



# **PEOPLE TO PEOPLE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL PROCEEDINGS**

School Nutrition  
Delegation to India

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# Incredible India!

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SNA LEADERS EXPERIENCE AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY IN THIS



**The bond** that unites all SNA members so securely is the shared passion they have for ensuring that no child in their individual schools and districts goes hungry. They know, better than most, the faces of hungry and malnourished children living right here in the United States, and this is why they are so dedicated to this profession, despite program complexity and public misperception.

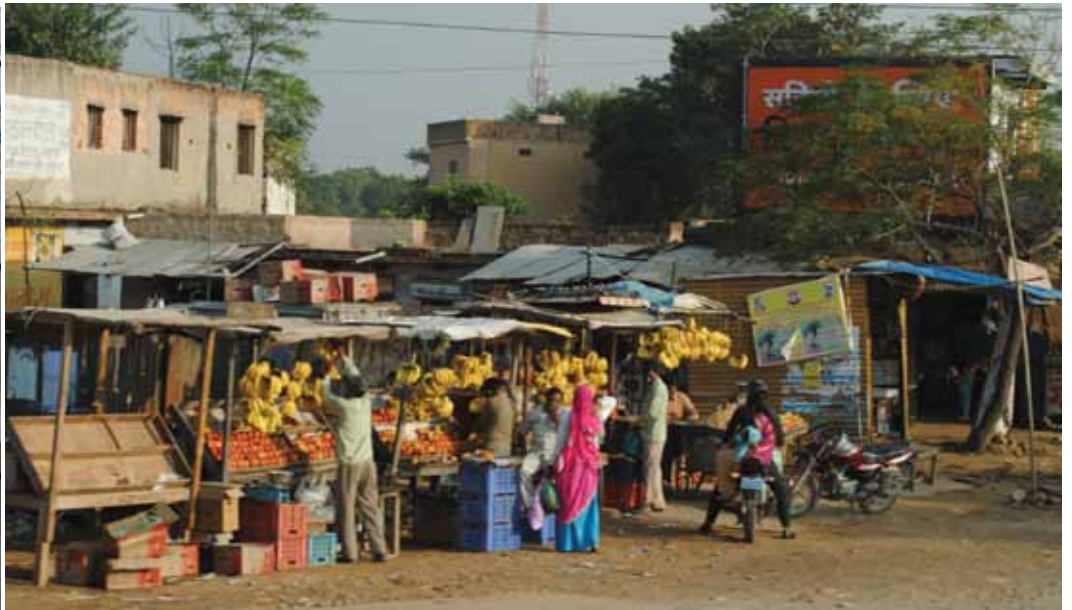
They also know, better than most, that school-based federal child nutrition programs offer these hungry kids in America a matchless lifeline. And over the course of the last two decades, many SNA members have come to recognize that there are hundreds of millions of children beyond our borders who live in desperate poverty, with no such intervention between them and severe hunger and malnutrition. They have heard the messages of such national leaders as former Senators George McGovern and Bob Dole and President Bill Clinton, who recognize that school-based feeding programs are essential, absolutely essential in eliminating hunger and reducing poverty in developing nations around the world.

A passion for children—all children—has led many SNA members to support the establishment and ongoing work of its Global Child Nutrition





CULTURE OF CONTRASTS.





Foundation. And this same passion has prompted many to travel far beyond their communities to witness firsthand the difference school feeding programs can make to the poorest of the poor.

Since 1997, SNA has sponsored four official delegations in the People to People Citizen Ambassador Program, traveling to South Africa, China and now India, meeting with government officials, NGO (non-governmental organization) representatives, school administrators, teachers, nutritionists and others committed to making school feeding a permanent policy and practice in their countries. Delegations have visited schools and observed firsthand how school meals serve as an incentive to allow their children—especially their girls—to get an education. They’ve witnessed the joy of students over receipt of something as basic as brown bread and milk. And once they have witnessed the miracle of global school feeding in action, they are forever changed and forever committed to finding new ways to help, with dollars, with technical assistance, with building awareness by sharing their what they saw and learned.

Last November, a 13-member SNA delegation journeyed to India for eight incredible days. Members hailing from all over our nation—Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, California, Georgia and more—formed new connections with each other and with our hosts. Since returning, we have been sharing what we learned with our brains and experienced with our hearts, first with our individual families and communities—and now with you.

People to People trips are unique combinations of professional exchange and cultural introduction. Delegation members are asked to

keep journal records for different parts of the trip, and the “journalists” who volunteered are identified in the corresponding sections of this article. Our stories and the accompanying photos barely begin to recap our adventure. And unlike many other international trips I have made over the years, the many layers of my India experiences remain as fresh as if I just departed.

## GAINing Ground

*Journalist: Rhonda DeVaux, SNS*

The challenges to reducing poverty in India are daunting. In a population of 1.1 billion people, 70% live on less than \$2 per day; 24% get by with less than \$1 per day. Estimates suggest that nearly half of the children in the country are undernourished.

In 1995, the government launched a National Program of Nutritional Support for Primary Education, to address hunger and school attendance, but it did not specify how such “nutritional support” (e.g. school meals) would be provided. Six years later, India’s Supreme Court ruled that states were required to provide a hot, cooked lunch to students in government-funded schools every school day. The government provides free grains, plus some support for additional meal ingredients and the cost of preparation. States are expected to provide additional support, but it varies greatly. Such midday meal (MDM) ingredients as vegetables, spices and oil are procured locally. Women from different castes are employed to prepare the meals. The MDM also is used to teach hygiene and etiquette.

Our first professional exchange in Delhi was with the Global Alliance for



Improved Nutrition (GAIN), which was established by the United Nations, to work toward a world without malnutrition by mobilizing public-private partnerships and providing financial and technical support to deliver nutritious foods to people at greatest risk. GAIN currently operates in more than 25 countries, reaching 300 million people.

The GAIN office in Delhi is supporting the Naandi Foundation, a local NGO, to fortify government-sponsored MDMs for 800,000 children from ages 5 to 12. Meals are generally vegetarian, with an occasional egg. GAIN and Naandi are currently working on a rice supplement fortified with iron, zinc and folic acid.

## Sound Familiar?

*Journalist: Barbara Lloyd, SNS*

In Delhi, we also visited with the Diabetes Foundation of India at Fortis Hospital, where the focus changed from those who are undernourished to those who are malnourished. We learned that 32.6% of students in private schools are considered overweight or obese (this is compared with 8-10% of students in government schools). The obesity rate is higher for boys than it is for girls, and significant percentages of these children are showing signs of insulin resistance (a precursor to diabetes), high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol and triglyceride levels and early heart disease.

As in our own country, there are several similar factors contributing to the increase in childhood obesity in India:

Both parents working outside the home. Fastfood options easily available to young students. Affordable “supersized” meal options. Physical inactivity.

Interventions have been focused on bringing nutrition education into the classroom to change the behavior of the individual (child, family, teacher) and change the environment (home, school). The success of the program is measured by the knowledge level attained by students, teachers and parents and by changes in their behavior through food choices.

## The Taste of Education

*Journalist: Helene Clark, SNS*

Our final professional exchange in Delhi was with the Nutrition Foundation of India, which included a visit to a school, where we participated in serving the MDM. The school we visited was a government-funded primary school for boys, and the MDM is an incentive for parents to allow their sons to attend. In addition to the meal, students receive uniforms, winter clothes, shoes and books.

The 300-calorie MDM we served consisted of grain (wheat or rice) porridge and black lentils. In general, every MDM features a cereal grain and a pulse (beans or lentils). Food is served on stainless steel plates (which the students bring from home) by a server employed by the meal provider for quality assurance purposes. Children are permitted additional portions, which are adjusted for each child at the server's professional discretion. The number of portions provided at each school is based upon the previous day's attendance, plus 10%. Leftovers are made available to staff and others as appropriate. The MDM costs 5.5 rupees (approximately 20 cents). At this school, it was served at 10:30 a.m.; school starts at 8 a.m. School is in session 220 days; students attend 6 days per week, with the second Saturday of the month off. School is out of session for two months in winter, in addition to summer breaks and numerous festival holidays.

The Nutrition Foundation of India is a 30-year-old NGO, whose goal is to provide integrated child development services. During the office part of our visit, we learned that clean water and proper waste disposal can be challenges to foods prepared in schools. Proper training is critical. In addition, delegation member Sue Greig, an SNA past president and retired dietitian, made a brief presentation on successful nutrition education activities designed to increase vegetable consumption.

## Faith Can Move Meals

*Journalist: Jill Conklin*

We left Delhi for Jaipur, where the highlight of our visit was a day hosted by Akshaya Patra, a faith-based NGO feeding MDMs to one million children enrolled in government schools; it hopes to feed 5 million by 2020. Founded in part by the Hare Krishna movement, its work is guided on the principle that “no child in India should be deprived of education because of hunger.”

After a morning welcome that featured a beautiful, traditional Indian ceremony, we toured the Foundation's central kitchen facility. Production crew members wear uniforms, complete with safety hairnets, hats, glasses and gloves. We observed bread being baked in ovens and rice and lentils being prepared in large soup caldrons. Production is both mechanized and manual under very strict food safety rules and procedures. The facility included a large warehouse, refrigerated storage and a warewashing area.

Typical menus are influenced by the food culture of the area served by each production site. Components always include vegetables and bread (locally called *chapati* or *roti*). Rice with yogurt is common in the south, while lentils (*dahl*) are preferred in the north. In areas with central production facilities, meal components are placed in canteens that are distributed to local schools; the furthest distance is 45 miles. In more rural areas, the meal is sourced and produced by local women, trained through self-help and/or gender disparity employment programs.

Meals cost approximately 28 cents; some 40% of the cost is subsidized by the government, while remaining costs (including inflation fluctuations) are offset through private sector partners and other NGOs. Faith-based employees working in the Foundation's programs do not accept wages, so labor costs are reduced.

Our exchange featured MDM experiences with students at two government school sites. At the first, students lined up for lunch outside classrooms, sitting patiently along a corridor. *Roti* were piled high in bowls. We took turns offering a ladle of the *dahl* mixture and 2 breads per student. Once served, but before eating, students sang a prayer blessing for the meal. The meal was hot and filling. After eating, the children stood in line to clean both plates and hands. The second site featured a similar system.





### SNA Delegation to India

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 Nancy Rice, SNS, SNA President  
 Brenda Bernardy, Minnesota  
 Helene Clark, SNS, ConAgra  
 Jill Conklin, Winston Industries  
 Rhonda DeVaux, SNS, California  
 Cynthia Giese, Montana  
 Sue Greig, SNA Past President  
 Jamie Leavitt, SNS, New Jersey  
 Barbara Lloyd, SNS, Washington  
 James Quenneville, Florida  
 Adam Simmons, Arkansas  
 Carol Sykes, SNS, North Carolina

## The Simple & The Splendid

The People to People program offers numerous cultural experiences and key site-seeing destinations. In India, these offered a fascinating showcase of the extreme economic contrasts that are endemic to this country.

We were able to see most of the major historic and cultural sights in both Old Delhi and New Delhi, including the largest mosque in the country, Jama Masjid, which we had the honor to visit during one of the most important Muslim religious observances. The beauty and serenity of the mosque was followed by a wild rickshaw ride through narrow, crowded streets lined with tradespeople and artisans.

A visit to Delhi is not complete until you've seen Rajghat, where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated on the bank of the River Yamuna. A simple, black marble platform in a park-like setting is a wonderful reflection of this great man.

Jaipur is one of the most beautiful cities in India; it's earned its reputation as colorful (it's called the "Pink City"). The City Palace, where the royal family still resides, features a large complex open to the public to recall the pomp and splendor of a bygone era. During our three days in this city, we also were treated to an elephant ride, a tour of an open-air observatory and some shopping for carpets, jewelry and spices.

Our final destination was Agra, and a much-anticipated visit to the Taj Mahal at dawn. No words could do justice to describe the "lyrical beauty" of this memorial built by Emperor Shah Jahan to enshrine the mortal remains of his beloved wife. Each of us literally gasped at the sight.

The sites were incredible, but we also valued opportunities to learn about Oriental carpets from a family that has been making them for generations, as well as the craft of decorating statues and pottery with paint and jewels. And what a delight to be treated to a special dinner at the home of an Indian family; truly an unparalleled occasion to share details about our respective lives, work and dreams...from one person to another. **SN**

**Barbara Belmont** is SNA's executive director. She has led or co-led all four of SNA's official People to People professional exchange delegations and provided the photos for this article. Taj Mahal photo by **Nikada/istock photo.com**.

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