

Here I am, send

Andrew Marfleet, Chair of ACT, was one of 65 delegates who attended the 14th Biennial National Conference of the Evangelical Teachers' Fellowship in India. The conference was held at the Pallotine Animation Centre in Anant Nagar, Nagpur from 31 October to 3 November 2005. The event was entitled: *Here I am, send me!*



What a journey!

After two nights on the train from Chennai, I wondered why I had said I would go to Nagpur to speak at the biennial conference of the Evangelical Teachers' Fellowship of India. I knew that we had been diverted because of landslides, the effect of a cyclone that had hit Tamil Nadu state, but communication with the outside world had ceased. I couldn't even talk to Dr Moses and his wife Caroline who were on the same train; they had settled for cheaper seats, and were cut off from the air-conditioned sleeping apartment I was in.



The train from Chennai to Nagpur

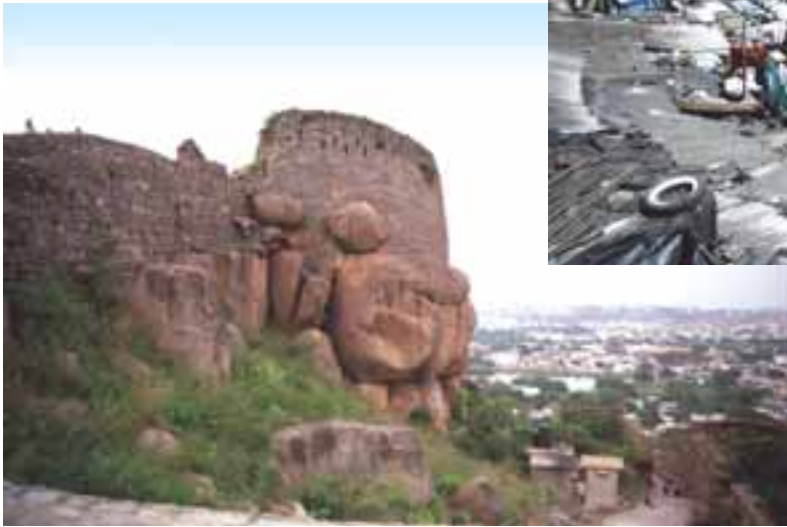
The Church on the sub-continent dates back to the apostle Thomas, whose tomb can be visited in Chennai

I talked with fellow travellers, bought food from the vendors who prepared it on the train, and watched the rain-soaked landscape rolling by: little villages, fields of rice, peasant farmers and their cattle. The monsoon was running late this year, apparently.

I suppose I should have been grateful that I was able to leave Chennai, once known as Madras. I had arrived there a little late from Hyderabad, the flight having been diverted to Bangalore, but the plane from there got me safely to Chennai airport. Dr Moses Michael Faraday (college lecturer, President of ETF and Tamil poet) was expecting me; I had spoken to him that morning by phone. But now Chennai was in darkness, with main routes flooded or blocked by fallen trees. On a borrowed mobile, I spoke to his son, Judah. Over two hours later they got to me. They had travelled over an hour by motorbike and – as taxis were refusing to operate – had hired an auto-rickshaw to get the three of us to Madras Christian College where the good doctor lectured. What a journey! It wasn't far from the airport, but how we avoided the floods, potholes and debris I will never know. It was well after midnight when we reached the

me! ISAIAH 6:8

Indian Christians were spreading the Gospel long before Western missionaries arrived



Golconda fortress, overlooking Hyderabad

college. We lit candles and got as much sleep as we could in a guest room, to the sound of frogs croaking outside.

Passage through India

Dr Moses and his son were up long before I woke, and went home on the motorbike for a car. I was able to have a cold shower and then watch spotted deer ambling through the trees and bushes in the extensive college grounds. The security guard brought me a flask of coffee; he'd travelled miles to get the milk. I was struck by the fact that even the workmen could hold a good conversation with you in English, but in South India, apparently, no one spoke much Hindi. It was either the local language or English. The car eventually reached me, and we headed off to town. The three or four events I was due to speak at had all been cancelled, as the schools and colleges had been closed, but I was able to talk at some leisure to two principals, a

Indian Christians are wonderful people, with a real heart for mission



The Dhobi Gats in Mumbai

headteacher and several other educationalists over the next 24 hours, not to mention seeing the city, the impressive colonial buildings along the sea front, and a surprising number of churches. I was taken to a Christian event that was in Tamil, but very welcoming. The YWCA where I was booked to stay turned out to be quite luxurious, and the Indian Christians were so hospitable.

Okay, so it had taken me nearly 36 hours to get to Nagpur, right in the middle of India. It was a relief to alight and meet my friends again. They had met another Christian teacher heading for the conference. He was Chinese, but had grown up in Calcutta, so spoke Hindi. So one of us knew how to tell the taxi driver how to find the conference centre. And the Ambassador taxi – a kind of converted Morris Oxford – wove its way there between the motorbikes, pedestrians, cattle, auto-rickshaws and other vehicles that, like everywhere in India, just crowded the carriageways. At least they drive on the left!

Bouquets of flowers

The conference organisers were glad to see us, even if we were 24 hours late. The ETF General Secretary, Eappen John, had said goodbye to me in Hyderabad four days earlier. Everything had gone swimmingly there in Andhra Pradesh, after I had arrived on schedule from Mumbai and had spoken at a teachers' meeting in the lovely gardens of a big house in the suburbs. I had toured the twin



Andrew addresses the conference

My lingering impression is of a very fast moving country, in spite of some very slow trains!

towns of Secunderabad and Hyderabad, dominated by a central lake with a huge Buddha on an island, climbed up to the rocky Golconda fortress – the home of medieval emperors, and at one time (it is said) of the famous Kohinoor diamond – and visited the local museum. Eappen, his wife Suja, and their lovely daughters had made me so welcome. So it was good to see them all again. After the travelling, the simple buildings and delightful gardens of the conference centre were a real oasis. Even the weather was brilliant – sunny, but not too hot. I soon made plenty of new friends amongst the Indian teachers, the missionaries and even a small contingent who had travelled down from Nepal to be there. Some of the delegates from South India, sadly, were unable to get there, because of the flooding. But there were still several dozen in residence, plus visitors from Nagpur – including singers and musicians. The talks I gave,

Andrew Marfleet has been a full member of ACT since it started in 1971, a Board member (on and off) for over half that period, and Chairman since 2001. He currently represents ACT on the National Executive Committee of the Values Education Council of the UK.

Andrew taught English and RE in secondary schools, first in East Africa and then in England for about 20 years, and worked in two university education departments, acquiring a PhD (on Christian values in schools) along the way.

Andrew has been a governor of two schools and has served on the Suffolk SACRE for over twelve

years. Other contributions include editing *Spectrum* (now known as the *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*), writing for the *Charis* project, and serving on the 1996 Values Forum (for SCAA/QCA). He now works full-time for Prospects Learning Services, mostly as a school inspector.

Andrew is married to Debby, a primary school teacher.

He has held various leadership positions in his local Baptist church, and is a regular Lay Preacher.

on Christian Perspectives on Teaching and Learning and on The Scope of RE in a Pluralistic Context were well received, but being given presents and bouquets of flowers was beginning to become embarrassing. I was happy to worship with these lovely folk, even in Hindi when I could pick up the words, and relax again.

The ministry of the Indian speakers, in seminars that ranged from The Integrity of a Christian Teacher to Serving and Leading Effectively, and in the main addresses, was a real blessing to me. Eappen John and Moses Michael Faraday gave keynote addresses on the conference theme, from Isaiah 6:8, a theme that was analysed in detail by the main speaker, R Stanley, in seven challenging studies on 'Mission' throughout the Bible. I could well understand why Mr Stanley has such a reputation as a preacher throughout India, but I never found out what the 'R' stood for...

There was a chance to visit another Indian home before I left Nagpur, and to find an Internet café to send an email home for only the second time on my trip, before catching the overnight train back to Mumbai. This time I was with others, missionaries and an Indian Christian lady, as we snaked our way across Maharashtra, crossing the impressive Western Ghats in the morning sunshine. The hotel in Thane, where I spent my last two nights, was fairly basic, but their restaurant was good. The poverty in the streets outside – including young mothers scavenging in the rubbish tip – was a real contrast to the impressive buildings I saw in downtown Mumbai the next day. Three of us, a Dutch missionary, the Indian lady – herself a missionary from the south – and I hired a taxi and saw the sights. Chowpatty beach and views of Elephanta Island, the huge Gateway to India (an arch to commemorate the landing of George V and Queen Mary in 1911), the railway station (something between St Pancras station and St Peter's in Rome!), the 'Hanging Gardens' of the central park and the impressive homes of Bollywood stars, and even the massive outdoor laundry (the Dhobi Gats) were not to be missed.

Planes, trains and auto-rickshaws

I was totally exhausted by the time I got home. Knowing I had to rise before 5am to catch a taxi to the airport did nothing for my final night's sleep in India. From then on, every journey was on schedule – taxi, planes, and trains back home. But when you fly west, it makes for a long day! Being upgraded to first class from Mumbai to Abu Dhabi was a treat, but I had too little time to lie flat on the reclining seat because breakfast took up most of the flight. It's not every day, though, that you



The Gateway to India, Mumbai

can eat off bone china on a plane, with linen napkin and tablecloth, with real cruet and cutlery. Cornflakes were so welcome after the ubiquitous breakfasts of rice and curry.

My lingering impression is of a very fast moving country, in spite of some very slow trains! New technologies and mobile phones are seen alongside ox carts. Women in saris sit side-saddle on the pillion seats of motorbikes driven by men without helmets. The big cities are huge, and the countryside vast. So much was new to me, but so much, reflecting the days of the Raj, seemed to be somewhere I had always known. I never felt I was there for the first time. And so much of it has already become part of me.

Eappen John and Moses Michael Faraday gave keynote addresses on the conference theme

Indian Christians are wonderful people, with a real heart for mission. And, as they are proud to point out to visitors, the Church on the sub-continent dates back to the apostle Thomas, whose tomb can be visited in Chennai. Indian Christians were spreading the Gospel long before Western missionaries arrived, and are sharing the message with their compatriots now that most missionaries have departed. It was thrilling to see Christian teachers committed to their task, busy for the Kingdom. They didn't need me there to help, but showed such appreciation that I had taken the trouble, on behalf of ACT, to go and have fellowship with them. I'm glad I did.

■ Andrew Marfleet

Information

The Evangelical Teachers' Fellowship (ETF)

was founded in 1977 as a professional associate group of the Union of Evangelical Students of India. From its humble beginnings, ETF has grown into a national organisation with 400 members spread across India.

In 1990 ETF appointed Dr G Devapaul as its first full-time General Secretary and established an office in Secunderabad. In 1999 Mr Eappen John took over as General Secretary and the ETF office moved to Hyderabad. In January 2001, Eappen joined Interserve (India) as a staff partner, and was seconded back to ETF until December 2006.

ETF's Vision and Mission Statement says the organisation exists to disciple, encourage, equip and resource Christian teachers that they may be witnesses and servants of Christ in their teaching situations; in the Church; and in the nation.

Please pray...

- that more staff partners will join ETF and the ministry among teachers will grow into all the states of India with strong local units
- that *Chalk and Chai*, ETF's quarterly magazine, will meet the felt needs of all ETF members
- for ETF's Property Project which aims to procure a larger (1000 sq ft) office in Hyderabad by the end of 2007
- that all ETF members will make a financial commitment to the organisation so that all ETF's monetary needs can be met

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Gardens at the conference centre