Preface – a vignette from Hyderabad

In 2000 I landed at Mumbai airport to transfer on to Hyderabad in the south. It was about 3a.m. They played some Andrew Lloyd Webber music on the plane as we’d disembarked. I was totally disappointed. I’d arrived for my first trip to India and had done so to a tune from *Cats*. Surely a sitar and tanpura would have been more fitting? Where was Ravi Shankar when you needed him? Air France was totally not getting it.

I wouldn’t be disappointed for long. The transfer from the international to domestic terminal by charabanc bus was an experience in itself. Scared out of my wits, I teamed up with a young girl who had travelled from her home in Hounslow, West London. Indian parents but had never been to India herself. A typical *Bend it Like Beckham* moment. Together we managed to break free from hordes of beggars advising us that we were making a big mistake and getting on the wrong bus. If we didn’t go with them we’d miss our flights, they warned. Poppycock!

Somehow we made it, bags and all, and the rest of the journey was without incident. This trip was to be the first of many for me over the next 12 years to a vibrant, entrepreneurial, pungent, exciting and enchanting India.

The next day, having been picked up from the Viceroy Hotel, and from the back of a moped, I noticed private schools everywhere. They are difficult to ignore. In the Old City of Hyderabad I saw them advertised on the back of auto rickshaws, signboards by the side of the road and on the roofs of the school buildings themselves. Children were walking to school or sitting in a row on their fathers’ motorbikes, sometimes in threes and fours. They were carrying the biggest bags you’ve ever seen, with all the books they needed for the day. Uniforms so smart, I wondered how they ever kept them clean in such heat and grime of the city. Great school names stood out like ‘Oxford Grammar School’, ‘Madina Mission’, ‘Genius High School’, ‘St Angels’, ‘Glossy Mission’, ‘New Bluebirds Grammar’, ‘St John’s’. These private schools aren’t for the rich, but the poor. This is the low-income side of town. Thousands of fee-paying affordable private schools are being run as businesses by entrepreneurs from within the community. Driving down one lane takes you by three, four, five private schools or more.
Holding my laptop in one arm and with the other wrapped around the waist of my moped driver, we bumped over potholes, missed other road users by inches, avoided cows, and got boomed at from behind by lorries the size of double-decker buses. Eventually zigzagging down the back lanes away from the noise we parked the bike outside Dawn High School.

My first private school visit was with Mr Khurrum, tall, handsome, with perfect manners and smile. I was invited to sit in his office to sip black tea with him. He welcomed me warmly. The ayah brought in snacks and more tea. In Hyderabad everyone seems to have more hours in the day, exuding a calm sedentary style in a hubbub of chaos.

After some time we appeared from behind the curtain hung at his office doorway like some actors in a play. The children greeted me warmly, some looked no more than three years old and were presenting me with flowers; others shook my hand and could have been 16. The school caters for children of all ages, known as a through school; most private schools are in Hyderabad. Calling on every classroom seems a must. No one wants to miss out on the attentions of a foreign visitor. The classrooms have no doors, just a doorway. No windows, just a space where a window could be. In each room a blackboard, chairs; children tightly packed in rows stand bolt upright to wish me ‘good mor-ning ma-dam’. I ask each time what the lesson is – Telugu, Urdu, maths, social science, English, science – the teachers were so dedicated and most noticeably so were the children.

It was time to leave Mr Khurrum, but over the years I was destined to return many times, spending two wonderful birthdays at Dawn High School a decade apart!

But then it was off to a government school. I’m now getting my balance better on the back of the bike and even encourage direct right turns into the oncoming traffic. Saves time. We park up. Some children were wandering around in the playground and almost all the rooms were empty of children and teachers. However one was packed with about 60 children. The teacher was sitting at her desk. The children undertaking something on their own sitting on the floor, which was wet in some places and surrounded by buzzing mosquitoes. The children looked miserable and were obviously of different ages. I asked the teacher what they were doing and why there were so many in this class when the others seemed empty. She told me that the other teachers at the school were off. She was the only one present. Therefore she had all the children in one class. What were they doing? Math. The curriculum set out that the children should know the numbers from one to 10,000. So that’s what they were doing. All term. Writing down the numbers each day from where they left off the day before: 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, etc., etc., etc.

From that day forward these children became my motivation.