

Streets of Sorrow, Streets of Joy



Calcutta is one of the most notorious cities on earth for abject poverty, but as NIALL O'DOWD reports there is one Irish aid organization prepared to help change that.

CALCUTTA – We are traveling through the teeming streets on our way to one of Calcutta's most notorious red light districts.

We leave our car and walk through narrow alleyways as surprised women and children watch. White faces are unusual in Calcutta, and it often results in a crowd of curious children gathering around to just look at you.

Our guide John O'Shea, founder of the Irish relief agency GOAL, explains that in a society where 50 cents a day is an excellent wage, it is hardly surprising that thousands of women sell their bodies on a nightly basis to try to make ends meet.

Women, he tells us, are the most exploited of all. Child prostitution is epidemic and the sights we are about to see will sicken us.

There is one unexpected twist, however. As we emerge from a warren of side streets we see all the men are gathered, not around the women but a television set, which is showing the India versus Pakistan cricket match.

They are seven or eight deep and they are utterly enthralled. It is the biggest sporting occasion in years and the women, on this night anyway, hardly seem to matter.

O'Shea leads us down the alleyway to where the women, hundreds of them, are sitting and standing outside their hovels. Some look as young as 10 or 11. Others are old and haggard, though O'Shea explains they may only be in their thirties. The life they have led has beaten them down.

They stare at us as we walk through, this group of five or six white men and women and two Indians. Some look frightened of us, have never seen white faces before and turn away to avoid us.

It looks like a very slow night. Some call out their prices as we pass. "Ten rupees sir," the equivalent of a few cents.

We pass a rat dead in the gutter, and some mangy dogs, which are ubiquitous

all over Calcutta, lie sleeping in our path. For some reason they are never disturbed.

The heat is stifling with hardly a breath of a breeze and the temperatures are beginning their rapid climb to over the 100-degree mark in the summer. Currently it is about 90 degrees here in the city and the sweat sticks doggedly to your clothes.

O'Shea explains that after the cricket match is over, this place will teem with men.

and alight on a large residence.

This is GOAL's safe house for the children of prostitutes. Most are dropped off by their mothers before they go to work so they have some place safe to stay.

In a strange way the kids of prostitutes are the lucky ones – at least their mothers care enough for them. Tens of thousands of other children are just abandoned.

At least in this safe house for prostitutes there are mothers who care enough to send their children here. GOAL has taken advantage of this to ensure that the kids are given the rudiments of education.

The children are divided by age group. We drop in first on the kids in the 6-8 age range. There are about 50 in a room that should hold half that number. Like everything else in Calcutta,

and affection. It is a deeply moving moment, and even a hardened Calcutta veteran like John O'Shea is affected. We are all wiping away tears.

Then we walk into the toddler's class. Among the kids a vision awaits us, a beautiful little girl, only 2 1/2 years old, dressed lovingly by her prostitute mother in a white outfit that resembles a first Communion dress.

We are all drawn to her. She is holding chalk and a blackboard and she is writing down the Bengali alphabet letter for letter, while listening to the teacher. Then she writes as far as "G" in the English alphabet for us. We are all stunned.

Here in this most unpromising place on earth a little genius is developing. Her teacher says she has never seen anything like it. To look on her face is to look at hope, she tells us. So we stand and stare.

JOHAN O'Shea first came to India in 1977. At the time he was a leading sports journalist in Ireland and had a very successful career in the making.

It would never be enough for O'Shea, however, who wanted more than just the plaudits of his peers and the latest exclusive on who was going to make the Irish rugby team.

A big bluff man, O'Shea does not suffer fools easily. Down the years he has tangled with every Irish government and many international agencies as well. His straightforward approach and aggressive advocacy has meant that he has as many detractors as advocates as a result.

There is no disputing his achievements, however. In its 27 years of operation GOAL has spent well over \$200 million in providing relief to the Third World and is always first into the breach along with the other major Irish aid agency, Concern, when a crisis hits.

Currently there are over 900 Goalties, as the organization's volunteers are known, overseas, helping out in world trouble spots. They have volunteers in Afghanistan, Angola, Congo,

Honduras, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Uganda to name just a few countries.

They were even in Iraq until the town they were staying in was made unsafe after 13 Italian soldiers were killed in an ambush there.

But it is India which has remained O'Shea's great love and where GOAL started. Like so many, he was inspired by Mother Teresa and decided to come first to Calcutta where the need was greatest.

There he met two Indian doctors who had pledged their lives to the poor. Dr. Sam Chaudhuri and Dr. Pappu were facing overwhelming odds in trying to help the street children and the starving residents of nearby villages outside Calcutta.

Chaudhuri had started the Child in Need Institute (CINI) in 1974 as a clinic for malnourished children. O'Shea's first donation to them was \$200, all the money he owned in the world.

Twenty-seven years later GOAL's activities in Calcutta have expanded to the point where they have taken an estimated 8,500 street children into their care and rescued them from lives of abject misery on the streets. They support 25 local organizations that provide vital services to the needy.

The two Indian doctors, Sammy and Pappu as they are universally known, now run the CINI, funded heavily by GOAL which has made a huge difference to the lives of those children.

There is a saying in Calcutta that you can see God more easily here than anywhere else, and O'Shea is among the handful who reach out to help the wretched poor. It seems an apt saying.

THE next day we are on our way to the worst slums in Calcutta. Despite the fact that the Indian government is immensely prosperous when compared to other countries with huge poverty issues, the caste sys-

tem ensures that those most in need are barely helped.

The callousness of those in power towards their poor in a country which can afford nuclear weapons, has the fastest growing information technology industry in the world and is currently booming, is incredible.

O'Shea says the failure to provide basics such as clean water and sanitation is costing hundreds of thousands of lives a year. No one in power seems to care. An election is due soon, but in the time I am here I hear not a word about the nation's poverty crisis.

The slum we visit is like no other that I have seen, row upon row of ramshackle dwellings that would never qualify as houses. A putrid river runs alongside where the poor drink, bathe and defecate in.

The smell is accentuated by the pungent odor of the nearby tannery, one of the few industries in this wretched corner of the city. The effect is a sickly sweet odor which O'Shea compares to walking through killing fields in the Sudan many years ago. The stench is inescapable.

Afterwards in the hotel, I scrubbed and scrubbed to rid the odor from my skin. How must it be for those who live there 24 hours a day?

Here too, however, there is a glimmer of hope. The slums are home to schools funded by GOAL, for those kids of the tannery workers and children whose parents do not even have work.

The first school we go to is on the bank of the river. Inside the one room there are 40 or so beautifully presented young men and women.

The children are all beautiful, solemn eyed, barefoot and with a quiet dignity that belies their surroundings. Despite the horrendous atmosphere, all are clean as new pins, some wearing uniforms.

Again you feel the sense of empowerment that they feel from education. The teacher tells us many suffer great hardship to make it to school every day.

I watch as the lesson commences and see that flies and vermin of all kinds settle on the schoolbooks, drawn by the putrid waste in the nearby canal. The kids, however, either ignore or dismiss them

with a flick of the hand.

There is nothing more important to them than learning, even in this hell-hole. It is an object lesson for all those who take education for granted in the west. It is the same story when we walk through the tannery to the second slum school. On the way there we come across conditions that Charles Dickens would never have imagined in Victorian England.

The workers are each weighed down with a huge pile of animal skins that they take off the back of trucks and bring to the processing center. The weight of the skins must be crushing, the smell intolerable, but still they plod towards the disposal area. It looks like a medieval nightmare.

Again the kids of these tannery workers are hoping desperately to find a way out, and GOAL seems to be the only organization that is helping. "If we can only break the cycle, for one generation, we will end all this," says Dr. Papu, his idealism intact despite a lifetime working with such hellish conditions.

"That is the hope we have. In fact it is the only hope." Looking around it is very hard to disagree with him.

THE next day we leave Calcutta. We are on our way to the Sundarbans islands, strips of lands off the Ganges River where the most deprived Bengalis live.

If Calcutta is next to the last stop on the misery train, then the Sundarbans is truly the end of the line. Thousands live in villages where clean water, toilets or even education are almost non-existent.

They are the untouchables, the poorest of the poor, in many cases driven from the mainland. O'Shea is on his way to open a

school, the first ever, in one of the villages.

We drive for three hours out of Calcutta through traffic that would make rush hour in Manhattan look like a stroll. At last we pull in to a deserted marshland area and walk the rest of the way to the jetty where a boat will carry us across to the islands.

As we set sail down the Ganges, the afternoon sun beats mercilessly down, but there is a freshness to the air which you would never find in Calcutta. To a person we are glad to be free of the confines of the city, even for a day.

On either side are men and women trawling the shallows for shrimp. Our guide tells us they have to watch for crocodiles and even the ferocious Bengal tiger.

The men wear masks on the back of their heads, as the belief is that the tiger will never attack frontally.

When we land aboard the island, it is as if the conquering hero

has arrived. Our path to the schoolhouse is strewn with garlands; the villagers line up on both sides and fling flowers of welcome at us. The full meaning of what has been achieved by GOAL here becomes starkly clear.

We come to the schoolhouse, a fine brick building among so many mud huts.

The village elders are there to greet us, several with tears in their eyes. This is an overwhelming moment for them.

Then the local children dance and sing, songs and dances of welcome and celebration. Then comes the moment they have all been

money can go here. If they even make small contributions it can have an incredible impact," O'Shea said.

We saw that impact over the next week or so. A hospital for children with physical disabilities, including many born with clubbed feet. A psychiatric institute,

yet O'Shea is first to point out that it is only a drop in the proverbial bucket. There are 100,000 children sleeping rough every night in a city the size of Manhattan.

GOAL has managed to help save about 8,500 of them so far, but there are 2,000 people a day flooding into the city from the impoverished villages. The problem, it seems, may never end unless the cycle can be broken.

YET it was far worse some years ago until a little Albanian nun, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, began her crusade to make the world sit up and take notice of the destitute in this major Indian city.

She was 18 years old when she went to Dublin to take her vows and become a nun of Loretto, a teaching order that ran convent schools in India. She took the name "Sister Teresa" after Saint Teresa of Lisieux, the patroness of missionaries.

Today, they simply call her "Mother." Even though she has been dead since 1997. Mother Teresa is still omnipresent here. They even refer to her in the present tense, as in "Mother's Mass is at 5 a.m."

They are referring to the morning service of devotion in her memory held essentially in her living room at her modest residence where her remains

lie. Thousands come to pay their respects, and her miraculous medals are a deeply prized possession.

Outside, after her morning Mass one day last week, her beloved city was waking up to another day when the battle for survival for millions would begin all over again. She would be happy, no doubt, that her own sisters and organizations such as GOAL have joined the battle to help save those poor souls she spent her life assisting.

One of the prize possessions in any village home is the medical card that shows how many shots the child has received. The mother guards it with her life; it shows that some one, somewhere cares.

The list goes on and on, yet O'Shea is first to point out that it is only a drop in the proverbial bucket. There are 100,000 children sleeping rough every night in a city the size of Manhattan. GOAL has managed to help save about 8,500 of them so far, but there are 2,000 people a day flooding into the city from the impoverished villages. The problem, it seems, may never end unless the cycle can be broken.



Photos by Jenny McCauley

This little girl, not yet three, knows all her Bengali alphabet, and some English letters,

Young girls are especially prized.

Some are trafficked in from all over India, sold by their parents because the Calcutta market is so lucrative. Many will never see their homes again.

Many are gang raped and beaten to ensure that they will never try to escape. It is a grim scene.

But even in this hellhole there is hope. We pass through the red light district

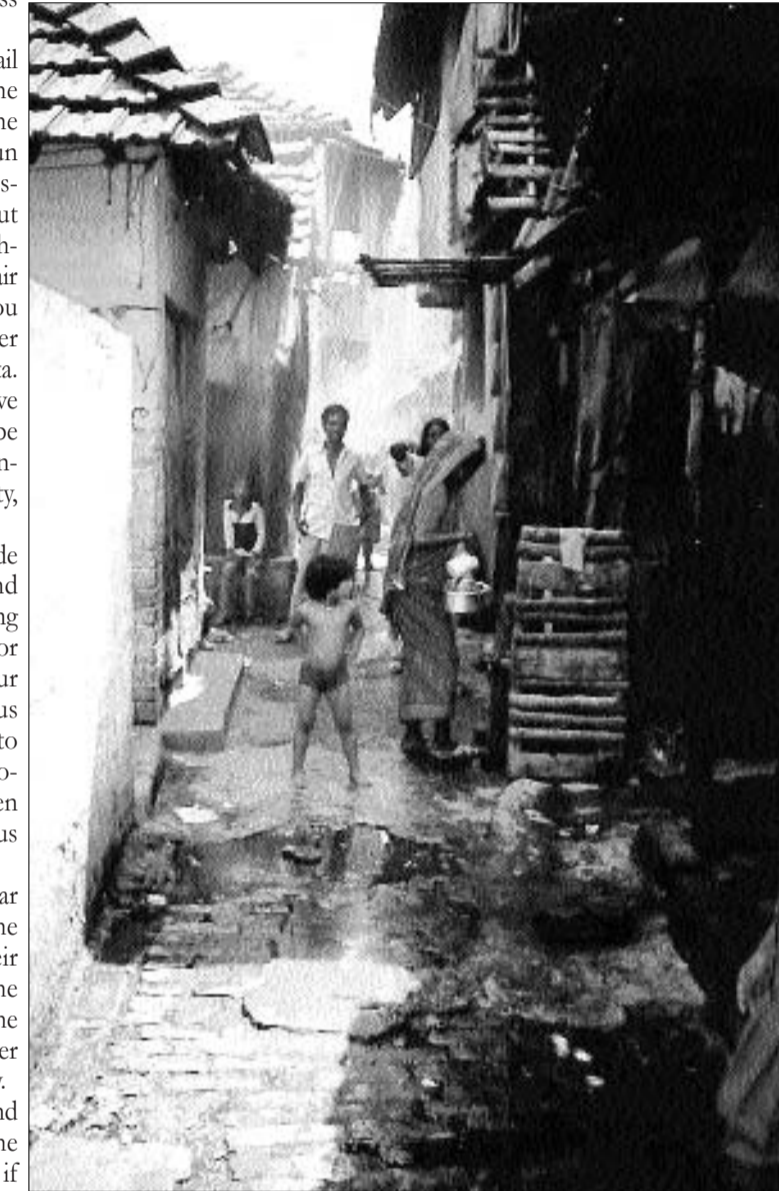
There are an estimated 100,000 street kids in Calcutta. Most will never know their parents.

In one GOAL home we visited I spotted a little girl, less than three years old, abandoned the previous night outside the shelter. She is in pain, large tears welling in her eyes, as she frantically searches our faces for the mother or father who has abandoned her. She will likely never see them again.

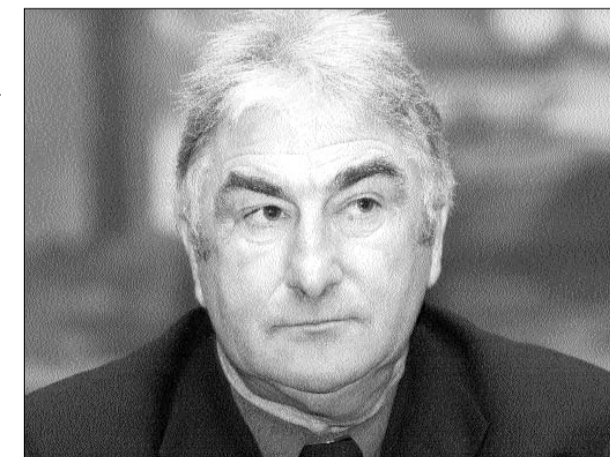
however, space is relative.

These kids are so happy to be learning that they don't seem in the least inconvenienced. Their faces are studies in joy as the teacher takes them through the alphabet in their native Bengali dialect and rudimentary spelling in English.

They are delighted to see us, and we are soon surrounded by kids clapping out hands, kissing us, talking to us, and reaching out for love



The slums of Calcutta



GOAL founder John O'Shea.

GOAL Contacts
WWW.GOALUSA.ORG, or the organization's
New York office at 212-831-7420.