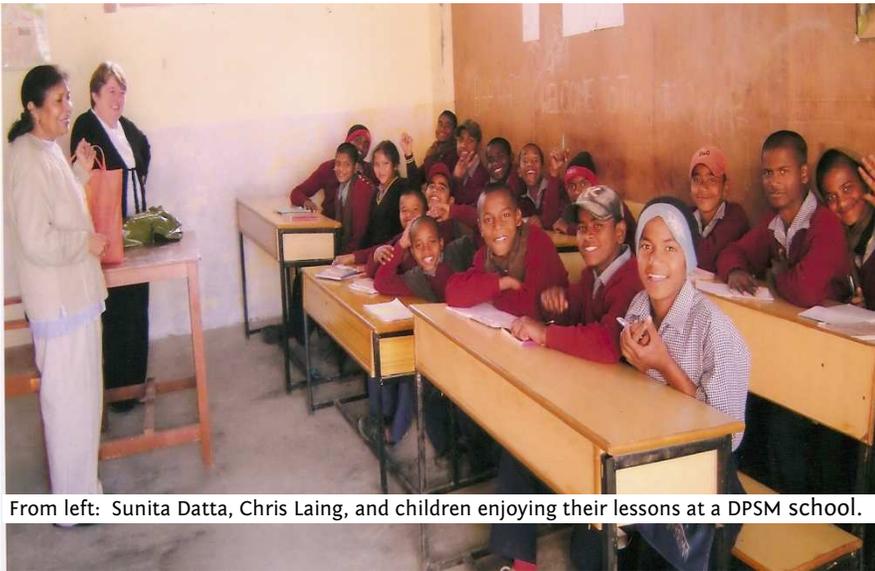


# Lessons on Reducing Prejudice:

## A volunteer's experience with the Rama Foundation in India

When prejudice becomes ingrained at a society wide level the resultant forms of social exclusion can have far reaching implications. This is an issue that defines the work of Cambridge based NGO, the Rama Foundation, which works to help support children from ostracised communities of lepers in India. In February 2009 an experienced teacher named Chris Laing travelled with the Rama Foundation to Haridwar, India, to teach at schools set up by Indian partner organisation Divya Prem Sewa Mission (DPSM). Chris was so inspired by her experiences that she is due to travel back this November 2009.



From left: Sunita Datta, Chris Laing, and children enjoying their lessons at a DPSM school.

I met with Chris just before her second trip to Haridwar. She discussed the experience of working with the Rama Foundation with a keen enthusiasm, and her genuine passion for teaching shone through. "I have never taught children so keen to learn" she says. Furthermore, the usual language barrier involved in teaching overseas was not a problem for Chris; she found the children she taught were so engaged that they managed to stay "in tune" with her lessons.

The Rama Foundation sends qualified teaching volunteers to the two schools run by DPSM every year, and the impact this is having on the local and wider community was clear to Chris. "When people notice outsiders travelling a long way to help members of an excluded community it can open their eyes, and encourage a change of perspective" she noted.

Although leprosy is now a curable disease it can be very difficult to access treatment in India, and the prejudices associated with the condition are still pervasive. The DPSM was originally set up as a hospital for lepers. However, it was soon noticed that the hospital's waiting rooms were filled with healthy children, excluded from wider society because of their parent's condition. These children were mostly made to spend their days begging on the streets. DPSM therefore decided to provide two schools for these children, which today educate and provide residence for 212 children from 15 states in India.

Maximising the Rama Foundation's ability to contribute to the DPSM schools requires experienced teachers. Chris has over twenty years of work experience in education, making her an ideal candidate. With such a wealth of experience Chris's skills would be desired by many NGOs, so it is interesting to hear what attracted her to working with the Rama Foundation. In her career she has worked extensively on special needs and equality issues, and through this she gained insight in to the negative power of social exclusion. The unjustified outsider status given to the children that the DPSM and Rama Foundation work to help inspired Chris to want to provide her time and skills to this project.

A central aim for the Rama Foundation and for Chris is to provide positive educational experience for the children. On her February trip Chris decided she wanted to give all the children ice cream, which many had never tried before. On her upcoming trip in November she wants to extend this provision of joy by providing musical instruments and day trips for the children she is teaching.

The Rama Foundation has many plans to extend their work in the future. They plan to engage with girls from the leper communities, who at present do not attend DPSM schools. Furthermore they aim to establish connections in Cambridge with teacher training colleges and centres, in order to ensure continued regular placements for trained teachers at DPSM schools.

Chris is returning to Haridwar this month, accompanied by Balbir and Sunita Datta, who are involved with the running of the Rama Foundation. Chris plans to stay and teach for a month, whilst Balbir and Sunita will stay for three months. On their return The Humanitarian Centre looks forward to hearing from Chris, Balbir and Sunita, about progress in the Rama Foundation's valuable work.

Produced for [www.humanitariancentre.org](http://www.humanitariancentre.org)

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