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Dear fellow-members of the TS and TOS around the world,

We hope you are enjoying keeping in touch with what is happening in the TOS internationally. Our international electronic newsletter aims to bring you information to inspire your service work within or outside the TOS and to help you get to know TOS members outside your own country.

Remember that the newsletter is designed to be read while you are connected to the internet.

Please also consider sending photographs of your TOS activities and news items that might be of interest to fellow TOS members. We would welcome your contributions by email to the editors at tos.intouch@gmail.com.

With best wishes,

Carolyn, Diana and Geoffrey

Correction to the last issue, no 17 -

In our last issue, we stated that John Kern is the founder and director of the Kern Foundation that currently offers a matching grant to the TOS in America in support of the Golden Link College. In fact John's father, Henry, was the founder and John is not the director but an advisor to the Foundation – a highly experienced, skilled and consummately diplomatic advisor, may we add!



(L. to R.)

Carolyn Harrod is the National Coordinator of the TOS in Australia, Geoffrey Harrod is the International TOS Webmaster, and Diana Dunningham Chapotin is the International Secretary of the TOS.

Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.

– Mohandas Gandhi



TOS emergency aid for starving families in East Africa

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The food was personally delivered and distributed, principally to the mothers, by Mrs Usha Shah, TOS convenor in Kenya. Accompanied by a local area facilitator, Mr Paulo, she travelled to Kitui via Machakos where a pick-up van loaded with maize flour, oil and salt was waiting. They then left for Kitui, about two hours away. Usha sent a moving account of the food distribution. [Read more...](#)



An update from the TOS in Hungary

The TOS group formed last year in Hungary has just acquired official registration as a non-profit service organisation working under the name of MA-TE SZ. (This is an abbreviation of three words: MA = MAGyar, meaning Hungarian; TE = TEozófiai, meaning Theosophical; and SZ = SZolgálat, meaning Service.) The group continues with their work in the flood-affected village of Borsodnádásd. The group's long term goal is to help the villagers build their own active self-help community and develop their own service work. To this end, the group camped in the town for three days in August to get to know the villagers better and deepen already established bonds.

An interesting facet of MA-TE SZ's work is the self-training its members engage in to develop the skills needed for service work. For every four or five newcomers, a special orientation programme is planned in which the whole group participates. [Read more...](#)



TOS news from around the world

In this issue you'll find news from the TOS in the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, India which held a most enjoyable conference in a beautiful Jain shrine serving more than 500 pilgrims every day. There is also news about the Assam and Arunachal TOS Region's energetic Annual Meeting that combined inspiring social welfare work with interesting talks and discussion. The TOS in Brisbane, Australia shares news about their recent cinema event that they ran to raise funds for international TOS projects and the TOS in Kenya talks about a project they have recently begun to give skills to needy women, enabling them to add to the family income by making dairy products and dung cakes for cooking fuel. [Read more...](#)

What's new on the International TOS website?



Brazil

Our [Latest News](#) this month comes from Andréa Dias de Mendonça Resende who recently replaced Regina Celi Medina Alves Silva as coordinator of the TOS in Brazil. She told us about two original and constructive initiatives in which the TOS and TS collaborated early this year. The first event was a 'caravan'! A small group of theosophists travelled by car through ten cities to the city hosting this year's TS Summer School. On their way, they introduced the Theosophical Society to the public, giving talks on theosophy, selling books and magazines, and mentioning the TOS's work as well. The second important initiative this year took place at the Summer School itself in the city of Bonito in the State of Mato Grosso do Sul. The TOS in Brazil organised a bazaar, with objects and services donated by those attending the School.

The new [Featured Article](#) is by Vic Hao Chin, Jr, the President of the Golden Link College. The news that the Golden Link School in the Philippines was extending its programme to tertiary level in August 2009 triggered interest amongst members of the TOS around the world. Mr Vijay Mital of Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, wrote expressing enthusiasm and asking about the theosophical content of the curriculum at all levels. Vic, in consultation with Ms Rekha Nahar, administrator of the kindergarten, primary and secondary divisions, replied with an explanation of how the College provides a theosophical education. In their view it has two facets that are a focus for students and teachers alike:

- the development of the individual in terms of character and an awakening of the higher faculties and qualities such as self-awareness, compassion and meditative silence
- the development of a philosophy of life founded on the ageless wisdom or theosophy, based on understanding the basic principles of popular theosophy and the core essence of the great spiritual or religious traditions and exploring the application of such philosophy to daily life, profession, society and human problems.



East Africa

Our [Featured Project](#) is the newly established project of the TOS in Kenya, mentioned above, to provide emergency aid for starving families in East Africa. Our thanks go to all those TOS groups around the world who have stepped in with donations so that 55 families could immediately be supplied with food.

We commemorate Annie Besant's birthday this month with a short article and some unusual photos of her from our archives. You can find them in our [For Members](#) section under the title *Inspirational People*. You'll also find additions to the TOS photo gallery and the Inspiration section.

Go to <http://international.theoservice.org>

Tree planting in Kenya



The TOS and TS in Kenya have launched a project to educate children on the importance of looking after the natural environment. The project started in early May with a visit to the High Ridge Primary School in Parklands, Nairobi. Usha Shah, the newly appointed director of the TOS, addressed the assembly of children, along with special guest, former TS International Vice-President, Mary Anderson. Usha, Mary and others talked about the essential role trees play in the life of the planet and the responsibility of every human being to plant trees and take care of them.

A tree planting ceremony then took place with pupils from all fourteen classes. Mary, TS officers and committee members planted 26 trees. Each class has its own special tree and is responsible for taking care of it. The circle in which the trees were planted has been named *The Theosophical Garden*.

[Read more....](#)



TOS members visit the Social Welfare Centre at Adyar

We continue the photographic tour George and Gailene Wester of Perth, Australia have prepared for us of the humanitarian service projects run at the international headquarters of the TS at Adyar, Chennai, India. In this issue, we visit the Social Welfare Centre where vocational training is given to young women of modest means and day care activities are offered to underprivileged children of kindergarten age.

All who attend the international convention of the TS in late December each year are invited to an Open Day at the Social Welfare Centre where they can meet the staff and students and discover the year's achievements. The vocational training ladies and the children put on delightful dance and drama performances and their beautiful work is displayed. [Read more...](#)

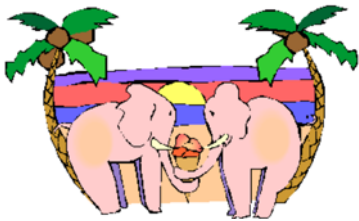


Simple acts of kindness

In recent issues of this newsletter, we have celebrated some simple acts of kindness that no one gets to hear about. Now we feature a Theosophist whose service to the TS has gone largely unseen because it has always been performed in the background.

Bernice Croft acted for ten years as Secretary to our International TS President, Radha Burnier, before retiring last February and returning to her native New Zealand. While many of us around the world wish Bernice a happy retirement, we know in fact, that she is as busy as ever, and has really only changed her service address from India to New Zealand.

Dorothy Bell, a member of the Australian Mornington Peninsula TS Group and a national member of the TS in America – and one of the many visitors to Adyar whom Bernice befriended – shares her fond memories of Bernice here with anecdotes of Bernice's many simple acts of kindness while she was the President's secretary. [Read more...](#)



A parable for reflection

Once again we have a story with a deep message for life. [Read more...](#)

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TOS emergency aid for starving families in East Africa

In the face of the current acute food shortage in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya, the TOS in Nairobi has undertaken a project on behalf of us all. The town of Kitui, 130 km. east of Nairobi, was selected and a church identified as local partner. At the end of August, fifty families were given enough staple foods to keep them alive for a month as part of a programme that will last six months. (No, wait! In fact 55 families were fed, because it was impossible to turn away the extra ones that turned up.)

The food was personally delivered and distributed, principally to the mothers, by Mrs Usha Shah, TOS convenor in Kenya. Accompanied by a local area facilitator, Mr Paulo, she travelled to Kitui via Machakos where a pick-up van loaded with maize flour, oil and salt was waiting. They then left for Kitui, about two hours away. Here is Usha's account.

The road to Kitui is all tarmacked except for a badly pot-holed stretch of two kilometres. The countryside all along is dreary and depressing. We can see grass which is brown, shrivelled and ready to catch fire but for long patches of bare earth. The trees are leafless and waiting for the rains which have not arrived for three years. The savannah shrubs and cacti are battling to stay alive. It is brown and brown throughout, with little green except for the trees which refuse to surrender to the harsh conditions. The fields display the brave but failed attempts of the small land-holders to grow maize and chick peas – failed because all the plants have dried up, even before seeing the light of the day.



On both sides, women and children are trekking long distances to find and buy water from designated places with boreholes. Improvised ways of lessening the weight of the water are seen: cans held on strings, children rolling drums along the road, donkey carts... We see women carrying their babies on their backs with water cans in their arms and scores of children, even young ones, trudging along in pursuit of water. We, who live in developed countries, cry about child labour in Africa and elsewhere but those who complain should come and see what in many cases is a necessary evil. They are working for their very survival. This search for water keeps them out of schools and keeps women from earning a living by knitting, sewing, etc. Animals also trek long distances in search of water. On our way, we see a donkey licking the pebbles along the side of the river to see if there is any water – a pitiful sight. The rivers have dried up and offer nothing but boulders and rocks.



Already saddened at seeing these desperate conditions so close to Nairobi, we reach the arranged venue where more than 50 people are waiting patiently for us to arrive. The women surge forward to welcome us with songs and dancing. Amongst them are some very elderly ladies barely able to walk, and even two blind ones. This brings tears to our eyes. A speech of welcome is made and in reply I explain about Theosophy and the work of TOS worldwide. The people are amazed when I mention that TOS members in Spain, France, England, New Zealand, Germany, Australia, Italy and the USA care about their plight and have made it possible for TOS Kenya to bring them food. Hearty applause and prayers of blessing are given by all before we even start on the work at hand.



Everything is set up quickly and the food distribution starts in a very orderly way. Some of the recipients cannot hold back their tears when they see the flour and oil. The elderly and blind ladies are helped to carry their share by the younger ones. Some biscuits, sweets and stationery from a Kenyan donor are then distributed. The elderly ladies are the happiest to receive the biscuits – a special treat indeed! It is hard to see them so thrilled with simple things to which they never have access and which we take for granted. Many come to hug us, shake hands or just be near. At such moments I feel good to be alive and able to be of some service to our fellow beings! Amid shouts of “Asante Sana, na Mungu na Bariki” (Thank you and may you prosper by God’s grace), we leave to return to Nairobi. On the way we see smiling women and children carrying their very welcome load, assured of a daily meal for at least a month.



At one point we stop and give some small things and a shirt, trousers and cardigan to a very elderly man walking along the road. He clutches the clothes, staring at them with amazement as though he can't believe the gift is real!

When we get back to Nairobi after our long day, we are tired but so very happy that TOS Kenya has embarked on this project. As I try to go to sleep, all I can see is the smiles on the faces of the elderly ladies in particular and the delight of the old man on the road side, and I can still hear the shouts of happiness that greeted us when we arrived.



Some of you are asking about the possibility of developing a project that will allow 'our' families to feed themselves rather than depending on emergency aid. Excellent question! We are looking at the modalities of putting down a bore hole on the church property at which our food distributions will take place over the next six months so that the villagers can have not only drinking water but water for the planting of high quality seeds....

Until news of the feasibility of this project is available, I extend heartfelt thanks to all of you who put a smile on the faces of the residents of the Kyambevo Village, Kauma Location, Kitui West. Each penny you have donated has gone to the beneficiaries and there have been no administrative expenses whatsoever. Many, many thanks.

The TOS in Kenya is itself supporting five of the TOS's 55 families at a cost of 2,000 Kenyan shillings per month per family. This covers supplies of 22 kgs of maize meal, cooking oil and salt. That's for a family of two parents and three children per month. (The total sum for the full period of six months including all five families comes to US\$700. One wonders how long a family of five from an affluent country would last on what would seem to be a mono-diet of maize meal...)

TOS groups and an individual member in other countries have matched the five families taken on by the TOS in Kenya, allowing us to cover 45 of the 55 families so far. Usha Shah assures us of complete accountability in this project. As she has told us, not a penny of our donations is going on administrative costs such as is the case with the big charitable organisations on the spot.

For further information on the project or to send a donation (still badly needed), write to Diana, our international secretary, at tosinternational@wanadoo.fr.

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An update from the TOS in Hungary

We congratulate the TOS group formed last year in Hungary on its just-acquired official registration as a non-profit service organisation working under the name of MA-TE SZ. (This is an abbreviation of three words: MA = Magyar, meaning Hungarian; TE = TEozófiai, meaning Theosophical; and SZ = SZolgálat, meaning Service.)

While the members are still busy with the administrative side of this step, they are carrying on with their work in the village of Borsodnádásd. This is the flood-affected town in northern Hungary they 'adopted' last year with the blessing of the town's municipal officers. While activities so far have included emergency relief such as the collection of donations and clothing and the offering of gifts last Christmas, the group's long term goal is to help the villagers build their own active self-help community and develop their own service work.



To this end, the group camped in the town for three days in August to get to know the villagers better and deepen already established bonds. We will bring photos of this experience in a future issue.

An interesting facet of MA-TE SZ's work is the self-training its members engage in to develop the skills needed for service work. For every four or five newcomers, a special orientation programme is planned in which the whole group participates.

We wish MA-TE SZ every success in its endeavours.

Here is the outline of MA-TE SZ's training programme

Preparing ourselves for service

I. Setting the foundations for a cohesive group

- Introduction: games to help us get to know each other better and to set a relaxed atmosphere
- Self-expression: in what areas of service is each of us particularly interested?
- Exploration of the fundamentals of service using non-verbal means such as creative visualisation
- Self-knowledge games: how can each of us help?

II. Service in the light of theosophy and its laws

- The law of karma and dharma
- The law of evolution
- The law of reincarnation
- The law of analogy
- The law of sacrifice
- The notions of 'good' and 'evil' in theosophy

III. The selfless attitude of the server

- The theory of humanistic psychology
- Criteria for an equal relationship between the 'server' and 'the served'
- Communicating from the basis of the selfless attitude of the server
- Putting our skills into practice every day: – situational games

IV. Résumé

- Programme overview
- Questions arising
- Brainstorming: ideas for service projects together
- How was this training useful for me?
- Constructive feedback about each other and our TOS group



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TOS news from around the world

An unusual venue for the Gujarat and Maharashtra regional conference

Can you imagine enjoying a TOS Conference in a beautiful Jain shrine serving more than 500 pilgrims every day?

In early May, this is where members from the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra met to report on and confer about TOS activities in the region, which focus principally on education, health services and help for senior citizens. The members also took time to discuss the letter from the Master of the Wisdom that inspired Mrs Besant to create the TOS. A retired vice-chancellor of Saurashtra University said, "I am not a member of the TS but I am an ardent member of the TOS, which is living brotherhood."

To the right we see Dada Bhagwan Ashram near the town of Surat in Gujarat where the TOS Conference took place.



TOS Regional President, Bro. Kanti Bhai Patel (standing left), welcomes guest speaker, Bro. Mahendra P. Singhal (seated in the middle), who addressed over 50 members present on the theme, "Why TOS and how it relates to brotherhood".



As is so often the case at TOS conferences in India, a presentation was made to the needy – in this case a wheelchair.

Another inspiring AGM in the Assam and Arunachal region, India

The President of the Assam and Arunachal TOS Region, Bro. J. N. Patowary, recently reported on his region's energetic Annual Meeting that combined inspiring social welfare work with interesting talks and discussion.

The program began with a medical camp at which approximately 250 people were treated. They even had a mobile medical van equipped with X-ray and ECG facilities.

Members also participated in other social service activities including visits, with distribution of gifts, to a school and a home for women and orphans, many of whom had been displaced by floods, earthquakes and ethnic disturbances. The women have access to training in weaving, embroidery and making items from textiles.



Consultations at the medical camp



Members enjoyed a variety of interesting talks, many of them on the relevance of the TOS's approach to service, in relation to contemporary world problems.

At the conclusion of the meeting, various mobility aids were provided to poor and needy handicapped people. Some of these aids had been purchased with a donation from the TOS in Brisbane, Australia.

Successful fundraising for the TOS in Brisbane, Australia

The Brisbane TOS group in Australia supports a number of international TOS projects as well as its local project with homeless women. They are therefore frequently searching for successful fundraising ideas to enable them to make donations to these projects.

Recently they ran a cinema event that was well supported by their friends. They negotiated an excellent reduced price with a cinema, and sold tickets to a popular movie at a little more than the normal cost of a cinema ticket. On arrival, guests were welcomed with a beautifully packaged box of home-made afternoon tea treats and offered a choice of drinks. There was time before the start of the movie for guests to mingle and chat, which added to their enjoyment of the event. Since the afternoon tea was donated by TOS members, this event was a most successful fund-raiser.



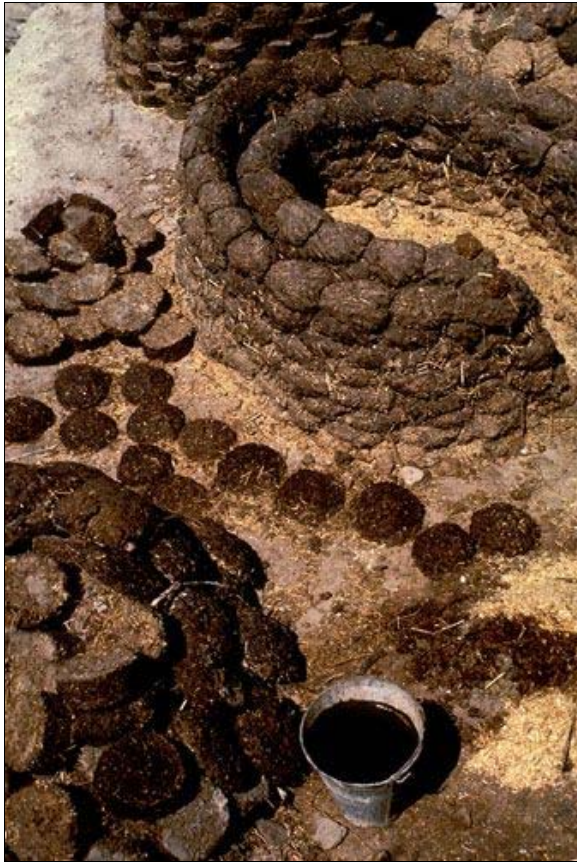
TOS President, Tina Fiedler, handing a guest an afternoon tea package

Income generating skills for needy ladies in Nairobi

The TOS in Kenya started a project in September to give skills to women enabling them to add to the family income. Ten ladies from 25 to 70 years of age came to the premises of the TS in Nairobi and were shown how to make cow dung cakes to use as fuel, instead of coal. The fuel cakes are easy and cheap to make, are environmentally friendly and can be sold with a very reasonable profit margin.

The ladies were also taught to make dairy products: butter, ghee (clarified butter), yoghurt (plain and with different fruits and fruit flavours), cottage cheese (again with several flavours), lassi (a cooling yoghurt drink) and paneer (a kind of cheese). Ways to make, pack and sell the products were also discussed.

The ladies were initially to come for only one day but they would like to come back to learn the making of samosas, chapattis (plain and stuffed), as well as art and craft work! TOS Kenya is delighted to be able to assist these women to make extra money for themselves and their families.



Cow dung cakes to the left, and above, drying on a tree

The ladies also learnt to make food products for sale (below).



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Tree planting in Kenya

The TOS and TS in Kenya have launched a project to educate children on the importance of looking after the natural environment. The project started in early May with a visit to the High Ridge Primary School in Parklands, Nairobi. Usha Shah, the newly appointed director of the TOS, addressed the assembly of children, along with special guest, former TS International Vice-President, Mary Anderson. Usha, Mary and others talked about the essential role trees play in the life of the planet and the responsibility of every human being to plant trees and take care of them. A tree planting ceremony then took place with pupils from all fourteen classes. Mary, TS officers and committee members planted 26 trees. Each class has its own special tree and is responsible for taking care of it. The circle in which the trees were planted has been named *The Theosophical Garden*. For the moment it is a little bare and if it is to be called a garden, Usha thinks that a few shrubs and flowers will need to be planted to lend colour to the area.

The next part of the project will consist of a painting competition on the theme "Scenes from Nature" for lower primary classes and an essay competition for the middle primary classes on themes also relating to the importance of Nature. The upper classes will take part in a speech contest and will be challenged to come up with a project to reduce the use of plastic bags. When this part of the project will be taken up is anybody's guess because right now Usha has her hands full with the emergency food relief project reported on elsewhere in this newsletter. She is also helping with an income-generating project for 15 needy women that involves teaching them how to make dairy products and cow dung fuel cakes. In the long run, the plan is for all the pupils at High Ridge Primary School to spend a day cleaning the area around their school and to make a trip to the Karura Forest to plant more trees. In all, a hundred trees should be planted at the school and in the forest. They will include fruit trees, indigenous trees, medicinal trees and shade-giving trees.

Usha reports that this is a pilot project and if successful will be taken to two more schools in 2012 or 2013.



Usha Shah addressed the pupils and talked about how trees are like human beings in that they need to be nurtured and taken care of. To look after our trees and the environment is our way of thanking the Supreme, said Usha, especially trees as they give us so much. When she asked the students what trees give us, they mentioned flowers, fruit, shade and oxygen.



Present at the tree planting from left to right: Pauline (Head Teacher), Mary Anderson (Guest of Honour), Miss Sarla Maroo (Chairperson of Nairobi Lodge), Navin Shah (General Secretary of the TS in East Africa, and a teacher (High Ridge Primary School).



Here we see Mary Anderson addressing the students about love in its different forms, including love for the environment. The children were fascinated by her and listened attentively.



Mary is planting the first tree assisted by a boy scout, with others in attendance.

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TOS members visit the Social Welfare Centre at Adyar (part 2)

We continue the photographic tour George and Gailene Wester of Perth, Australia have prepared for us of the humanitarian service projects run at the international headquarters of the TS at Adyar, Chennai, India. In this issue, we visit the Social Welfare Centre where vocational training is given to young women of modest means and day care activities are offered to underprivileged children of kindergarten age.



All who attend the international convention of the TS in late December each year are invited to an Open Day at the Social Welfare Centre where they can meet the staff and students and discover the year's achievements. The vocational training ladies and the children put on delightful dance and drama performances and their beautiful work is displayed.



TS members awaiting the start of the Open Day celebrations



Here we see some of the pre-school children ready to perform. Around 85 children aged between two and five are looked after. Classroom and outdoor activities are arranged, as well as field trips. A nutritious vegetarian breakfast and midday meal are provided for the children, who are looked after by a staff of 4 teachers and 5 helpers.



The children tell a story through drama. Intellectual, personal, physical and social development is attended to and special emphasis given to language work.



Folk dancing performed by the vocational training ladies



International TS Vice-President, Mrs Linda Oliveira, presents a certificate of course completion to one of the students, along with a gift.



Mrs Breda Zagar of the TS in Slovenia cuts the ribbon on one of the room displays.



TS members enjoy the beautiful art and craft work.



Samples of the ladies' sewing work



Equipment for the teaching of weaving and tailoring which is offered to some 25 women per year



Free medical treatment is provided at the Social Welfare Centre for needy villagers by the doctors of the Theosophical Order of Service in Chennai.



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Bernice Croft acted for ten years as Secretary to our International TS President, Radha Burnier, before retiring last February and returning to her native New Zealand. While many of us around the world wish Bernice a happy retirement, we know in fact, that she is as busy as ever, and has really only changed her service address from India to New Zealand where, amongst other community activities, she has resumed her long-standing membership of Soroptimist International, a volunteer service organisation for business and professional women working to improve the lives of women and girls in local communities and throughout the world. Her busy life has also included attending the annual ES retreat at The Manor in Sydney, Australia in May, joining a creative writing group and lecturing at the Wellington TS Lodge.

Bravo, Bernice!

Dorothy Bell, a member of the Australian Mornington Peninsula TS Group and a national member of the TS in America – and one of the many visitors to Adyar whom Bernice befriended – shares memories of Bernice here.

... the President's Secretary

My first meeting with Bernice Croft...

It was Sunday, mid-afternoon, in early October 2002 and I was in India. After unpacking my clothes in the intense humidity and heat of the day – and adjusting to my allotted sleeping quarters on the ground floor of Leadbeater Chambers – I trundled over to the dining room seeking the company of those who were also attending the 8-week School of the Wisdom and visiting the legendary Adyar TS Headquarters for the first time. Fortunately, I found a few other weary travellers from Europe, England and even another Australian whose flights had arrived either in the middle of the night or early morning. We swapped stories for a while.

Two Western women approached our table from the little road alongside the dining hall, both in Indian outfits – with those colourful pants and long shirt-dress that we came to know as the salwar chemise. They joined the table, introduced themselves as Bernice and Leonie, and we learned that they were volunteer workers on the compound, both Kiwis – from New Zealand. Bernice explained to a questioner how she purchased her dress materials, her salwar chemise basics at the huge Chennai Silks store in the CBD, and had them made up to her own design specifications by a man out the back of some nearby shops in downtown Adyar.

Not a strand of burnished gold hair out of place, and looking as cool as a cucumber, she answered a whole stack of questions about water and food, shopping and supermarkets, snakes, rabies, jackals, cobras, bats and mosquitoes – and how to handle auto drivers. She was elegant and the sweeping scarf-shawl – worn over the left shoulder – sometimes found other positions with equal grace.



By comparison, I felt hot and uncomfortable – as well as slightly underdressed – in vanilla summer slacks and cotton top that clung uncomfortably in the heat. Of course, to a student of theosophy, such body-conscious thoughts were totally inappropriate and should never have registered on the radar.

Suddenly she turned around, fixed her eyes directly on mine in a no-nonsense summons and declared, “You missed lunch, so we’ll take the bicycles.”

Surprised, and not knowing what it really meant, or how long ago I had breakfasted on the plane or ridden a bicycle – I said, “Yes, I’d love to.” So this was my first meeting with Bernice Croft. Sizing up what was really a trivial, personal situation of my own making, she stepped in and did what was there to be done with no concern at the inconvenience to herself or the loss of her precious leisure time on a Sunday afternoon. There she was, checking the tyres, thrusting a bicycle into my hands and then setting off down the road calling, “Don’t worry, just follow me.”

I watched her ride off, admiring her mastery of the machine that to me was like an uncomfortable, militaristic improvisation that refused to co-operate or respond to any effort of mine to gain momentum. As I wobbled in zigzag fashion after her, I wondered how anyone could portray even a smidgen of elegance in such a bodily position – her feather-light shawl, now resembling a long scarf, seemed to trail freely in the air behind her, very much in the genre of the English actress, Maggie Smith, pedalling her bicycle around Scottish laneways in the movie, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. “Come on,” Bernice called after a while, checking my progress on the bumpy little road, winding through palm trees and other exotic trees and flowering bushes, past a few scattered buildings here and there, “Just out the front gate for a wee bit.”

I raised my eyes from the roadway to the Bookshop sign and then towards the front gate. To my horror I saw heavy traffic – trucks, buses, taxis, autos, big cars, little cars, motorbikes, scooters, even a bullock cart and other bicycles, all rushing past, changing lanes and swerving in and out, with no space in between.

In panic, I yelled, “I can’t go out there... I’ll be killed,” my voice trailed off in disbelief.

“Just follow me, you’ll be safe,” Bernice sang out.

We passed the security guards through the gates of the walled compound, turning hard left to the edge of the roadway. I breathed a little, assured that we were not actually going to be swallowed up into the mainstream traffic. Nevertheless, the assault on the senses upon leaving the peaceful verdure of subtropical jungle vegetation, had begun. Such a cacophony: the honking and blaring of all types of horns, whistles and unknown others, and the droning and revving of all kinds of motor engines, charging along, expelling heavy diesel and petrol fumes into the odorous hot mix of near invisible swirling dust and dirt.

Bernice was zipping around parked cars, autos, motor bikes, as well as pedestrians – groups of Indian men strolling beside, not on, the broken sidewalks. My lack of skills to negotiate such obstacles left me behind a little and I lost sight of her. Worried, I paused to look around and thankfully heard, “Over here.” She had parked her bike, indicated where to put mine, and was halfway into a sort of shop with display cabinets and a service counter. Lots of Indian waiters hovered as she pointed to the contents in the cabinet, and then we were ushered to a small table and instantly became the objects of curiosity.

A delectable selection of Indian sweets, cakey things, biscuity things, was brought to the table with tea. The journey had ended in cake. What a wonderful reward for effort, I thought, and for an hour I forgot about the return journey.



As years rolled on...

I grew to know Bernice Croft when I returned regularly to Adyar for Schools of the Wisdom and International Conventions, and the little incident of kindness I have just related – wrapped in adventure as it was – came to represent to me her way of truly working the first object of sister-brotherhood – and HPB’s “theosophy is altruism”. She was a natural. Her helpfulness and assistance to those around her turned into a reputation as ‘the traveller’s aide’ in India, and it spread through word of mouth to more and more visiting Western members, who were disadvantaged by language and ignorance of local custom and the ‘Indian way’ of doing things.

Whether it was getting stamps, posting letters and sending a parcel home; working the banking system with travellers’ cheques, changing money or finding specific shopping items and venues – Bernice was a voice that was well-grounded in experience. She knew the tourist traps and exploitation routines and she knew the relatively authentic markets and stores for genuine rugs, crafts and jewellery and took members there. She knew about transportation, in and around Chennai, visiting local temples and ashrams as well as Ramanashram and Auroville. She knew the local eating places, and the nooks and crannies of the suburb of Adyar, including the adventures surrounding a visit to Elliot’s Beach on a Sunday afternoon.



She was up to date with local arts activities and festivals, and occasional visiting musicians giving concerts as guests of Consulates were also on the “let’s go” menu. She also took Westerners to the Cathedral for Christmas Carols and service on Christmas Eve – to compensate for an otherwise hollow time for those who came to the International Convention and were away from family and traditional Christmas celebrations at this time.

She also helped the TOS in many ways. Our International Secretary, Diana, recalls one such gesture of practical thoughtfulness,

“When I was at Adyar once and about to travel on to Auckland, I mentioned to Bernice that the TOS there was about to hold a sale to raise money for its projects. Bernice filled an entire suitcase with a wide variety of tasteful Indian handicraft objects for me to donate to the sale anonymously. (Some of the items were valuable too – necklaces and things.) They sold like hotcakes, in fact.”

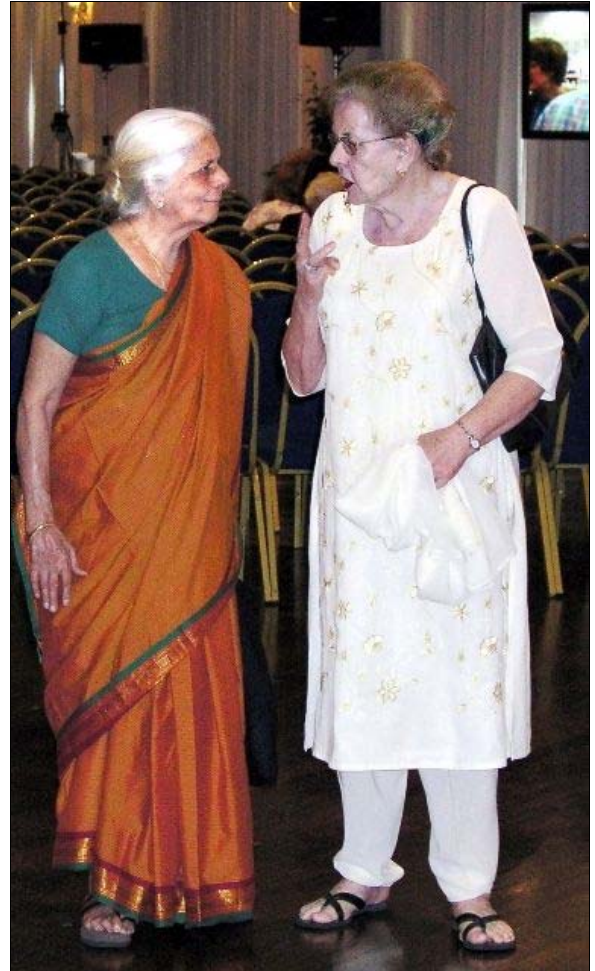
But there was another part of Bernice’s work of which very few people were aware – and about which I have had to read between the lines when only a few clues had randomly manifested – but enough to join the dots, and I suspect that they represent the tip of the iceberg. Because she is a very private

person, I know that she will be embarrassed to read any public acknowledgement of her work, but she made a difference to many lives and she is an inspiration to us all. In this world we need such inspiration and to acknowledge this rarity of true service, done with great humility and invisibility, seems to me to be appropriate – and an honour.

I refer to the kind, practical and material assistance given to Indian workers and their families, in times of dire need and survival, or in helping to make a new start or build a temporary bridge for some to 'find a way' to earn a living. The struggle for existence – to meet day in and day out, their basic physical needs, medical debts and especially the burdens suffered under the illegal practice in Indian culture of wedding dowries – played heavily on Bernice's mind and her response to it was a natural one. Whether it was in food, clothing, furniture or financial support, Bernice gave of herself and her own pocket. In so doing, she also walked her own tightrope nightmare of realising that her generosity was possibly being exploited but her desire to alleviate a little of the suffering – imposed by practices of the caste system, the gap between the wealthy, privileged and poor, the systemic corruption of social institutions – was all that really mattered. In these contexts, she also seemed to try to impart some simple skills of budgeting and planning, priority-setting and problem solving – a little bit of self-empowerment that was also a way of helping that had longer term value.

Observing from the outer, there are many Westerners like myself who witnessed her dedicated serving of the President not as "only the typist" – as she often referred to herself – but as a true secretary and minder, a guardian of the Office. She was a companion and server, often with chauffeur, travel agent and mediator duties. Whether she was fixing afternoon teas for dignitaries and visitors to the Office or organising painters, plumbers, electricians or IT technicians, she kept the Office machinery operating and functional – literally and administratively – with dignity and decorum.

Ever ready to assist, to solve problems, to roll up her sleeves to lend a hand – in her role as Secretary to the President, informally as a 'traveller's aide' or as a friend to Indian workers – Bernice Croft raised the bar of "the Supreme Duty," in the words of Annie Besant, to great heights.



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A parable for reflection

A holy man was having a conversation with God one day and said,

"God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like."

God led the holy man to two doors.

He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in.



In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelt delicious and made the holy man's mouth water.

The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished.

They were holding spoons with very long handles, that were strapped to their arms and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful.

But because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering.

God said, "You have seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one.

There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water.

The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand."

"It is simple," said God. "It requires but one skill.

You see, they have learnt to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves."

