

'Progress hasn't stopped attacks against women'

Mithila Phadke

@timesgroup.com

Brett Lee *ne diyela hai!*" an excited voice rang out, efficiently honing in on the most exciting part of the news the roomful of kids had just heard.

The Salaam Baalak Trust's staff had just told the children about how a cricket bat, signed by the cricketer, would be part of an auction to raise funds for the NGO. The tot, keenly listening from the back, took it upon himself to distil the message for the little ones. The entire room responded as one to the upcoming question though. "India best or Australia best?" asked the gifter of the said cricket bat, Natasha Stott Despoja. "India!" they called out, with a few smiling and saying, "*Dono (both).*"

The Charni Road NGO had been the final stop on the itinerary for Stott Despoja, the Australian ambassador for women and girls. On Tuesday, a day after she landed in Mumbai, the visiting envoy had been to the Apnalaya NGO's office in Govandi for an interaction with a group of teenage girls and conducted a discussion with students from Sophia College on gen-



Rizwan Mithawala

TAKING STOCK: Australian ambassador Natasha Stott Despoja (R) meets anti-trafficking activists at Sophia College on Tuesday

der equality. Members from the Apne Aap Women's Collective, an anti-trafficking organization working for commercial sex workers and their kids in Kamathipura, had visited the Sophia College campus, and a meeting at Mantralaya with principal



secretary for women and child development, Ujjwal Uke, followed. Stott Despoja was in town to promote Australia's global engagement with gender empowerment and equal rights.

"I am here to look at the

work Australia has been supporting in this city," said Stott Despoja. "It had been a fantastic experience." Violence and discrimination are issues that women across the world continue to face despite progress over the last few decades, she said. The ambassador was in Delhi earlier this week to release the State of the Girl Child in India 2014 report. "It is a worldwide epidemic. In Australia too, women and children are affected by violence in a way that is unacceptable." At Apnalaya's, she had teens sharing career aspirations with her, and at Sophia's, the students asked Stott Despoja about the hurdles women in politics still deal with.