

With love, from France

Some stories deserve to be told. Trust us, this is one of them. A student of the International School of Toulouse, France, James Rao may have been born with a golden spoon, but this teenager is making a praise-worthy effort to feed young minds at the Byramjee Jeejeebhoy Home for Children in Matunga.

The half Indian-half English James's tryst with the home dates back to his earlier visit. "Around two years ago," informs social activist Roshni Damania, who's the secretary of the children's home. "James's father, Kiran Rao, a top-notch in the aircrafts industry, is a very good friend of Pervez (her husband). He happened to know of my association with the home and asked whether James could visit us for a school project," she says.

James returned touched. And when he and his classmates attended the Geneva conference on the Declaration of Human Rights in March last year, he knew just the place they could make a difference. He remembers how during his last visit, he couldn't communicate much with the kids as they couldn't speak English. "Only one could," he recounts. After speaking to Roshni, he thought of getting some books that could help the children learn the language.

While the thought's been noble, its execution has been quite novel too. They held a concert in their school where instead of entry passes, students had to bring a book to donate. "Books were like a ticket to the concert," says Lucy Cockerton, another stu-

dent of IST. They also collected contributions in the form of money and clothes for the kids. "We had two options - either send them or bring them here," says Liz Meagher, Head of Secondary. "We chose to bring them here," she says.

On day one, the children's 'bhaiyas and didis from France' painted the toy room and set up the dozens of learning books they'd got with them. The room was envisioned by Roshni and her colleagues, who were putting it together bit by bit. "But James and his friends gave it its final shape and life," says Anagha Patil, a social worker associated with the home. Next, they plan to help set up a small kitchen garden in the premises for children. During their four-day stay, besides spending time with the children, they plan to visit the Municipality school which the children go to and understand the education system. A visit to the Gateway of India also figures on their itinerary.

While James moved out of India with his family just 10 years ago, for his friends, until now the only window to India was *Slumdog Millionaire*, a wrong one albeit. Though Julie Heathcote-Smith notes the vastness of poverty and the huge gap between the poor and the rich here, she feels the movie gives a very negative portrayal. "It's not as hard as it's made out to be," she says. Taking a cue, Ben Buckley quips, "When I arrived, I was pleasantly surprised with the warmth these people exude despite poverty. The poor in France and Europe aren't as warm and welcoming."

Five students and their teachers from France touch the lives of destitute children in Matunga with a promise of many such projects in the future



WHAT AN EXPERIENCE: Students of the International School of Toulouse with kids from the Byramjee Jeejeebhoy Home for Children and (inset) Roshni Damania



Meagher, meanwhile, simply says, "Indians are happy people." Apart from their admiration for the people, their taste buds have taken quite a liking to the spicy Indian food. Meagher surprises us with her off-hand

count of the dishes they've indulged in. In fact, the gang also visited Mohammed Ali Road and tried out Indian sweets.

Unknowningly, this quaint home for orphaned and destitute children has placed India more prominently on the world map for IST students. "This is the first visit of potentially many in the future. It's an information gathering journey too, with lots of photographs and videos. Next year, I plan to start a full study on India for kids at school," promises Mastthew Podbury, Head of Geography.

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