

A Journey to India – Laura Hickie

After what was perhaps the longest and most tiring journey I've ever had the pleasure of undertaking, the three of us could finally say we had made it. As I stood at the exit of Chennai's airport, I'm not quite sure how to describe my emotions. 'Mixed' however was most definitely on my list. I could feel the knot in my stomach that was part nerves and part fear and part excitement and I couldn't quite distinguish between any of them. Walking out into the hot Indian air can only be compared to stepping into one very large oven, and so to ensure none of us were cooked, (particularly the two of us with Irish ancestry) we slowly and steadily made our way through the crowds in any shaded areas we could find, until we found two lovely individuals who were going to be taking us to Rangammal School. Despite the underlying shared feeling of terror that we endured during the taxi ride along India's rather 'interesting' traffic system, we finally arrived safely at the school and the most glorious welcome awaited us. Any previous feelings of nerves or doubt vanished as we realised what wonderful company we were surrounded by – students and staff alike- and the three of us soon felt settled and welcome within the school knowing that five magical weeks lay ahead of us. We quickly overcame the initial language barrier with the help of the children, picking up the basics of sign language and within in just a couple of days were we able to communicate with them and understand them pretty well.

Something that will always stay with me from the visit was just how happy the children were. Their smiles and laughter were infectious from day one, and no matter how tired we were from the early morning starts, we seemed to be almost zapped with energy just by being around them. One of the most effective ways of waking us up seemed to be by rapidly surrounding us the moment we emerged from our rooms – sort of like bees to honey, or a dog to a bone – and every morning we would have at least five children on us at once hanging on to either our arms, waist or legs with no intention of letting go. In fact, morning walks to the dining hall felt like being a member of One Direction on the red carpet, with cheers and shouts of excitement at our arrival, but of course we loved them for it and we wouldn't have had it any other way.

The majority of our trip was spent within the school acting as a classroom assistant and sometimes taking a few classes ourselves helping with teaching English. Some of my most memorable days were when I was able to take a class on my own helping the children with their English pronunciation and learning new words. Although initially it was slightly daunting and could be a bit of a challenge, it was a brilliant way to build up my confidence and I was even told by one of the teachers who overheard me speaking that I had done very well and had a nice bold voice when I

spoke, and so knowing that I had done well was very rewarding! Of course it was not just praise from a teacher that was rewarding. Actually being able to help the children progress was an equally good feeling and I feel very lucky to have been able to help even in just a small way. Alongside teaching the children, I also enjoyed being able to simply observe some of the classes, particularly the younger standards. It was fascinating to be able to see just how the children are taught. For example we saw how they learn to make the correct sounds for certain words, or the correct sounds for certain letters, as lip reading clearly isn't the simplest of skills, and I very much enjoyed seeing various ways in which the children have to be taught.

One of my favourite tasks allocated to us in the school and one that I also feel very lucky to have been part of is the choreographing of Sylvia's welcome dance, as Sylvia was away when we went on our visit. Initially, when asked if the three of us would be able to help to create a routine we wondered how exactly we were going to manage it, however it turned out to be much simpler than we anticipated. We chose the recent Disney hit that took the world by storm – 'Let it Go' from the film Frozen, and we found that even some of the children were familiar with it! After lots of rehearsal time, we watched the finished piece on our last day with the children in costumes and the girls with beautiful white dresses and glittery silver pom-poms. As a performer myself I was incredibly proud of their work and efforts and I would be lying if I said that I didn't tear up a little watching them on stage!

Aside from the time we spent with the children in the school, we also were lucky enough to experience some of the culture in Tiruvannamalai. We went on a visit to Tiruvannamalai's famous temple and had a day out feeling very much like Indian princesses. Dressed in our beautiful saris with flowers hanging delicately from our hair, we turned a few heads and were greeted with warm loving smiles from the locals as we walked through the courtyards of the temple. We even had the experience of receiving a blessing from an elephant! Yes, you read that right, an elephant! Upon arrival at the temple the three of us placed a coin into the elephants trunk, who then patted us on the head and gave the coin to the trainer. It was certainly an experience I won't be forgetting any time soon. Later that same day we also had the chance to eat our lunch in traditional Indian style – with our hands from a banana leaf – another experience I won't be forgetting. Although the locals there make this eating process look very easy with relatively little mess involved, it turned out that the three of us were not quite as skilled as we thought we might have been. That being said however, whilst it may have been one of the messiest lunches I've eaten in a long time, we also had a lot of fun and we were thrilled to be able to gain such great insights into Indian culture.

Other days out away from the school also included visiting the established hospital and the day care centre, which again were eye-opening visits that made us realise what an incredible job Sylvia has done and we were able to get an idea of just how many people she has helped with her work. We were able to see several different sections of the hospital and meet with members of staff and see how the equipment worked. Although a future in medicine has never been a calling for me personally, I was still fascinated by the work that had been done and the amount of people it catered for. Similarly in the day care centres, spending some time with the children there who were equally just as loving and as lively as those in the school, made me feel so glad that I had chosen to come to India with the Sylvia Wright Trust.

There were so many amazing things that we were lucky enough to experience in our five weeks in India, alongside a mix of emotions and feelings but they simply cannot all be written down in detail. So, I hope that this overview gives you an idea of the incredible time that I had, and I hope to continue to support the charity in the future.