



## A semester on wheels

The Tata Jagriti Yatra was a revelation and an inspiration for the youth who travelled through the Indian heartland on this journey of social awakening

Imagine a group of schoolchildren being able to communicate, interact with each other and exchange cultural information through telepresence rooms in schools across the globe! No wishful thinking this is, but an innovative business-cum-social model conceived by young Gaurav Agarwal and Mohammed Al-Shawaf, who came up with the idea while seated on their sleeper berths in a long distance train in India.

They were among the 330 youth participating in the Tata Jagriti Yatra (TJY) 2008 and the idea of telepresence rooms was one of the many bright ideas the

trip generated.

The Tata Jagriti Yatra (a journey of awakening), an 18-day-long train journey, which started on December 24, 2008, had youngsters between 18 to 25 years, travelling across India to cities and small towns, visiting social entrepreneurs who run successful and innovative projects in rural, semi-rural and some urban areas. The entrepreneurs work on providing solutions to the many social and economic issues faced by local communities.

Inspiring youngsters like Mr Agarwal and Mr Al-Shawaf was one of the key objectives of this





The specially-chartered train for the *yatra*

journey. The aim was not only to expose young girls and boys to a slice of India that they wouldn't otherwise get to witness, but also to awaken and kindle a spirit of social entrepreneurship among them. It was hoped that by spreading the message of enterprise-led development through print and mass media, the rest of the country would also benefit positively.

### Birth of an idea

The Tata Jagriti Yatra was the successor of a similar event held in 1997 which commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's Independence. Shashank Mani, chairman of the Jagriti Sewa Sansthan (JSS), a non-government organisation (NGO) that seeks to promote skill and enterprise training in young Indians, led that event and subsequently wrote a book about it. "After a span of 10 years, sparked by the book and the enthusiasm for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence in 2007, a group of participants of the first *yatra* and some others conceived a plan to organise another Jagriti Yatra," says Mr Mani.

JSS needed a strategic partner for this initiative who understood and believed in the cause. They found the best partner in the Tata group. Both JSS and the Tata group realised that they shared a common vision — of helping communities and connecting with the youth of the country who would be key players in India's future development. The Tata group became the main sponsor of the *yatra*.

### Exploring the heart of India

After eight months of planning and logistics coordination, the TJY was flagged off on December 24, 2008, from Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai. Besides the 330 youngsters, the people on the train included members from JSS and Tata employees, and facilitators from diverse professional backgrounds who guided and gave direction to the young *yatris*. The journey was

punctuated with stops to visit projects en route, and sharing of views, ideas and presentations.

The informal interactions in the 'common room' bogie, the singing of the *yatra* anthem — penned by noted adman Praseon Joshi — and celebrating New Year on the railway platform at Bangalore, created a bond among the youth and added to their excitement and energy levels. The *yatra* became a melting pot of cultures with participants from different states of India and different countries. The differences in languages and personalities was overcome through the sharing of knowledge and learning.

Ground rules set by Colonel Patil, in-charge of the train, were observed scrupulously — no smoking, no littering, no drinking and observing the three Rs — refuse, reduce and reuse! There was a heightened sense of civic cleanliness and concern to keep the train clean at all times, including the decision not to litter or leave behind even a single empty mineral water bottle on the way.

The visits to the many different projects gave the *yatris* an insight into what could be achieved with support from the community. The panel discussions on social and economic issues at various cities, gave them the opportunity to hear distinguished professionals speak on various contemporary issues, including 'affordable healthcare for all Indians', 'from poverty to self-help', and 'unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit'.

At Bangalore the *yatris* visited Technopark, India's first IT park, and learnt, from its founder and CEO Mr Vijayraghavan, how to collaborate and work seamlessly with the government ensuring a corruption-free, efficient and speedy administration.

Further south, in Pondicherry, they were amazed at the unique cross-subsidisation model of the Aravind Eye Care System which has helped millions of rural people recover their eyesight at little or no cost.

Mr Al-Shawaf and Mr Agarwal were particularly inspired by the technique used by this organisation — video-conferencing and transfer of images — to share patient information and receive advice in remote rural places, thereby enabling the doctors to treat the blind.

In Hyderabad, the visit to Naandi Foundation, founded by Manoj Kumar, was an eye-opener for Kapil Daga from Tata Consultancy Services. He was amazed at the scale and enormity of Naandi's midday meal operation for underprivileged children. The organisation provides meals for nearly 150,000 children under the midday meal scheme and is a good example of a successful public-private partnership.

### A journey within a journey

As the *yatris* travelled across India, many inhibitions were shed as they interacted with each other and, in spite of all their differences, the common thread of the journey bound them together.

Many *yatris* were particularly appreciative of the work done by Ashoka fellow, R Elango, who left a lucrative job in Chennai and moved to his village (Kuthumbakkam), 30km away. He has since transformed the village, healing it of social ills like untouchability, poverty, exploitation of women, alcoholism and the caste system, thus changing the fate of the 5,000-odd inhabitants.

Another inspiring role model was Joe Maddiath, founder of Gram Vikas, who has been working with tribals and marginalised communities in Bhubaneswar, Orissa,

since his early twenties. The *yatris* were impressed with the fact that Mr Maddiath had decided at such an early age to dedicate himself to this work. His words reverberated in their minds long after the journey ended: “The satisfaction I get from knowing I am making a lasting change in someone else’s life keeps me going.”

As the *yatra* approached its end on January 10, 2009, the *yatris* were a potpourri of mixed emotions — bubbling with excitement, hope, joy at the thought of returning home; happy to have met and made new friends and yet sad and tearful to part ways. For most of the participants the *yatra* had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience that they would never forget.

Challenging as it indeed was for the *yatris* — to live out of a suitcase on a moving train for 18 days, share living space with strangers, deal with tight schedules and unforeseen train delays, cope with changing weather conditions — they managed to rise above the physical discomfort to begin another far more important journey. This inner journey of awakening and self-introspection, catalysed a change in attitudes and thought patterns, and made them look at things from a broader perspective.

As Ajay Kumar of Tata Chemicals says, “I learnt from the *yatra* that individual growth is not meaningful if it does not help others to grow and that nothing is impossible if we are willing to do it.” Many *yatris*, after visiting Goonj, a unique resource mobilisation NGO started by Anshu Gupta, which helps the poorest of the poor by providing clothes and other items (in return for community development work), immediately pledged to donate old clothes.

For Mr Al-Shawaf, from the University of California, Berkeley, USA, and other international students from South Africa, the *yatra* was a great experiential journey to understand better a country that they had only heard about.

Mr Daga, who is, in his personal capacity, working with a team of six individuals to produce silica from rice husk ash, compares the *yatra* to a runway which has given him the impetus and motivation to take flight: “I found Tata Steel and Naandi Foundation to be really close to my inner being. The development that has taken place at Jamshedpur for over a century has increased my respect for the leadership of the Tata group and has sparked a fire in me to build one such organisation.”

The words of these young *yatris* validate the hopes which Mr Mani, the JSS team and the Tata group had from this *yatra*. “We want to position this as an annual ‘semester on wheels’ where young Indians are exposed to the entrepreneurial energy coursing through the country, and in the process take to enterprise themselves,” says Mr Mani.

A fire has now been kindled and, hopefully, its warmth and light will reach out far and wide. ●

*Jai Wadia*

## Journey log

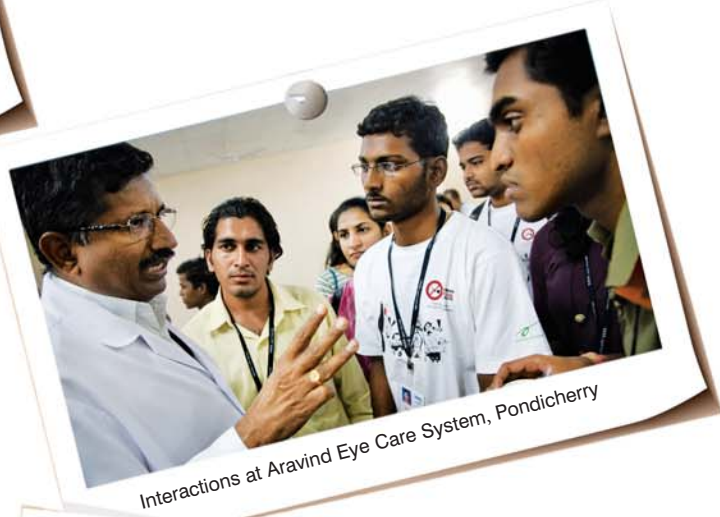
- ▶ Number of *yatris*: 330
- ▶ Projects visited: More than 15
- ▶ The route: Mumbai – Thiruvananthapuram – Kanyakumari – Pondicherry – Chennai – Bangalore – Hyderabad – Bhubaneswar – Jamshedpur – Lucknow – Delhi – Tilonia – Anand – Mumbai
- ▶ Kilometres travelled: 8,000 (approx)
- ▶ Number of meals served on the train: More than 20,000
- ▶ Bottles of Himalayan mineral water consumed: 21,600
- ▶ Electronic equipment: 10 Laptops by Tata Communications; 13 data cards by Tata Teleservices (Maharashtra)
- ▶ Co-sponsors: Tata Chemicals, Tata Power, Tata Steel, Tata Tea, Titan and Gateway
- ▶ Media partners: Times of India (print) and CNBC TV 18 (electronic)



The train is flagged off! (From left): Raj Krishnamurthy, TR Doongaji, Manish Tripathi, Rewati Prabhu and Shashank Mani



Yatris making sand carvings at Pondicherry



Interactions at Aravind Eye Care System, Pondicherry



A sizeable number of international students were part of the yatra



The yatris engrossed in an engaging discussion



Tata Sons ED R Gopalakrishnan (extreme left) speaking during a panel discussion on affordable healthcare at Hyderabad



Panel discussion at Delhi



The 330 participants come together and pose for the shutterbug at Bada Imambara, Lucknow