



Sculpture by Vijali assisted by Andean Community

WORLD WHEEL NEWSLETTER

World Wheel -- Global Peace Through the Arts

www.WorldWheel.org

Vijali Hamilton

MY JOURNEY TO INDIA 2016

Beloved Friends,

I recently returned to Santa Fe, New Mexico from India and as always the experiences in India have turned me inside out in a most positive way. So I would like to share some amazing experiences with you.

URMI BASU AND **NEW LIGHT**

I want to speak first about a remarkable woman Urmi Basu who was introduced to me by my dear friend "Story Dancer" Zuleikha. For sixteen years Urmi has worked with the prostitutes and their children who live and work in the red light districts of Kolkata, India. She started the social service organization, New Light by renting a room to feed, love and educate their children right in the heart of the activities of these sex workers. Yes they need and appreciate donations: www.newlightindia.org Here is an interview I filmed with Urmi:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOAcXxVUYFQ

When I first arrived at New Light in Kolkata, they were preparing banners for a march through the city to establish the day of December 16th, the day that Nirbhaya Diwas died in New Delhi from a brutal rape, as a day free of rape, a movement to "Respect, Protect, Empower." I joined them in their march taking photos and videos of their efforts:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUMnFHQPG5w>



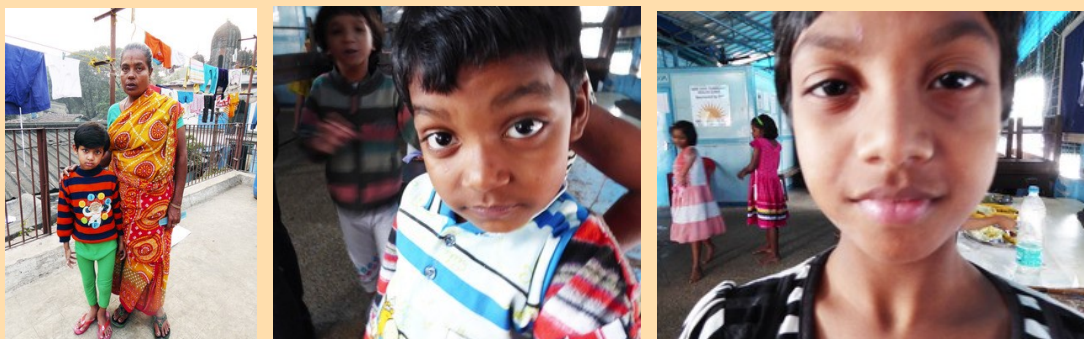
Urmi Basu and the march for a Rape Free Day

Today the fastest growing industry is human trafficking. It is our modern slavery, prison, and torture all rolled into

one. Not only are children and youth stolen for sex or labor, young women have been found dead with their organs cut out. Sold organs bring a good price. Being a woman, when I heard these stories, I felt the pain in my own body. How could I not do something about it? That is why I bought my ticket to India.

I went to support Urmi's work with the prostitutes' children's education, my contribution being the facilitating of art projects with these young girls to support their self-confidence, emotional health and well-being through artistic expression.

Every morning while in India, I would pass through this very narrow lane with the prostitutes' small dark rooms on either side. "Good Morning, good morning everybody," I would say as I greeted them as they sat on their doorsteps or while they washed their hair and clothes from a communal water faucet. Finally I would reach the room that New Light set up for their children.



Children of prostitutes

Instead of the children actually remaining in their mother's bed or placed under it while she works with customers all night, Urmi invites the children into this safe room where they are loved, fed, and able to sleep the whole night without disturbance. Some of the children are only 2 ½ years old and live there permanently if the mother gives permission. Otherwise they grow up knowing only the life of prostitution.



Sleeping children at New Light

Each morning when I arrived the children greeted me with such exuberance and we would play and paint together, then they would look into my camera to see their image and squeal with laughter. At night after being fed a meal, mats are put on the floor and about 15 children sleep there with colorful blankets thrown over them. How I loved these children! They made up for any difficulty I was having with the air pollution of Kolkata and (even more difficult for me) the everpresent sound pollution.



Vijali and children eating on floor



New Light children at dining table

At first, New Light needs to work with the mothers. Ordinarily the mothers don't want their children to become educated. They want them to continue the profession so they will have income when they get too old to draw customers. The girl or boy is forced into sex work when they reach 9, 10, or 11 years of age. The boys are trafficked as much as the girls for both sex and slave labor. Sometimes, if the woman is married the husband pimps the wife and also is very happy to pimp his daughters at a young age.



Girls eight years old



Children at New Light

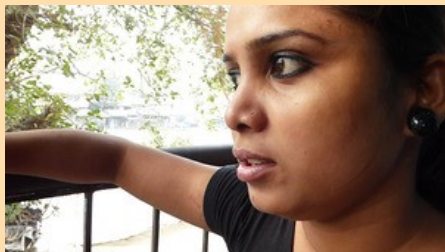


Bulu came young to New Light

Also New Light works with the mothers by teaching them needlework and crafts. They were making handsome comforters out of old sari material when I was there, with the idea that they could leave their profession when they can establish a small business.

New Light tells the mothers, "If we can take your children and educate them, they can later get a job that can support you and then you can retire". One beautiful example is Bulu. She was taken from a shelter when she was 11 years old and put with the girls at New Light. After her high school studies she studied to be a nurse. Now she has a job as nurse for all the children of New Light as well as the community of prostitutes. See my interview with Bulu:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr30JQYty7M>



Bulu is nurse for prostitutes in area and New Light

Now, Urmi has opened seven centers in Kolkata right in the heart of these red light districts, which is a brilliant idea. In the States we would probably bus the children someplace else and it would not likely work so well. One such district in Kolkata is Sonagachi, the largest human trafficking area in Asia. Pimps take young girls from Nepal, Singapore, and indeed all over Asia to Sonagachi. The girls are either stolen or told they will get a good job that can help their family. Then they are brought to India and put right into a brothel. One girl from Nepal managed to get away and she ran to the police for help where she was raped. Not knowing the language or a single person in this new country, she reluctantly returned to the brothel.

Another New Light location is at a burning ghat where only the untouchables, or the "Dalit," as Gandhi referred to them, are allowed to handle the dead bodies. I was taken to their center to paint with the children as their parents worked with the corpses. To find the center we walked around dead bodies wrapped in colorful materials ready to be burned on a pier of wood. Then the remains of bone and ash are taken down the steps of the burning ghat and floated out to the unknown on Mother Ganga's (the Ganges) fast flowing waters.

Once you are a prostitute in India you are barred from marrying, getting a job or renting a place to live. People have asked me, "Why don't they decide to leave". Well, they can't; society won't let them. They are stuck for the rest of their lives in prostitution. They are so marginalized that in order to feed themselves and their children they have to continue their work as prostitutes.

Urmi and her wonderful staff have another place for the older girls and one for the older boys. When the girl or boy gets to be 10 to 18 years of age they are very valuable to the trade. They are not the girls you see standing in the streets to attract customers. When trafficked they are locked in a room with a padlock on the outside of the door, ferreted away from the view of police. Sometimes they are forced to have 30 customers a day. If they don't comply they are beaten and denied food. You can see scars on their bodies from this torture.

So, New Light has a house for the girls at this vulnerable age. Sometimes the police are involved in freeing the girl, then New Light changes her name and she is protected until she is 18 years old. She is not allowed to go home and enter that environment because the pimps will snatch her. But her mother can come and visit her.

When the girls or boys become 18 years old they can go to another New Light home where they may live indefinitely as long as they continue their education or get a job. I feel this is so important, the follow up is what is often missing when people get out of our jails or detox clinics, and often return to old habits. Urmi Basu at New Light has literally saved, at this time, up to 250 children from a life of prostitution.



Vijali inspires New Light girls to paint their essence

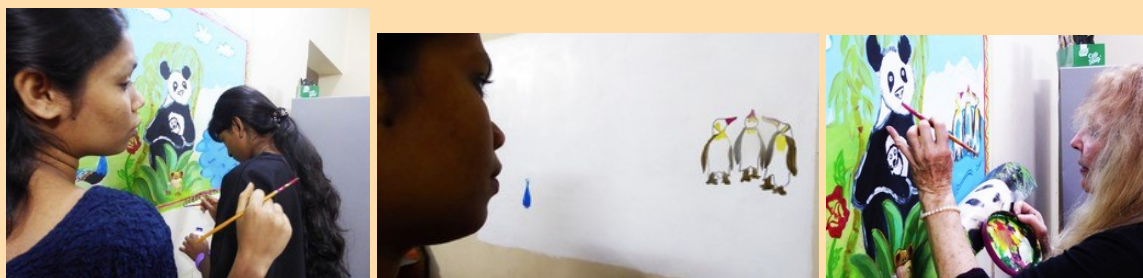
I was privileged to work with this group of girls 18 to 23 years old and taught them painting. They are 13 beautiful and spirited girls who live together, taking turns with the cooking and cleaning, in a flat that New Light has rented for them while they continue their education or work. When I first came and proposed that I would teach them painting, they said, "Oh we can't paint," but of course they were very talented and did amazing work. We ended up having a joyous time together painting a mural of their spirit animals.

I consider this to be one of my *World Wheel Projects, Global Peace Through the Arts* (see www.WorldWheel.org) where I have posed three questions in all of the 20 countries in which I have so far worked. The first question is: "Who are you in the deepest part of yourself," what is your true essence?" The girls each painted the most amazing and beautiful painting of themselves.



New Light girl draws then paints her inner self

The second question I ask in each country is "what is your problem?" They talked about how they missed their mother when they weren't allowed to go back into the trafficking environment. Of course, now at the age of 18 and onward, they can visit their mothers whenever they wish, they are free as adults to make choices in their lives, and that is just what New Light has worked so hard to give them!



Girls at New Light painting their spirit animals for mural with Vijali

The third question I ask is, "What do you think is the solution?" They talked about how they loved their mother

and wanted to help her when they get a job, so that their mother can stop her work as a prostitute. They each chose a spirit animal that was to help them in their lives and help their mothers. These animals were the delightful images that emerged while painting together a mural in their living room.



Completion of mural "Spirit Animals"



Vijali and girls at completion of mural "Spirit Animals"

While I was working with painting, a friend of mine, Inna Dagman, a beautiful Russian dancer who immigrated to the States with her family, came for 12 days and taught the children dance and the older girls, specifically belly dancing, which they loved. She is also a body-worker and did amazing work with the trauma which the mothers had experienced, as well as taught her form of healing to the New Light staff. View the video clip of Inna dancing with the children and girls:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SntPX8loR7E&index>



Inna with girls at New Light house



Inna teaching dance



Inna belly dancing

While Inna was with me in Kolkata, on our free days we would go to Purna Das Baul's home and spend time with my dear friend and teacher of Baul music and philosophy. I lived with him and his family 20 years prior, for two months learning the Baul music and meditation. It was a wonderful reunion to see Purna Das, his son, Chotton and wife, and their baby whom I loved, grown to be 21 years old and over 6' tall. I took Inna as a gift for them to experience her beauty and inspiring belly dancing.



Purna Das Baul and Vijali in his home



Papia and her Baul Ashram in Kolkata



A Baul at Papia's Ashram

SHRI SARADA MATH

My month with New Light came to a close. I left Kolkata and traveled a short distance north to Dakshineswar where I had the privilege of staying at Shri Sarada Math where 100 nuns live in a beautiful garden right on the banks of Mother Ganga. They have a magnificent temple just within walking distance from the Kali Temple where Sri Ramakrishna and his wife, Sri Sarada Devi lived for a good part of their lives.

One early morning I walked over to the Kali temple with my basket of offerings and had a glimpse of the powerful black statue of Kali bedecked in flowers and silks alive from the devotion of thousands of devotees. Then I walked to Sri Ramakrishna's room a few yards away, where he had lived most of his adult life. I sat on the cool floor by his bed and meditated for some time, reliving the scenes from "The Gospel of Ramakrishna," conversations of Sri Ramakrishna recorded by Mahendranath Gupta. Then I crossed the walkway to the tiny Nahabat where Sri Sarada Devi had lived taking her early morning bath in Mother Ganga a few yards away, then cooking the day's food for Sri Ramakrishna and women devotees who would seek her out for guidance and inspiration.

This was a pilgrimage for me. When I was nine years old my father introduced me to the Vedanta Society in Hollywood, California (called the Ramakrishna Math, in India) where I received my first meditation instructions and by the age of 14 I decided to enter their convent in Santa Barbara and become a nun. After 10 years, when I was 25 years old I left the convent wanting to embrace the whole of life as my ashram. But the discipline of meditation and love of the life of Sri Ramakrishna was embedded in my heart for life.

BAUL MUSICIANS OF WEST BENGAL



Village scene, Shyambati near Santiniketan

After spending a few days with the nuns I took a three-hour train ride north to Santiniketan, the home and school of Rabindranath Tagore (my favorite writer and Nobel Laureate), which is now a university. The music and lyrics of the minstrel folk musicians of the area called Bauls (their name meaning, mad or crazy) attracted Tagore to the degree that he hailed them the true mystics of eastern India.



Basudeb Das Baul and Vijali



Vijali, Basudeb, Urmela at Baul Ashram



Vijali with two Baul women

I lived for two weeks on the outskirts of Santiniketan in the village Shyambati where in 1991 I built a house as an Ashram for the Bauls on land belonging to one family. They and the local people of the village helped me with the construction and I was able to use donations from the States that were given for my World Wheel Project. See the 4 minute video of my time with the Bauls in India in 1991 and the construction of the Ashram:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4MTEeNK_dg



Basudeb's mother



Anita and her husband



Anita's house in construction

It was a joyous reunion in the village! The baby who was born on my second visit there and whom I loved so much is now 23 years old. She just married and I saw how this now big family was crowded into two small rooms. They included: Basudeb Das Baul and his wife Urmela, one 15 year old son, and Anita the baby I loved so long ago with her new husband, along with Basudeb's brother's son and his mother who is paralyzed from a stroke.

I decided to build Anita and her new husband a two-room village style house (with the small amount I had left from donations raised for my World Wheel Projects). The site was chosen to be right next to the original house, the Baul Ashram, which I had built with the help of the family and community 25 years earlier. Unfortunately, this time I didn't have enough donations to quite finish the house, but I am wishing to complete it whenever I receive more donations. Here is the link for donations on my website: <http://worldwheel.org/donate/>

I know you will enjoy these three short videos clips I took this time while in India of Basudeb and the Bauls singing:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYztjajuIeg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PINGHDSz8cU>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wb0tPMDE2Is>



Basudeb singing with family and friends

It is my wish that the light of embracing all life and the philosophy of Oneness that I experienced while living with the Baul folk musicians, may permeate our planet, our leaders, and our personal lives. At this time of trauma in the lives of our brothers and sisters across the waters as well as in our backyard, I feel urged to spread this view of interconnectedness that initially inspired my own life's work in 1986, the *World Wheel, Global Peace Through the Arts*. You can view the trailer for the "Wheel of the World" film here on my YouTube Channel: Vijali's World Wheel:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toDRFMJaziE>

I feel the Baul philosophy of Oneness, of joy and connectedness, is what our shaking planet needs right now. They are indeed a profound group of musicians, living a life of acceptance of all religions, all people and all life. Those two weeks spent with the Bauls were perhaps the most joyous time of my life.

My dear friends, I know this newsletter has run on too long, but I had so much I wanted to share with you. I leave you now with a prayer that we may support love, beauty and peace through our words, actions and creations as an offering of hope and healing for our World Family and for this beautiful planet, our one and only home.

Sending so much love to each one of you,



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