

Report by Petra Spanning, India 2004/2005

In 2004/2005 I participated in the exchange program offered by the Indian branch which lasted nine weeks.

I have been working in a women's shelter based in Vienna for many years. Part of my sabbatical was dedicated to experiencing social work in different areas of the host country. CIF India is based in Mumbai. The organisers of the program created an interesting and informative program for a group of social workers coming from different countries. Furthermore the organizers tried to offer individual program elements for participants with regard to working experience and fields of interest.

The first two weeks of the program were dedicated to a so called orientation phase. The group consisted of eight social workers from six countries (Australia, Germany, Estonia, Austria, Sweden, and Turkey). For most of us this was their visit to India and we lived on the campus of the TATA Institute of Social Sciences, whose students there were having Diwali holidays in November. We were offered a rather cautious introduction to a metropolis of seventeen million people full of contrasts. Food was prepared especially for us, the hot spices were left out. Each of us had his/her own room, everybody spoke English.

The introduction phase consisted of sightseeing, cultural excursions (Bollywood movies, classical Indian music) and, most important, introductory lectures to religion, tradition, society, politics, history, human rights, social work and its development held by academics and professionals. We also got to know each other as individual participants, members of a group and learned a lot about our work, our countries, and discussed our experiences. I also had to present my country in a short talk and describe my personal experiences and motivation in my field of work.

During the following four weeks each participant lived in two different host families. The host families had either been abroad themselves, or had hosted previous participants of the Indian program. They also had some connection to social work, so interest and tolerance was there on both parts. I got to know big and small families, was spoiled by local goodies, was taken to parties and traditional weddings, was invited to concerts and outings. In short, I experienced a kind of daily life in Mumbai with a family, friends, work and leisure time.

Work consisted of four placements in social institutions which lasted one week each. The placements were chosen in the line of work I was interested in.

The first week I stayed in "Asha Sadan", an institution for children. Orphans, children living on the streets, children who have been left by their parents, pregnant girls, cast out and battered daughters and married wives can find a place there. I learned all the details about adoption procedures and through talking with the people working there I learned about the cruel Indian reality the girls have to live with and where there is no way out for them. The next project I visited was called "Support" and had developed a program to get children living on the streets off from drugs and integrate them into society. At "Sakhya" (Anti-Dowry & Women's Guidance Cell) I was informed that dowry in India had been forbidden since 1961, but was expected in 70% of all marriages. If the groom or his parents are not satisfied with the dowry this can lead to battering of the wife or to her death. "Prerana" is an organisation based in a neighbourhood where many prostitutes live. The institution takes care of about 150 children of prostitutes, gives them a place to live other than staying with their mothers, sends them to school, looks after their health and protects them against sexual exploitation.

Public funds which are very scarce are used to fund HIV prevention programs and projects directed against population growth. Most of the social institutions are therefore funded by fund raising campaigns, private sponsors or international donors .

After this interesting and exhausting time I spent Christmas in Goa relaxing on the beach and thinking about the things I learned.

At the end of the program the whole group met again in Aine, in a rural camp where we experienced country life in a tribal area. We found a peaceful idyll alongside bitter poverty and a very basic life without any technological support. "Gram-Mangal" has existed since 1982 and is trying to improve the infrastructure and education for tribal people.

The program ended with feedback, evaluation and saying good bye.

The participation in a CIF programme offered me the possibility to get out of my comfortable life in Austria and experience life in another country. It was great.