

# fresh wisdom from an indian sojourn

by *Russel Bartlett.*

Where else in the world would you

Be blessed by an elephant,  
or see the baker slice the  
bread between his feet, or  
Watch a bullock-powered lawn-  
mower, or walk hand-in-hand  
with a new friend, or eat  
A hard-boiled duck egg, or a  
curry with forty chillies  
in it?

Only in India! It was our  
privilege to be there from  
mid-December '77 till June  
this year, working with the  
Union of Evangelical Students  
of India, the "sister"  
organisation of the AFES.

## Thanks Folks!

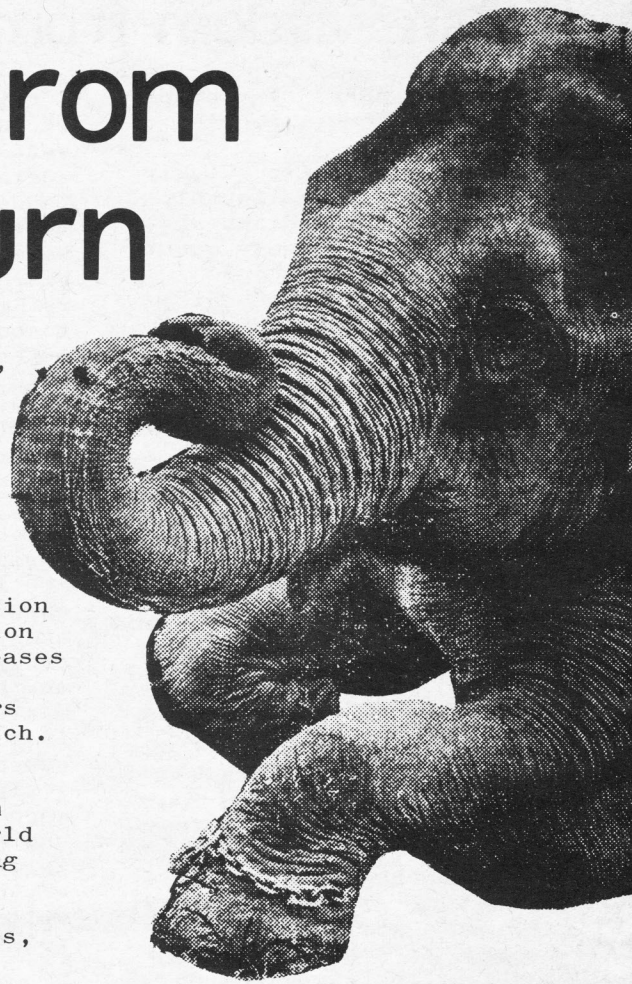
At the start I want to  
say "thank you" to you,  
students and graduates, who  
supported us, who prayed for  
us - it was a profound en-

riching experience for us,  
for which we praise God.

How to share with you the  
impact, the learning, the  
insights that we gained?

## PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The largest single impression  
was the people - 625 million  
at last count. India increases  
by approximately one  
Australia every year! Cars  
only belong to the very rich.  
People walk, or travel by  
buses and crowded trains.  
The Indian Railways system  
is the only one in the world  
to run at a profit. Feeling  
the crush in the cities,  
seeing the small shanties  
crammed with large families,  
and seeing whole families  
whose home is a plot on the  
Calcutta footpath, one quick-



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ly gains a sense of a people, and being amongst people.

Hence we felt quite quickly how much more relationship-orientated the Indians are. Recreation is largely spent in meeting friends and relatives, sharing "chai" (tea), talking over a meal. Even in the daily activities there is much less rush, more expectancy to relate - most shopping is done via the bargaining game - it's expected and enjoyed. In the bank one day, hoping to quickly change a traveller's cheque, I emerged half an hour later having been given a cup of tea and amicably questioned about my plans and background. On one bus journey an Indian friend and I began to discuss faith, evidence for belief etc. with a fellow next to me - it was not long before all the passengers in the back four rows were joining in - they soon left me far behind as they launched into Tamil, at times with obvious hilarity, at others getting quite heated. It's such a great contrast to travelling on buses here now - all islands to ourselves.

## MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

Chandapilla said to me, "You Australians, you're all like gum trees - when you're alone you're like a gum tree, and when you're together you're still like gum trees."



I think it's fairly true - we Australians are aloof and self sufficient. And our society reinforces the tendency - so much of our meeting is around the 'box'; we spend so much time and energy to get our money to get married and get our land to build our house so that we can live our own private life. I don't know if I ever questioned, or even saw our insularism - it's powerfully obvious now.

I've wondered how much this affects our interaction as Christians; how many studies, meetings, cellgroups, services, committees are functioning and yet the people are not truly meeting. I don't mean the so-called "sharing meeting", often aimless, that is quite prevalent: I mean honest personalization of scriptural truth, real support and care for one another in the context of applying scriptural principles. Hence our coming together will help us to learn to relate.

## evangelism

For I see that relationships is the key issue to our evangelism. Now our primary aim in the AFES is evangelism. I've had to come to grips with a personal hang-up that I had with the word 'evangelism'. I get the feeling that many are looking for the best technique to get the quickest results. We want a method, any method that will give a result. We organise speakers, tracts, broadsheets, even missions, hoping that they will do our evangelism for us. I'm not saying that we shouldn't use these means; quite the contrary - we need to be far more alert in taking up the opportunities that the media and our campus structures give us. If some evangelistic aid serves our desire to communicate, then let us use it. But my fear is that we substitute these things for the greatest communicators of all - ourselves. The most authentic proclamation comes as it is integrally part of a

real relationship.

"So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you, not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:7-8)

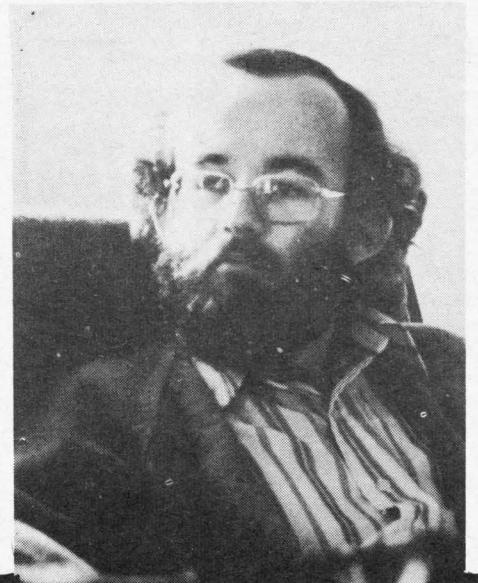
"Evangelism means to meet people on their ground - in their lives, in their way of life, in their social, cultural intellectual, emotional and material condition, and those who share their lives, to share with them our life of faith."

Hans Burki

This is a great need - to learn to be warmly, genuinely relational, to learn to share ourselves, to 'meet people on their own ground'.

Many of us find this difficult even with fellow Christians. We need to be honest about this and put growing in relationships as high priority. Committee members, cell group leaders must ensure that this kind of growth is happening.

To share in the UESI, as another tertiary orientated mission, was an education in itself. They are boldly evangelistic, and reaping a real harvest. In their culture, where day-to-day life and religion are inextricably combined, and thus where





talking of God, belief, destiny is commonplace, I found a strong desire to find spiritual reality. It was amazing to see large numbers of Hindu students truly interested, and some responding, to the words of acceptance and relationship with God.

#### INDIAN GRADUATES

But what impressed me even more was the involvement of graduates in the tertiary groups. This inspired me - to meet and share with graduates who had regular involvement with tertiary groups - some for 10 years and more. I was greatly humbled as I prayed with graduates at a state conference, to feel their care for students, and desire for the gospel to be known in tertiary centres. In the UESI graduates and students were together.

Now it appears that few undergrads here have thought about the fast approaching reality of graduate life - how to handle new relationships, responsibilities, much more money, pressures to conform, problems of integration etc. etc.; nor have they thought about what they will be able to contribute as graduates, to undergraduates. Generally there is not that sense of flow, of being students and graduates with a common calling and vision for the tertiary world.

In actual fact the number of graduates who are involved

in any way is decreasing. Have they lost the vision? Do we not have a distinctive and strategic ministry on Australian campuses? Not all can help students personally, but all can pray and give, and many can open their homes, or provide valuable resources. The tertiary Christian staff could be the source of much strength and guidance, but appear reluctant to be involved. We need to widen our perspectives - to look ahead, and back, and work out in practical ways how to encourage a "whole" view of the fellowship - how to prepare students for graduate life - how to help graduates care for students.

#### AFFLUENCE

I would be amiss if I did not mention our realization of our affluence. We had far greater culture-shock returning home than on our arrival in India. I could write at some length of what we now see as our massive over-indulgence, our excessive life-style; however it is more positive if I share how we are trying to respond.

Firstly, we are trying to learn to think before we spend money, or use the resources we have. Does that sound naive? What is obvious is that so much of our life-style is an unthinking drift in the stream of the dictates and pressures of our society. Surely Jesus' saying "where your treasure is there will your heart be also" has to be visible in our day-to-day living? So in the food we eat, clothes we wear, the general level at which we live, we are trying to discover our right response as children in God's kingdom.

Secondly, in our stewardship - Paul speaks of working in order to 'give to those in need' (Eph. 4:28), but it is drummed into us that we work in order to invest, save or spend. We have experienced great generosity from friends and supporters here, and from our brothers and sisters in India, and we have had much joy in giving and seeing true thanksgiving (see 2 Cor 9: 6-15). It is salutary to think that one Australian dollar has the value of ten

in India; if twenty in a CF group went without one bun and one cup of coffee once a week for five weeks, the money saved would support an Indian staffworker for a month!! So when you hear of SEA projects in the future can I encourage you to give freely - even the smallest contribution achieves something.

But stewardship is wider than this - it is the question of the orientation of the whole being - what to do with our gifts, time, training, our very selves. How we need to break out of our parochialism and careerism and consider the opportunities in other cultures as well as our own, for giving ourselves. Right now for students there are the opportunities that VACSERVE provides to experience being a Christian in another culture. For graduates we saw a great variety of opportunities to give, in medical, teaching, pastoral and supportive work, in many parts of India.

#### THANKS AGAIN

So we are full of praise for the opportunity that we have had, and thankful to God for "providing every blessing in abundance." We experienced His honouring of this promise many times - in travel, in the safety of our children, in the growth for all of us, in material provision, in the expansion of knowing and being known, in the meeting and sharing with precious persons.

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