

Ray Myers

Hubli, Then and Now

Thank you for this opportunity to tell you something about my past and recent experiences in India with the members and guests of the Rotary eClub of the Southwest USA. I first worked there as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 1966-68, and returned to Karnataka State on two subsequent occasions. In December 2006, I spoke at a conference on the use of technology for students with disabilities in Bangalore, and for the month of July 2008, I returned to the town where I had worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer forty years earlier. Bangalore may be known to many Americans now, and perhaps some have even spoken to a representative of an American customer service center there. The Hubli area where I worked as a Volunteer is not as internationally renowned as Bangalore, but is that part of India where the Deshpande family originated before coming to the United States and launching a successful technology business venture headquartered in Andover, Massachusetts. The Deshpandes subsequently established the Deshpande Foundation in 1996 which now supports non-governmental development efforts in their home town half-way around the world. Young Americans and other adventurous world citizens are once again invited to Hubli to contribute their skills to development in a part of the world where technology can now connect us with a "click," but where many remain unconnected and struggling to survive.

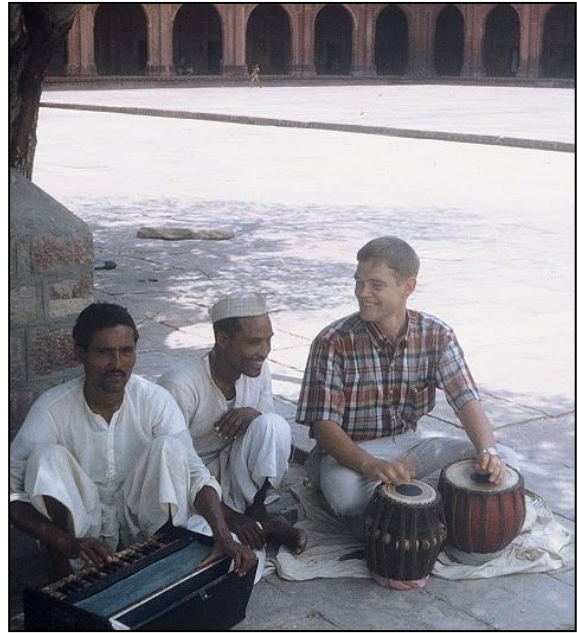


In the late winter of 1966, I began to realize that my college days were quickly coming to an end. Earlier in that decade a young president announced the creation of a Peace Corps that would send young Americans around the world as Volunteers to countries in need. Perhaps it was the sense of adventure combined with an untested idealism that attracted me,

so on the first day of July that same year I joined a group of like-minded recent college graduates in a training program in southern Vermont that prepared us to spend the next two years in Mysore State in southern India (now Karnataka). Many of us had not yet set out on a pre-determined career path, but with the help of some basic training in the teaching of health/nutrition and acquisition of conversational Kannada, we were sent to Teacher Training Institutes (TTI) throughout Karnataka in October that same year.

Suddenly I was halfway around the world, living and teaching at the Men's TTI in Dharwad, Karnataka (Mysore). Nearly all Indian colleagues, friends and acquaintances were most baffled by this: WHY were young Americans there? This line of questioning could lead to numerous shared cups of tea, but our presence still remained inexplicable to many over the years. It was a pre-electronic world where, perhaps, if you were wealthy enough or could read, a short-wave radio or newspaper could bring you a small sampling of world news. From the standpoint of U.S. engagement in the broader Asian world, the biggest news was our war in Vietnam. For this reason, sending young

American men and women on a mission of "Peace" to the land of Gandhi must have seemed even more puzzling (were we there to learn about nonviolence or spread our own brand of passive resistance?). But for me, it was an adventure. A male Volunteer clearly had advantages not available to his female teammates. Young American males, like their Indian hosts of the same gender could travel freely through the markets and alleys of cities, towns, and villages. They could spend hours in tea shops, restaurants, movie houses, etc., and be joined by Indian students, friends, and invited to all-male gatherings on different occasions. After a few months, the most enjoyable part of the day for me would be meeting with some of the teacher trainees as they sang and played local Karnatic folk tunes. I was fascinated by the rhythm and sounds of the tabla that accompanied the harmonium and singers.



Eventually I became one of the tabla players when they were performing less complicated rhythmic patterns. While these activities were not considered official duties or assignments, they enabled me to become more a part of the training college community and eventually expand my work scope to include some of the work in neighboring villages described below. I was a stranger in a foreign land, yet there was a sense of freedom and acceptance that I did not fully appreciate at the time or would ever have a chance to experience again.

A Raleigh three-speed bicycle became my primary means of transportation around the towns and villages of northern Dharwad

District. When some schools were too far for a one day bike trip, the next most readily available means of transportation was the public bus system. I would usually catch the bus at its originating point in the neighboring town of Hubli. Teaching responsibilities at the TTI were minimal. As Volunteers on the TTI faculty we would conduct formal lecture-type classes in health/nutrition for an hour or so a few days a week - very much in the academic mode of the British system India had inherited. Within a few months of beginning lecturing duties, the regional Peace Corps office in Bangalore initiated a collaborative effort with the CARE feeding program. They were promoting the construction of school kitchens in those village communities where the CARE meals of bulgur wheat and milk powder were already being prepared as the students' mid-day meal. The kitchen construction project was to be a collaboration between the village and CARE, with a Peace Corps Volunteer serving as the project monitor of funding and work quality completion. I eagerly became involved in this more outcome-oriented opportunity. The village, through its local representative council (Panchayat), would support fifty percent of the kitchen's cost in kind or cash, while CARE provided a fifty percent share as well. I was able to work in a dozen villages where we built school kitchens this way, varying in size and design, depending on religious and ethnic affiliations. For many of us, this type of work was more appealing and satisfying than teaching at the TTI. It could also be seen as more self-serving, in that we could quantify what contribution we made. The more difficult task, of course, was measuring whether we contributed to improving teacher trainees' knowledge of health/nutrition practices that would be implemented in their home village schools. At the end of Peace Corps service and into the years beyond, I often wondered whether these structures would survive physically and if their origins would even be remembered in future years.

When I returned to the States in 1968, the Vietnam War was still raging, and many Americans of different ages and races seemed to be at war with each other. I still had my Peace Corps idealism but it was not working well in the early months of my return home. I had lived and worked in a place unlike any other I had experienced before. Now I was returning to a very different place from the one I left two years earlier.

Hubli and my experiences there were fading in memory until the spring of 2008, when I learned about the Deshpande Foundation and their efforts in the Hubli-Dharwad area. I was now working in the Office of Educational Technology in the U.S. Department of Education. The Foundation invited its first group of Fellows to travel there in June and I was fortunate enough to be asked to join them in July as they began their year of service there. This was to be a unique time in a sixty-four year old life. Returning and working in the town where I worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer forty years before is surely an opportunity that very few volunteers have experienced. Full of nostalgia and eager to see what changes have come as a result of India's economic emergence in the twenty-first century may have helped prepare me for this journey, but I was not prepared to see how much life had not changed for the vast majority of those residents of Hubli-Dharwad, India, northern Karnataka, on the Indian Railway line between Mumbai and Bangalore.

I was back in India that July as a guest of the Deshpande Foundation that invited me to help evaluate the state of educational technology in the Hubli-Dharwad area. My current work responsibilities at the Office of Educational Technology in the U.S. Department of Education included liaison activities with international guests and colleagues interested in professional exchanges around appropriate applications and uses of technology, and my office leadership felt that this travel would further

enhance our understanding of technological developments there. Although I was now returning as representative of a federal domestic agency, I was also very interested in what might remain from my earlier associations via the Peace Corps. Surely someone would remember the Peace Corps, or at least one or more of the young Americans who lived there in the late sixties. I actually returned to the campus of the Teacher Training Institute where I had taught classes in health/nutrition, often involving travel to neighboring villages to oversee the construction of the school kitchens. I arrived in India on July 5, 2008, and returned to the U.S. on August 1. Forty years later, I did not meet a single person who had heard of the Peace Corps or could remember any activity or discussion about their presence in this part of India in the late sixties (4,325 of us served there from 1961-1976).

Perhaps it was just a question of numeric odds. India has more than doubled in population since 1968, and although the national average age is closer to my own, 64.8, nearly a third of the population is under the age of 15. Surprisingly, there was still a general fondness for the U.S. across different age groups, not so much for any generosity or peaceful bilateral exchanges over the years, but more in terms of support for our current military incursion into Iraq. The young Americans and Indians who were now Deshpande Fellows/Innovators (approximately 25 Indian, 15 American/British) were assigned to work in projects very reminiscent of past Peace Corps efforts in the Hubli-Dharwad area: agriculture, health, education, environment, etc. Whereas Peace Corps Volunteers were assigned to work with Indian government officials, these Fellows were typically assigned to specific projects developed and managed by smaller non-governmental organizations. These projects were also more closely aligned with each Fellow's specific educational training and

career goals as opposed to the broader Peace Corps assignments based on general host country needs.



Deshpande Fellows are working in a much faster, more populous, younger, and louder world than I experienced years before. Mobile phones, motor scooters, and ATMs were some manifestations of how younger Indians were choosing to connect with each other and the larger outside world of the twenty-first century. At the same time, there was much that brought me back to my younger years in these same streets: tea shops, vegetarian meals, Kannada language, auto rickshaws, crowded

buses, Karnatic music, dance, and Kingfisher beer (digital photography helped me capture more of those memories this time). These things still remained, and unfortunately so does an antiquated public educational approach to meet the growing demands of younger school-age Indian population. While there may be much talk about using technology in its schools and how India has benefited economically through its technological expertise and educated workforce in key areas such as call centers and other outsourcing services, many families in the Hubli-



Dharwad area have not reaped the benefits of such economic expansion. Deshpande has recognized the challenge and is attempting to resurrect the spirit of global social responsibility by inviting others to serve in a distant corner of the world. Hopefully, this non-governmental socially entrepreneurial approach will become the vehicle that will succeed where governmental efforts have not. Maybe another forty years will tell, or perhaps we will know sooner in a busier, faster-moving (for some) India.



I am grateful that I got to see and live again briefly in the twenty-first century Hubli-Dharwad, India. Living and working there again reminded me of what I experienced when I was there as a young man - that as one who serves, you still receive more than you give. Perhaps

I had more to give now, but it was not about giving and receiving this time. It was simply about being there and being welcomed back forty years later.

I went back to a part of India that was busier and more populated than before. It has not become as "westernized" as the urban



centers of Bangalore, Mumbai, or New Delhi, cities that most Americans think of in terms of India's emergence as a leader in technology entrepreneurship and out-sourcing. For me, seeing Hubli-Dharwad as it is now was a bittersweet experience. There is technology for those who can afford it, but even for those with the means, they still remain dependent on nature's cyclical ways. In northern Karnataka, hydro-



electric power is ample after the monsoon begins in the middle of the year and the waterfalls' cascading currents continue until the skies become dry once again.

Power shortages and surges in Indian homes and businesses interrupt Indian communication and

commerce from the village marketplace to the World Wide Web. The cell phone and other battery-powered hand-held devices, therefore, have become a more ubiquitous and reliable tools for communication, increasingly within reach for more Indians, but still very much a luxury. The Deshpande Foundation is providing a variety of resources through cooperating with numerous non-governmental agencies seeking to improve various social, health and community development projects throughout the Hubli-Dharwad area. Rotarians can play an important part by joining with fellow Rotarians in that part of the world as they work with the young "social entrepreneurs" of the Deshpande Foundation traveling to a foreign culture and place where they hope to make a difference in the developing world. A goal that they share with an earlier generation that travelled there over forty years ago under the banner of the U.S. Peace Corps.

Thanks once again to the Rotary eClub of the Southwest USA for this opportunity, and I hope this brief description of my work and visits there have provided a glimpse into what I treasure as parts of my life that I have been fortunate enough to experience. These are experiences that are about growing in knowledge about yourself and the world you live in, both joyful and painful. In the end, it seems that when one goes out to "change the world," the biggest change is for the person who wants to try.

The Deshpande Foundation

<http://www.deshpandefoundation.org/>

The Deshpande Foundation is the family foundation of Gururaj ("Desh") and Jaishree Deshpande. Founded in 1996, it is a leading philanthropic foundation in the US and India in the areas of innovation and entrepreneurship. In India, the Deshpande Foundation works largely in the "Sandbox," a geographically defined area that serves as a social innovation incubation space.

Our programs encompass grantmaking to NGOs, in-house education and fellowship programs, local leadership development, social enterprise incubation and more. With an emphasis on innovation, entrepreneurship and shared perspectives, the Foundation mines the experience of diverse stakeholders. We in turn use that knowledge in our work to transform the Sandbox region into an entrepreneurial hub driving social change.

It is a pleasure to be able to share with your club's members and guests what we are doing at the Deshpande Foundation. Our projects are

helping many communities in India, and we are always happy to work with Rotary clubs to strengthen our efforts. If you are interested in talking together about such possibilities, please contact us (infodcse@dfmail.org) and please mention this presentation.

Learn more about the Deshpande Foundation via this two-page PDF: http://nextvista.org/rhmaterial/Deshpande_Foundation.pdf

More Pictures from Ray's 2008 Trip to Hubli-Dharwad







