

The purpose for my visit in addition to visiting the school, thanking the teachers for their hard work, to observing the work conditions in the quarry and talking with the women who were new participants in Ananda Surabi, was to give the children the opportunity to be just that: Children.

We arranged for two buses to take the children and teachers to a playground and amusement park about an hour from our school. Having spent most of their lives in poverty at the quarry, it was the first time many of the children rode in a bus. Everyone got an ice cream cone. That too, was a first. And then there was the swinging pirate ship, see-saw, slide and airplane ride. Definitely a first. I sat in a small swing shaped like a crib and let ten children push me. I was melting not from the heat of the day, but from the sheer joy in the children's faces. We had packed a picnic lunch and sat and ate, mindful of monkeys eyeing our food. As we got ready to take a group photo, one of the boys came over to me. He was about eleven years old. He looked into my eyes. There was such earnestness in his eyes. And he said. "Aunty.....thank you." I wanted to cry. Many of these children grew up working in the quarry, chipping at rocks with metal hammers all day long. The idea of having fun and having freedom was foreign to them. For a moment, they had a chance to be a child.

Note: A special thank you and Mahalo to Ms. Daphne Theocatos, history teacher at Iolani School in Honolulu. Her 7th & 8th grade classes sent a care packet of pencils, pens, erasers, paper, and stickers that were distributed to the children on this day.

**Notes by Levani April 2005
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