

My journey to India

My journey begins with the three of us arriving in Chennai airport, feeling exhausted and rather dishevelled. I remember feeling a surge of emotions: excitement, nerves, even fear. As we stepped out of the airport doors the intensity of the heat hit us immediately and we hurried along to get to the air-conditioned refuge of the van. Once inside the four hour drive to the school that followed was definitely a shock to our systems. Goats, cows, people, and vehicles of every description are to be found anywhere and everywhere along the roads. When we finally arrived at the school we were greeted with an absolutely lovely welcome from the students and teachers. Any feelings of doubt we shared dissipated immediately as we realised how wonderful our time was going to be there. We spent our first day playing with the children and learning the alphabet in sign language so we could communicate. By the time we went to bed we were utterly shattered yet thrilled to finally be there.

We were woken up on our first morning by the sound of several children banging on our door. We quickly got dressed and opened our door to a swarm of little ones that were anxious to bring us down to breakfast. We soon found that every morning would begin like this, and as we made our descent to the dining hall we would have several children clinging on to our arms and legs. It was of course a lovely way to start the day and always filled us with energy and joy.

After a few days of growing accustomed to the school we received our timetables and began to start assisting in the classrooms. It was a delight to help the class teachers and the children with their studies. The children are incredibly enthusiastic, especially when it comes to learning English. Occasionally I had the opportunity to lead a few classes by myself which was a challenge yet ever so rewarding: I taught English through poetry and rhymes, using my grasp of sign language and pictures to convey the meaning of new words. Additionally we observed classes in the Early Intervention Centre, which is run for 1-6 year olds who are hearing impaired. This was particularly fascinating as we were able to see how the teachers taught these children to lip read and speak from such a young age. We also worked with the sponsor work team in which we translated letters from the children to their sponsors from Tamil to English. I particularly enjoyed sponsor work as we were able to gain a real insight into the school and home lives of the children. We were also able to discuss many aspects of the Indian culture with the teachers and at the end of every session we always left knowing something new.

We also had the pleasure of choreographing Sylvia's welcoming back dance, as she was away in England at the time of our trip. This was one of my favourite tasks and I loved working with our 12 especially talented dancers. We chose the song 'Let it Go' from Disney's popular film 'Frozen'. The children worked so hard to perfect the dance and when they performed it in front of the school for our leaving party I felt ever so proud of them- I'd be lying if I said a tear or two didn't fall!

Furthermore we visited the hospital on a number of occasions which was really interesting. We shadowed doctors and nurses working in various wards and even went into theatre to observe different operations. I was astounded by the size of the hospital as well as the

countless treatments available. Additionally we visited the day care centres for disabled children which was ever so lovely. The children there not only receive rehabilitation and care, but education, including Maths, Tamil and English. Whilst we were taught English and played and danced with the children.

During our trip we tried to see as much of India as we could. We visited the magnificent temples of Tiruvannamalai in beautiful saris that we had purchased on my birthday. We received many lovely compliments as we made our way in and around the 9 temples, and we were even blessed by an elephant! After the temples we visited an ashram where we had lunch and ate with our hands- a skill that is definitely underestimated! We also enjoyed spending 3 nights in the beautiful city of Pondicherry. We were able to visit more temples and ashrams, as well as the beach!

What will always stay with me from India is the children of Rangammal School. From the very first moment we stepped out of the van till the day we left, they always made us feel so welcome and loved. Our trip was truly special because of them. The children taught us so many new things, from sign language to origami to even caring for baby chipmunks. The children never stop smiling nor do they let anything stop them from reaching their goals. It was a delight just to be with the children, especially out of the classroom where we could socialise and really become friends. Whether it was braiding hair or playing rounders with the girls, or cricket and caring for baby chipmunks with the boys it was so much fun. I especially loved sharing the children's birthdays whilst we were there, and I was so lucky to have shared my 18th birthday with the school.

The hardest part of the trip was without a doubt leaving. It was heart breaking having to leave the school after the incredible time we'd shared there, but I left with the determination to better myself and strive towards a life in the likeness of Sylvia's. It was an honour to witness and involve myself with the truly tremendous work of Sylvia Wright and her trust, and I'm eternally grateful for the opportunity of doing so. Above all hope I can continue to support the trust in the future and return to India.