

## India Report – Agnieszka Bucholc

Firstly, I would like to express how thankful I am for the opportunity to travel to India and visit and see all that Sylvia has made possible for so many people. The school, hospital and day care centres provide so many opportunities and necessities that no one should ever have to live without, such as healthcare and education. These establishments have also created countless jobs, benefiting those who receive the services as well as those who provide them. I am so grateful that I have been able to contribute towards the work of the Trust and experience the joy that it brings.

When Niamh, Laura and I first arrived in Chennai, after a long and tiring journey, we were nervous but mostly excited about the experience ahead. We were first welcomed by the heat, heat like I have never experienced before; it made me realise how happy I was to be away from cold England. Our 4 hour car journey to the school from the airport was quite an experience; the non-existent road system is simply crazy but somehow it works surprisingly well. When we finally arrived at the school (half asleep), we were then given the most amazing welcome one could ever experience. As we walked through the door, the children were crowded around us, with the most excited and happy smiles on their faces, and threw flowers all around us. It was truly humbling to think they were that happy just to see us arrive at their school.

During our stay, we were very pleased to have been able to help out in lessons, teaching English to students of all ages. It was great to see how enthusiastic the children are about education and how eager they are to receive our help. Teaching was a little bit challenging at first, but we soon picked up the basics of their sign language and were communicating with them all easily. We were also glad to be of help to the teachers, especially regarding the writing of the sponsor reports and children's biographies. I found this particularly interesting, as we found out more about individual students; their preferences, future ambitions and also their backgrounds. Through this we learned lots about the Indian culture, as we discussed the different aspects of their lives with the teachers.

We also had the wonderful opportunity to visit the home of one of the boys at the school. We felt very privileged to have been welcomed into his home and meet his family. We were treated with such kindness and generosity; provided with a variety of food (even drinking and eating coconuts, which I hadn't tried before!) and shown around their home. It really proved to us just how lucky we are, although more importantly it also showed us that despite a poorer financial situation, the family all care, support and love each other and remain happy as they are grateful for what they have and receive.

During our short stay, we tried to experience the Indian culture as much as we could through various ways. Firstly, we got to enjoy the traditional food at the school which was absolutely lovely. Despite the spice (even on a morning), we quickly adjusted and really embraced the different flavours. We also had a wonderful time visiting the most famous temples in Tiruvannamalai. We were dressed in our saris that we bought the previous day which were simply stunning. If only we could wear them every day! It was incredible seeing these beautiful places of worship, all with so much vibrancy and colour. It was great to see how the different religions all coincide together and the variety of beliefs, especially among the school children - how accepting and respectful they are of each other. We were also very lucky to have an unexpected trip to a live circus! The children loved it so much, they were all in awe of the performers, and it was so great to see how much they enjoyed themselves.

The one thing that will always stay with me, is all the wonderful time we spent with the children at the school, playing and socialising in the afternoons and evenings. We had so much fun; learning so many new games, drawing with them, telling them about our families as they told us about theirs, playing new sports (we actually introduced the common English sport of rounders to the girls after getting a new bat and poles), board games, dancing, watching films or TV, looking after baby chipmunks, painting henna and so much more. We bonded with all the children and made friends for life. Their smiles and energy were what kept us so happy, even if this involved being woken up by banging on the doors at half past 6 in the morning and being used a human climbing tree. This is also why we were very pleased to have celebrated many birthdays with the children, theirs, as well as Niamh's.

As well as teaching English, we were given the task of teaching a small group of children a dance, after the teachers heard about Laura's dancing and performing skills. This dance would be performed for Sylvia when she returned to Tiruvannamalai (she was in England during our stay). We choreographed it to the famous song 'Let it go' from the well known film Frozen, which some of the children actually recognised. Teaching the dance was more challenging than we anticipated but with the help of a teacher and many hours spent practicing in the afternoons, we were so proud and happy when the children performed it so beautifully, all dressed up at our leaving party.

It was also very interesting visiting the hospital. I was very pleased to have had the chance to shadow some doctors and nurses and watch their incredible work on the different wards and in the clinics. It was also great being able to go into theatre and observe several procedures. We were also very glad to have visited the day care centres for the disabled. Seeing the children there was emotional but fantastic, playing with them and dancing. They were always so happy to see us, we couldn't help but to feel utter joy when being around them.

To conclude, I am very thankful for this amazing experience and I would very much like to return one day and visit again. I hope to continue supporting the Trust and the work of the wonderful and inspiring Sylvia Wright.