



Hard labour



In March 2006, London school teacher **Pete Pattison** gave up his job to begin a year long assignment documenting slavery in the modern world. He tells Keith Wilson why this project proved an eye-opener in more ways than one

Less than 18 months ago, Pete Pattison was teaching citizenship in a London secondary school, a job that he describes as ‘constant action and small minutes of rest’. That’s all right then, I think, a teacher has plenty of holidays to get all the rest he needs. True enough, but not for Pete. Born in South Korea, educated in Japan and a resident of India for many years, he has a wanderlust and experience of global cultures that has seen him forge a second career as a photojournalist. When

his pupils headed for the coast during the summer recess, Pete would typically head to the foothills of the Himalayas to photograph Nepal’s Maoist guerrillas, or India to document child labour.

Slowly but surely, his holiday assignments for overseas NGOs and charities such as Save the Children, also exposed him to issues that required more constant attention than a full-time teacher could give, especially a teacher trying to instil a sense of global responsibility and citizenship to London teenagers.

Then in December 2005, he took an extended Christmas holiday from school to begin work on a project that for most of us would seem impossible to photograph: slavery. Officially, slavery does not exist. By the law and constitution of every country, it is banned throughout the world. But through a London-based charity, Anti-Slavery International, Pete found the reality to be far different. With 2007 marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain, the prospect of a major

body of work documenting slavery today proved irresistible. In March of last year, Pete quit teaching and spent the rest of the year encountering practices he never knew existed. ‘I’ve worked in India for years, travelled there dozens of times, but I had no idea of the depth of the slavery that comes out of the caste system and the violence associated with it. This project was a real eye-opener for me,’ he recalls.

Illegal practices

As well as India, Pete travelled to Ghana, at the heart of the region that provided the human cargo for the transatlantic slave trade centuries before, and now the scene of a practice where hundreds of women are enslaved in religious shrines, as *trokosi* (wives of the gods). He wandered the streets of Haiti, the first country in the world to ban slavery, yet still home to more than 200,000 children known as *restaveks*, working as domestic labourers. In the UK and Ireland, Pete photographed victims of human trafficking, working in the

agricultural and service industries. He even entered Burma illegally to hear the stories of ethnic minorities snatched from their rural villages by the Burmese army and forced into labour, mostly as porters, and sometimes as human minesweepers.

Despite the illegality of all these practices, many of the perpetrators Pete encountered did not believe

‘Teaching is constant action and small minutes of rest; photographing slavery is hours of sitting around doing nothing and few minutes of action’

they were in the wrong. As a result, apart from Burma, he never felt threatened during the assignment. ‘I never felt in any kind of danger, certainly not in comparison to the people I was documenting,’ he says. Apart from a woman in Haiti who kept *restaveks*, none of the other perpetrators he met believed they were doing any harm. ‘A landlord in India who had dozens of bonded labourers said: “These workers are

like my children, whatever they want I’ll give them.” In Ghana they don’t think it’s wrong, the landlords in India don’t think it’s wrong, the Burmese military don’t think it’s wrong. Even in Haiti, the majority of the population don’t think it’s wrong. So there’s this big issue of recognition about what slavery is and the impact of it.’

This point is enforced by the way the word slavery has become hidden by modern day parlance: bonded labour, forced labour, human trafficking are today’s euphemisms for slavery. Adding to this climate of denial is that some of the practices are embedded in the fabric of their societies, explained away as a traditional religious practice (the *trokosi* of Ghana), or a centuries-old economic custom (Haiti’s *restaveks*).

ABOVE LEFT Ubi Li Htoo, who was seized by the Burmese military to work forced labourer

ABOVE CENTRE Gundir Singh, one of 46 bonded labourers who filed a court case against their landlords to free themselves from bondage

ABOVE RIGHT Evelyne Josphe, 15, and her daughter Vickencia. Evelyne worked as a *restavek* and became pregnant after being raped by a man who lived next door

INTERVIEW PETE PATTISSON

RIGHT Alongside everyday products, this shop in Haiti sells whips called martinets, designed to be used on restaveks, child domestic labourers



FAR RIGHT Vivienne Dunuku stands by while Walter Pimpong, Director of International Needs Ghana, tries to persuade her mother not to send her to a shrine as a trokosi



BELOW LEFT The hands of Enamur, who was trafficked from Bangladesh to Ireland to work in a restaurant

BELOW RIGHT The hands of Shyari, a 60-year-old bonded labourer, who works 12-hour shifts at one of Punjab's brick kilns

However, in these countries there are loose networks of small, local opposition groups, working peacefully to break the bonds of slavery. Unsurprisingly, those that are liberated find the voice to denounce the local custom or traditional practice that has enslaved them. 'If people think customs are about abusing other people,' one liberated trokosi told Pete, 'then they are wrong. There will come a time when this practice no longer exists.' Similarly, in India Pete met a group of bonded labourers who had stood up to their landlord. 'One of them said to me: "I would rather hang myself than go back into slavery." It struck me as curious because at the time I had just read of this slave from Jamaica 200 years ago, Samuel Sharp, one of the

leaders of a slave revolt, and just before he went to the gallows he said: 'I would rather die on those gallows than return to slavery.' It struck me that 200 years later people are saying the same thing.'

Gaining trust

Unsurprisingly, Pete says slavery does not lend itself easily to photography, his subjects having been abused, living with violence or threats of violence and often away from home and family. How did he gain their trust? 'The situation in each country was slightly different. In Haiti, it revolved around the local organisation I was working with and the relationship they had with the relevant communities. Without that, it would have been impossible. But you also had to push it a little bit:

"Can we go there? Can we follow that kid?" It wasn't easy. You have to be creative about how you approach things, but the key is to work with local organisations who know the situation.

So where does he go from here with this story? 'I've done enough. It's been a year of my life and I feel incredibly privileged. I've been stuck in obscure places, talking to amazing people and hearing amazing stories. I've also spent a huge amount of money. I'm at a net loss! Teaching is relatively well paid and I earned enough money to get by, but I think as a photographer you need to look for new challenges, to keep yourself fresh. The hardest thing for me to learn is this: teaching is constant action and small minutes of rest; photographing slavery is hours of



LEFT Bonded labourers at a brick kiln work late into the evening to escape the Punjab's searing summer heat

BELOW The door of no return, Elmina Castle, Ghana. Hundreds of thousands of Africans passed through this dungeon door on their way to a life of slavery in the Caribbean and Americas. Ironically, only a few miles from here girls are kept as trokosi (wives of god), by religious priests as atonement for misdeeds by their families

sitting around doing nothing and few minutes of action, when you have to get something otherwise you would have wasted hours. It's a different lifestyle and that was one of the biggest challenges because I'm used to doing things instead of sitting around waiting.'

Like the good teacher that he is Pete finishes our interview with an objective and a question. His aim is

that in some way his exhibition and book, both titled *Forgotten, but not gone*, will 'galvanise some greater public pressure to ban slavery forever, for good.' The question follows a lesson from the history of the abolitionist movement more than 200 years ago: 'The slave trade was ended because of pressure from the slaves themselves, but also from

public pressure within Britain. Slaves are fighting back, but where's the pressure happening from the public in this country? Who is standing up saying, we've got to end slavery around the world?'

How long it takes to answer this will depend on how long it takes for the lesson to be learned. ■

LINKS & CONTACTS

- Anti-Slavery International: the world's oldest international human rights organisation www.antislavery.org
- Volunteers for Social Justice: campaigns for the rights of bonded labourers and Dalits in Punjab, India www.vsj-ddva.org
- Haitian Street Kids: supports street children, many of whom have escaped a life of abuse as domestic workers www.haitianstreetkids.com
- International Needs Ghana: campaigns for human rights issues in Ghana, including trokosi www.africaexpress.com
- Kalayaan: provides advice, advocacy and support services in the UK for migrant domestic workers www.kalayaan.org.uk
- Burma Campaign UK: campaigns for human rights and democracy in Burma www.burmacampaign.org.uk

