



THE
EAST · WEST
OVERSEAS AID
FOUNDATION

6th Floor 407-409
Swanston Street
Melbourne, Victoria
3000, Australia

Phone
+61 (3) 9650 0514
Fax
+61 (3) 9662 3440
Email
admin@tewoaf.org.au

ABN 18 002 155 029

Donations of more
than \$2.00 made to
The East West
Overseas Aid Founda-
tion are tax deductible
in Australia

SPEECH GIVEN AT THE 12th EAST WEST FOUNDATION ANNUAL DINNER DANCE FRIDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2004 by: Justice Ron Merkel

The Uluru Children's Home now has as its residents, 24 girls who are aged between 1 and 8 years. It is no accident or anomaly that the residents are all female. I would like to briefly outline the context in which that situation has arisen.

There still remains a significant gulf between the appearance of India in the year 2004 and the reality of India in the year 2004. India has a democratic constitution and political process of which it can be truly proud. Under its constitution and legislation its citizens are protected from discrimination on grounds of race, religion and gender. India has also achieved a proud record of economic growth, including an information technology revolution, particularly in southern India.

In spite of those advances there remains the reality of India in the year 2004. One aspect of that reality is that gender disparities are dramatic. The following facts have been taken from a recent article by Louise Harmon and Eileen Kaufman, "Dazzling the World" published in the Berkeley Women's Law Journal Vol 19 No 1 2004. The article discloses the following information.

In India gender disparities are dramatic. India is ranked 127th of 175 countries in indices which evaluate gender disparities in life expectancy, literacy, and income and gender inequalities in terms of economic and political participation. No matter what statistics are scrutinized – maternal mortality rates, illiteracy, sex-selective abortion of female fetuses and infanticide, domestic and other gender-based violence, wage disparities, or nutrition – the conclusion remains the same: Indian women are suffering the effects of widespread and systemic discrimination.

The most graphic illustration of women's inferior status appears in the sex ratio statistics. The 2001 census projected a sex ratio of 927 females to 1000 males in the zero-to-six age bracket. Female infanticide was widespread, reflecting the pressures of the dowry system, the perceived need for a son to perform religious rituals such as lighting a parent's funeral pyre, and a widespread belief that a daughter's contribution to the family is less valuable than a son's. One of the most important contributing factors to this perception is that the daughter joins her husband's family upon marriage, which is reflected in the Indian proverb that "raising a daughter is like watering a neighbour's plant." The widespread availability of sex-selective sonograms, despite their illegality, results in an estimated three to five million abortions of female fetuses every year.

Reports of female infanticide in the poorest areas abound. Bihar, India's poorest state, has a sex ration of 819 women to 1000 men in some districts. Midwives are paid fifty cents and a sack of grain for delivering a girl, more than twice that amount for delivering a boy, and as much as five dollars for getting rid of a girl.

With respect to educational opportunities within villages, girls suffered discrimination based on traditional patriarchal attitudes. A common practice is to withdraw girls from school at a very young age because they are useful around the house. From approximately the age of eight, a girl "becomes a surrogate mother," looking after her siblings, doing the housework, and working in the fields. She also gets a poorer quality of food than her brothers – and less of it.

The lack of educational opportunities for girls in rural India necessarily contributes to the continuing disparity in literacy rates between men and women. According to the 2001 census, the literacy rate for women is 54%, whereas the rate for men is 76%. The status of women in India is unlikely to improve dramatically until this literacy gap is closed.



T H E
E A S T · W E S T
O V E R S E A S A I D
F O U N D A T I O N

6th Floor 407-409
Swanston Street
Melbourne, Victoria
3000, Australia

Phone
+61 (3) 9650 0514
Fax
+61 (3) 9662 3440
Email
admin@tewoaf.org.au

ABN 18 002 155 029

Donations of more
than \$2.00 made to
The East West
Overseas Aid Founda-
tion are tax deductible
in Australia

A spate of slogans promote education of girls, including: “When you educate a female child, you educate the entire family and when you educate a family, you educate the entire village,” and “Those who plan for one year sow rice, those who plan for ten years plant trees; but those who plan for a hundred years educate their children. Unfortunately, these have remained words of aspiration. The social reality lags far behind.

The Uluru Children’s Home is about an aspiration becoming a social reality. At the commencement of this speech I outlined how the residents of the home are 24 girls aged 1 to 8. That outcome reflects the consequences of infanticide, abandonment and gender based destitution which have arisen in the circumstances I have outlined. But the reason why the home is an aspiration that has become a social reality goes beyond the importance of providing a home for young girls for whom there may otherwise have been little hope or prospect in life. Not only are the girls now being given primary healthcare and education but the Uluru Children’s Home has been actively involved in the community of which it is a part. It is ensuring that primary health care and educational services are available to all of the children in that community which includes the adjoining village. In engaging with the community in that way the home is also putting the slogans to which I have referred into practice. It is also creating a sense of a community which incorporates the children of the home so that those children are not part of “the other” in the society in which they are living.

The steps taken by the Uluru Children’s Home are an important pilot project which can offer new direction and hope for the girls who come through its doors. In previous speeches I have indicated why being a Patron of the Foundation is important to me. The reason is that it enables me to be part of an organisation that is truly making a difference to the lives of those who fall under its protective wings. The home is an admirable representation of how that difference can be so significant to the lives of one of the most vulnerable sections of the Indian community.

Mao Tse-Tung said that “the long march started with the first step”. So the long journey in life for the young girls at the Uluru Children’s Home starts with the first step of their entrance into that home. Undoubtedly, when those children begin the long march through the life that lies ahead of them they will be immeasurably benefited by the contribution the Home has been able to make to their lives and, in turn, by the contribution to the Home made by the supporters of the East West Foundation who have attended this dinner tonight.

Thank you