

Katie Wilkinson Scholarship Report

Giving up Drugs with the Gods in Delhi

by Kate Rickett

“You pay for whatever you’ve done, I’m doing it right now! It comes back to you, especially in this country. It scares me sometimes you know, I’ve seen what they go through, lose their parents and people being battered and stuff, like this guy on the streets, and body rotting and stuff like that, and the cops coming and carrying it and burning it or chucking it into some medical school to get cut up, and that scares me, you know? I might have a bad karma.. I don’t know, but I’m trying to make... trying to like... do some good, so that maybe God can forgive me for all this shit I’ve done”

Client who believes in a universal God

This summer, facilitated in large part by a grant from the Katie Wilkinson Scholarship Fund, I spent ten weeks living, volunteering and conducting interviews in two drug rehabilitation communities in New Delhi. I set out to do qualitative research into how different religious belief systems influence the way users understand their addiction, and their expectations for staying clean in the future; this in the context of it often being an avoided avenue of investigation in cases where treatment practitioners anticipate a lack of familiarity with the possible beliefs held. In total I conducted around twenty hours of interviews with seven women and seven men, from Hindu, Christian and Muslim backgrounds - but many of whom believed in one universal God or had amalgamated doctrines from various different perspectives. Being able to spend that amount of time ensconced in the world of the rehabs - attending discussion sessions and devotion time, chatting together, eating together, singing dancing running very, very sweatily together (Delhi summers are still pretty heady even at 5.30 in the morning) – had a huge impact on me, on my understanding of what it means to be addicted and on the quality of the research work itself, as I got to know the participants and they got to know me.



One of the target neighbourhoods for outreach to current users, New Delhi

I had visited the projects last summer, and worked subsequently in a residential rehab here in Norwich, but it took a long, long time out there, much longer than I expected, to feel like I was able to make some sort of semi-reliable sense of just what it was that I'd become a part of. Certainly the ongoing experience of finding I had to once again throw out a new batch of fundamental assumptions, that I'd started to rely upon in working out what was going on around me, brought a personal immediacy to the whole cross-cultural decoding process under investigation! From that, and also as I became more sensitive to the concerns of the people taking part, the project expanded and re-focussed to include a consideration of the very experience of discussing spiritual matters within a cross-cultural set-up.

“I haven't talked to many people, even though last time it happened people were around. The Devil appears to me in different forms, sometimes as my ex, sometimes as a cat, sometimes as a snake. People think I'm laughing to myself or talking to myself, but I'm actually having a fight with the Devil. There is no point talking to people about it, or sharing, because they won't understand”

Muslim client

The centres house up to 26 women and children and anywhere up to 120 men depending on need, though this entails sleeping on the staircases. Clients come from a variety of backgrounds – from the streets of Old Delhi, from militant groups in the North East, from upper-middle class families who've done well out of India's bump up the technological ladder. Some drink alcohol or snort cocaine as their drug of choice, but most chase brown sugar (heating cut heroin on foil and inhaling the smoke) or inject/swallow pharmaceutical drugs. I've done outreach work here in Norwich, but in all my Indian-drug-scene naivety, it takes me six weeks to clock why, walking to work at the other centre each day, we might visit the chemist every single morning. The organisation takes an unusual approach in the broader context of the Indian rehabilitation system, which can often involve something tantamount to sectioning and may or may not include manacles and getting beaten up. “You need to use”, the director says, “tell me. Sure I'll try and talk you out of it, but if you have to, I'll probably give you the money. But do something different – start talking about it”. This doesn't quite get talked about, things get shifted. The nice pusher-man buys me a Rajasthani wooden-beaded necklace.

In terms of volunteering, I'd been expecting to put to use the statistical analysis skills I'd learnt in the Epidemiology unit in ENV, get my head stuck into the rehab data looking for trends in successful outcomes etc. I don't speak Hindi (though now I can tell you where I'm going, ask for a spoon and throw out various nouns associated with things-you-might-find-in-a-bedroom), so expected to be more behind the scenes. However, given the fact that they're massively under-resourced on the ground at present, the director asked me to work in a listening/supporting/befriending role. I balked at the term counsellor, having never taken on that role even back home before and coming from just such a very different world. It's not about offering advice, he says, it's about listening. And empathising. On the back of last summer's visit there, I'd joined an organisation here offering phone-based, listening support to people in distress. Listening I could do. So this summer my ears grew arms and legs, I got better (a bit) (maybe) at heeding body

language, and I learnt that I have further to go with consistently doing a good job of the old empathy malarkey face-to-face.

“Or I'll say it in the session, I was a prostitute or I've gone like this, I don't think at all, I don't feel ‘what will the client think?’ I'm saying with my own mouth I lived like this. I don't bother. Because I believe in one thing, how I am, I am what I say. What is the truth I'll say, now with that truth, if you want to be a friend of mine, talk to me, OK, if you don't then leave. So I am comfortable in saying the truth”

Client turned staff

My tongue, on the other hand, just misses the moment sometimes.

(and on the side: after completing the project work (and not supported by the Scholarship Fund!) I also did a RedR course in managing environmental health in disaster situations, including designing and constructing water and sanitation systems; I went to Nepal and visited contacts at the International Water Management Institute there, at ForestAction and at the government's rural drinking water supply co-ordinating body, who sent me off with the Red Cross to visit their associated projects - on whose invitation I also went up a landslide which had taken out 150 odd houses the previous day on the outskirts of Pokhara, to witness their relief efforts and check out the terrain. And then trekked to Annapurna Base Camp for a bit of a breather).