

**A Mouthful of Petals: Three Years in an Indian Village by Wendy & Allan (2020).
Adelaide: Wakefield Press**

A Mouthful of Petals is the story of Wendy and Allan Scarfe's experiences of volunteering as teachers from 1960 to 1963 in a remote village in the north Indian state of Bihar. They were among the first young Australians who volunteered to spend two or three years of their lives sharing the knowledge, skills and experience they had gained in their professions, through working for minimal wages in local conditions in what were then called "third world countries". Most often these countries were Australia's neighbours across the Indian Ocean, in the South East Asia region and the Oceania area of the Pacific Ocean.

In the case of the Scarfes, they had studied to become teachers at the University of Melbourne and taught for several years in Victorian secondary schools until they decided to accept the invitation of Jayaprakash Narayan to become teachers for his ashram school in the backward and impoverished village of Sokhodeora. One of the leaders of the independence movement along with Ghandi, Narayan had turned aside from political leadership to concentrate on social reform. Wendy and Allan had formed a remarkable friendship with Jayaprakash while doing educational work with the Ghandian Village Development Movement two years earlier.

Most volunteers live in local conditions, but Wendy and Allen found themselves living in what they recognised as "the most modern house in the ashram and for at least thirty miles around"— a recently built brick house with concrete floors and verandahs front and back. At one end of the back verandah was a small kitchen; at the other end, a Western style bathroom and toilet provided specially for them. Light, however, came from lanterns, cooking was done on primus stoves, kerosene powered the refrigerator they had brought from Australia, running water for the house had to be pumped from a well at the back to a high storage tank and it was essential to sleep under mosquito nets.

They found the village people could be divided into three groups. Their first contact was with the people living around the ashram – Jayaprakash's brother who was in charge of the ashram, the other teachers and two Japanese agricultural workers who were demonstrating new techniques in rice growing. These they related to more or less as equals. Then there was a small group of tradespeople and craftsmen who earned small but steady incomes which enabled the families to live in small houses and access enough food for their children's growth and wellbeing. They were largely satisfied with what they had achieved and were suspicious of the white strangers and the new ways they were introducing. The Scarfes had minimal contact with these people, the third group, the Harijans or outcasts, constituted the poorest families in the village and represented the great majority of its people. Mired in their poverty, they were quite unable to see beyond the realities of the tiny crowded mud hovels they lived in and the two meals a day of rice and dahl on which they could do no more than survive. Wendy and Allan felt drawn to help the Harijan children by offering them both opportunities for basic literacy and numeracy learning and finding ways to improve their diet and health. The book's name comes from the authors' observation of Harijan children stuffing hibiscus flowers plucked from a hedge into their mouths to satisfy their hunger and enjoy the sweet nectar to be found at the base of the flower.

Initially Wendy and Allan were overwhelmed by all the things they saw that needed to be done to improve both the teaching in the school and the health of the Harijan children. So little learning seemed to be taking place at the ashram school that they re-organised the classes at different levels of achievement and outlined a set curriculum that needed to be taught at each level. The challenge was to help the teachers implement this new curriculum and to encourage students to come to school regularly and benefit from this learning. They recognised that irregular attendance, poor attention and slow learning were directly related to the children's insufficient food that was completely lacking in protein – no meat, no milk no eggs. When they discovered that the ashram had 1400 pounds of American powdered milk waiting to be used, Wendy and Allan organised its regular distribution to the village children

each morning, by boiling up cauldrons of water, stirring in the milk powder and filling each child's bowl with the hot creamy liquid. Later they were able to access a protein rich multipurpose food which they distributed in the same way. The children benefited visibly in body weight, energy and alertness from these supplements to their diet.

One of the great challenges facing volunteers is coming to understand that the cultural assumptions which they have grown up with can be very different from those of the people they are living and working with. For example, Wendy's egalitarian Australian assumptions were shocked at the idea of having a servant working in the house. The Bihar villagers, on the other hand, considered that those who were educated and had money should employ servants, not just for their own convenience, but as a means of providing a small but steady income to a poor family. Allan, for his part, assumed that the village meeting would use the same system of making decisions as in Australia, by voting for and against a proposal. The Indian way, however, was to talk through the issues until a consensus was reached. How to care for children was another area of great cultural difference. The village mothers were amazed at the way Wendy cared for the two Indian babies that she and Allan adopted during their stay in Bihar.

What proved to be probably their most important achievement came through the initiative of Harijan adults who wanted to have the opportunity to learn literacy in the evenings. It all started with Mahavir, the servant they had been reluctant to accept. As he worked for them, he observed how important reading and writing were in their lives and begged to be taught how to read and write Hindi. He was absolutely delighted when he was able to read his first story for himself and asked to take home books and magazines which he read by lamplight at night. His success led other Harijans to ask Mahavir to arrange for adult literacy classes to be held at night and he asked Allan how they could achieve this. When no suitable building could be found, Allan and Mahavir were able to purchase some land and cheap building materials. Allan drew up some simple plans and Mahavir organised Harijan

volunteers to work in shifts to construct the building which was successfully completed. Meantime Mahavir and one other literate adult were sent to special short courses for literacy teachers. In this way, the Night Class building became a permanent feature of the village landscape and the adult literacy classes continued long after the Scarfes had returned to Australia.

Subsequently, Wendy re-visited Bihar and wrote a report on the famine of 1967. Her experiences at that time constitute the Epilogue of the book. Her account reveals the rapid growth in the intervening years of volunteer movements, so that the presence of American Peace Corps workers and Canadian volunteers enabled the digging of deep village wells during the Bihar famine. In the years following, these continued to provide permanent sources of water for the villagers to use for irrigating vegetable crops from the seeds they had been given. Then in 1970 Wendy and Allan returned together to India to research and later publish a biography of Jayaprakash Narayan, their great friend.

Originally published in London by William Heinemann in 1967, revised and re-printed by Seaview Press in 2011, *A Mouthful of Petals* was completely reset and published by Wakefield Press in 2020, as Wendy's tribute to Allan who died in 2016. Writing in 1977, Stephen Murray-Smith, then editor of *Melbourne Studies in Education*, described the book as "a distillation of the experience and wisdom of ...Australian[s] who ha[ve] a real understanding and knowledge of mudbrick, cowpat, village India. It is to Australia's international credit that the Scarfes are now widely known abroad, especially in Asia, for their sensitive and important works on Indian themes...their achievement has been remarkable." *Overland*, 1977

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