

The Warmth That is India

The Netraprakash Eye Camp 1996

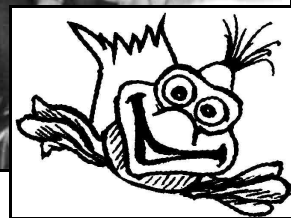
Netraprakash means ?light of the eye."
The PRASAD Project, was hosted by Gurudev Siddha Peeth Ashram of Ganeshpuri, with Aravind Eye Hospital and volunteers from all over the world. The ASPEE Agricultural Research Institute in Ganeshpuri was transformed into a modern Western style operating facility. In addition there were seven tents housing 180 people each -- 90 patients with one accompanying escort.

They arrived from all over the State, many on foot being led very often by a younger member of the family. After surgery patients received five days of postoperative care, medical attention, hot meals, and much tender loving care from the eye camp volunteers.

In Maharashtra, India, 70 percent of the 85,000 residents who suffer vision impairment from cataracts cannot afford medical treatment.



Shobi Dobi performing in one of the tents with Birdie Bird



In two weeks 7,700 poor people received vitamins, medications when necessary, and eye examinations. Of those, over 3,500 received glasses, 944 received sight restoring intraocular lens implants.

It's about 3 a.m. on January 10th in the Tansa Valley of Maharashtra, India – the location of the 1996 Prasad Project Netraprakash Eye Camp. I'm standing on the roof of the volunteer dormitory having been awakened by the broadcast chants of Brahmin priests and temple bells. The night sky is black and full of brilliant stars. From my viewpoint there is a peaceful spread of trees, fields, cows, chickens, dogs, small houses and huts. Everything around seems to be in blossom. The air is cool and clean except for the increasing smell of burning wood and incense, as the villagers begin their morning fires and make their morning offerings. I cannot begin to describe the fragrance, beauty and peace of this place.

But into my stillness creeps a fear. There are ancient reasons for doing everything here. I don't want to offend anyone. So how will these people react to a clown? Will they throw stones at me, spit at me, run away frightened? As far as I know they have no tradition of the clown in their country. Certainly the circus has performed in their big cities, but out here? Will I get mobbed? Will I disturb the order of the eye camp which is so necessary to treat thousands of people? Can I really do this? All by myself as a solo act?

When Shobi stepped off the bus and into the first of the eight large tents, there were many expressions of terror. Soooo, Shobi smiled, lifted her hat, and said, "Meera nome Shobi Dobi hey?" In the local dialect - "My name is Shobi Dobi." Well, as chance would have it, a "dhobi" is the person in the village who does the laundry and "shobi" means elegantly beautiful. So here she was, a

middle-aged western elegantly, beautiful washer woman dressed in rainbow stripes and polka dots. The villagers could not contain themselves, they giggled and they played -- they played like everyone else in the world plays. It's that connection to the inner light - that spark that happens when people go into their inner child.

So off I went making my way into the tented city. At first I did what clowns usually do - perform. I tried doing my usual magic routines, and although the people did watch respectfully, I noticed a fear creeping back into their eyes. This was not the usually response to "funny magic." Instantly I realized what I was doing. I was in a land that abounds in stories and myths about alchemy and magic – a land where magic really happens and is performed by great beings, and I'm only a clown.

While I was thinking this, I was taking out my "change bag" that has a squeaky mouse puppet in it. The bag is made out of common cotton print fabric and turns inside out six times. I noticed that the women were looking intrigued. So I kept turning it inside out all six times. They continued with a look of "how did she do that?" I realized that I was teaching them how to watch my silly magic! After that the magic was part of the play.

My teacup stethoscope that makes different sounds as I check their hearts and of course the bubbles were hits. But it was the gathering of people to watch a performance that didn't seem right. This became evident when I started blowing up the latex gloves as

balloons. The first ones were fun as they bounced them all over the tents. But after a while it became a "giveaway" and I got mobbed by outreached hands. This was disruptive and I quickly stopped giving anything away. That meant no balloons and I didn't even try face painting.

My luggage was "detained" for seven days, so my puppets Dr. Scrubs and Wacky Nurse did not arrive for 6 days. Birdie Bird my main puppet at the time was in my "carry-on," much to his protest. He complained for days at having his nose stuck in my underwear.

But in the big scheme of things it worked out perfectly. It was Birdie and the Indian people who taught me how to be a caring clown. Years ago working as an art therapist I learned -- If you listen closely to your patients they will tell you what they need. I listened closely and learned to be a "heart to heart clown."



This is how it happened. One day the nurses came running up to me, "please you come." So they took me by the hand and pulled me through the crowded streets between tents into the small triage tent. They brought me to a blind woman squatting on a small carpet. The Camp could not restore her sight as she had glaucoma, but they could give her medication for the glaucoma and help the pain.

There she was blinded in sight, and me blinded in language. Being in the clown moment, I never thought about this, but just knelt down to her. (See photo above) Her village friends gathered around talking to her and maybe explaining, in the local dialect, my appearance. I put her hands on "Birdie Bird." She took him to her forehead (in Hinduism this is a kind of blessing) and said, "Ah Chota Garudat." Chota means "little" and Garuda is the large bird that carries the Hindu god Vishnu. So in essence she was calling Birdie "Little vehicle of grace." I was so touched. She was just so grateful that someone was paying attention to her - that was the quality of her humility. It was awesome that as a clown and a foreigner, I could touch her in that spot.

Dr. Scrubs and Wacky Nurse arrived a few days later. Wacky Nurse, the troll nurse hand puppet, pictured on this page, soon became Nursibai. She would close her little mitts and bow her head and say "Namaste" or "Peace be with you."



Even the little old men (who seemed to take only two cubic feet of space all folded up) would unfold to put their hands in the traditional prayer greeting "Namaste." Nursibai, being swift to seize the moment, would grab their hands, lean her little



head against their fingers and stroke their fingers with her little mitt. "Kesa Hey? T.K? T.K?" How are you? O.K.? O.K.? She was so compassionate, everyone loved her. They even put a bindi on her (the red dot Hindus wear on their forehead to honor the God within). They would laugh with delight at her gestures and even hug and kiss her. Shobi is pictured below with Nursibai and Dr. Scrubs.





Dr. Scrubs in his "dignified manner" made rounds by walking up and putting his head in someone's lap. The villagers would usually take his head in their hands and put it to their foreheads. Upon leaving to go to the next patient they would touch his feet and put their hands to their forehead. A sign of respect, all in play and yet, they were showing Dr. Scrubs their gratitude for the sight restoring surgery. We would all laugh. But there is a little bit of truth in all jest. I felt the waves of their gratitude. The clown had become a tangible heart level way for the people to express their gratitude. I became the heart to heart connection between the doctors and the Indian community.

Dr. Scrub with Shobi and Eye Camp Staff - Sherry Garner



A nurse in India came up to me, "You know I've been wondering what is wrong with me, because I don't laugh when I see you with those people (the patients), I want to cry." I asked her to explain. "It's coming from that place just before you laugh or cry -- it's the same place." Somewhere inside of me a response came -- "That's poignancy. A good clown is always poignant. That place is the heart."