

With the Sylvia Wright Trust in India: Tom Cullinan. November 2010.

The 4 hour journey from Chennai to Tiruvannamalai gave our group of five an insight into the India that I have only read about and seen on television. It was the prelude to an exciting and colourful 10 days which were conducted at a fast pace with many interesting and emotional encounters.

On reaching the Rangammal School for the hearing impaired, which has 209 children plus headmistress and staff, we had the most warm and enthusiastic welcome with garlands of sweet smelling flowers placed around our necks and anointing of our foreheads. The children gave us a guard of honour down the pathway to the school.

On the way I met Monika, whom I sponsor, and her older sister Kirithuga shyly waiting amongst the children. That was a great moment to meet the girl whom I had only seen in a photo sent by her teachers.

Later we introduced ourselves to the assembled school and were entertained with Indian dancing followed by a bonfire and fireworks. What a start to our visit!

At mass next day in the local Catholic Church we were introduced to the large congregation and presented with beautiful shawls.

On reaching Rangammal Hospital another huge welcome was given to us and prayers were said inside the Chapel of the Holy Name. Unfortunately Sylvia was not well and could not be there.

We were shown around this remarkable testament to the achievements of Sylvia and I realised the enormity of her achievement in transforming a mobile clinic into a 220 bed hospital. The amount of hard work involved in doing this is difficult to imagine but she has created an oasis of care and compassion which is badly needed in an extremely poor area of India.

We met Mr. Vijayen, the hospital manager, and Mr. Rajah, the accountant, who were very grateful to the Sylvia Wright Trust for their vital support.

One morning we set off to visit Monika and Kirithugas' home about 1 hour drive away. She lives there with her parents and 4 year old sister Deepika who is able to hear. Their parents own a small plot of land and a few rather thin-looking cows which provide a small income.

We also called in on 2 small day centres set up to help and teach severely disabled children. The incredibly devoted teachers and caring staff told us that progress is made albeit at a slow rate.

The opening of the new nursing college brought a number of dignitaries to the ceremony and of course Sylvia. It was an entertaining evening with speeches including one from Tony Allinson and tremendous dancing from the boys and girls who, though not hearing the music, never missed a step due to the beating of a drum and direction by their dance teacher. The student nurses were very lively and attractive in their multi-coloured saris.

A great time and another milestone reached by Madam Sylvia.

There were many more exciting events including watching the 14km walk around Mount Arunachala by over a million people to celebrate 'Deepam' and the lighting of a bonfire on top of the mountain. Also we toured the farm which has many cows providing milk for the hospital and the school.

The days went very quickly and after a lovely goodbye from the children and staff at the school we set off to Chennai. The drive was a little hair-raising as on the dual carriage-way we almost collided with a cow and just missed a motor cyclist. However we made it and finally I visited St.Thomas Cathedral which houses some of the remains of St. Thomas the Apostle.

I would like to thank Sylvia Wright for the chance of taking part in her great projects, the staff of the schools and the hospital, the wonderful children who sparkle and shine with joy and happiness and give us much more than we give them and of course my Yorkshire friends: Tony Allinson; Tony Hartigan; Anne-Marie Rose and Bernadette Barnes for their company and humour.

My visit to India with the Sylvia Wright Trust was far better and more involved than I expected. The children and teachers are the stars with their simplicity, politeness and wish to make us welcome. The main star is Madam Sylvia with her directness, practicality and sense of humour.

It was a great success which gave me an insight into an incredible country and showed the huge impact Sylvia has had in Thiruvannamalai.