



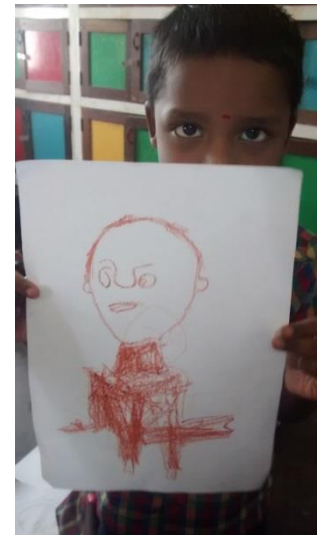
This Summer I decided to return to India for a third time. Having graduated from university in July and with aspirations for a career in social work, I realised that I had ahead of me the perfect opportunity to go back to Madurai to work alongside Jim and his team at Vidiyal. After many emails and months of planning, I once again found myself on a flight out of Heathrow; this time alone and with a 2 month stay ahead of me. Incredibly daunted, I was reminded of something I

was asked on my return from the New Dawn visit the year before: 'how much of your heart did you leave behind?' The answer was almost too much to account for and so my doubts soon disappeared. Almost 24 hours later, I was being welcomed at the airport by Jim and Sharmi who then drove me back to their home along Madurai's bustling streets, to the place which was to be my home too for the next 8 weeks. My Indian adventure had begun.



During my stay I had a very busy work schedule, most of my mornings were spent in Vidiyal's nursery school where children are taught very basic numeracy and literacy skills and are given the sensory development that all children need at a

young age. It is a safe and happy environment, a place where they can escape the dangers of the slums. Together we went on a nature walk to a Banyan tree and a field trip to a fish farm and whilst in the classroom I taught them some English rhymes and how to write and count up to 10 in English, as well as a self-portrait drawing activity that went down a storm!



Jim also asked me to come up with a project or activity to run during my evenings at each of Vidiyal's drop in centres, so that both I and the children could get even more out of my visit. Each of the drop in centres is unique. As spaces they are very important; they are within the slum environment yet they are protected, again acting as an escape from the dark side of the slums. I wanted my project to enable the children to put their own mark on these special places, as well as to leave something permanent behind myself and so in three of the centres I ran a mural painting activity. The children designed and painted these



themselves and it was a delightful way to spend time with them all. The murals were creative and colourful and made such a difference to the dark grey walls of some of the smaller centres. Best of all though was the pride the children had in the finished pieces. 'Super, super!' they exclaimed as we finished painting.

I also spent some time working with the children residing in Vidiyal's Reception home, a temporary home for rescued children, and witnessed for myself the ways in which Vidiyal provides them with the support and love that they so desperately need. During their time in this home they learn computer skills and sewing, they are given lessons in Maths, English and Tamil, and are also offered traditional craft and karate lessons. Central to the care provided is the counselling given to help them work through their problems and to teach them how to better cope with whatever may be going on in their lives. They stay in this home up to a maximum of 6 months and then Vidiyal works hard to find a new and permanent home for them – more often than not they will go back to their families, but sometimes children's homes are the only option.



Recently, this aspect of Vidiyal's work has skyrocketed, with the launch of Childline in the city, which is also run by Jim and his team. Through Childline, and thanks to the facilities offered by the reception home, Vidiyal has been able to reach out and help even more children. In the past year, they have had 250 children come into the reception home and Childline has received 1461 phonecalls, including 13 cases of child marriage and 18 cases of physical abuse and this is going up all the time as awareness in the city grows. During my time there, there was one day in which they stopped 3 child marriages alone.

I was once again taken to visit homes in two of the Madurai slums during my time in India – Ambethkar Nagar, which is the poorest area of the city and Muthupatti, which is a section of Madurai with one of the highest crime rates, as well as being a slum that we haven't ever been taken into before. These visits were as always eye opening and at times deeply moving – the poverty of these areas, despite the fact I've seen them before more than once, will always be difficult to digest. Strangely enough though, what I was really struck by during my visits to the children's homes is just how much fun I had there. When people live in such close proximity, and in such small spaces, a strong sense of community overwhelms anything else. I was reminded that at the root of the reality of this kind of poverty are simply homes and families and daily life. At each house I was welcomed with open arms – I saw family photos, met relatives, drank cups of tea and even watched one man show me the tools of his craft of candle making. I think that just shows you how much they all care for and look out for one another, something that we can all learn from – as well how accepted Vidiyal has become in their community.





All of these experiences allowed me to play observer and to see what the children got up to on a weekly and daily basis in a way that we've never had the chance to before. On top of everything else, I was lucky enough to be in Madurai for the election of the new Child Right's Committee, a workshop on social media and staying safe online, the feedback meeting for the Child Right's festival and an exposure visit to Vidiyal from an organisation for handicapped children. On each and every one of these occasions, all of which were organised and run by the children

themselves, I was blown away by what I saw. As individuals and in a group context, the Vidiyal children are some of the most mature, bright, hard-working and confident people I have ever had the privilege to meet. Although providing an education is at the core of what Vidiyal does, I've learnt that this is only one element of what it gives to the children of the Madurai slums. Vidiyal empowers and teaches and realises the passions and talents of every individual. These children are working their way up through the karate belts, they are learning guitar, singing songs, raising money for homes for the elderly, speaking in public, performing plays and dancing.

Of course, they are also having a lot of fun to top it all off on camps, days out and educational trips. The annual 5 day camp was a huge success this year. We took the children to Cumbum Valley, where we camped in a marriage hall and washed in the river each morning. The children had a fantastic time, building tents, playing relay games, cooking outdoors, visiting a waterfall, taking part in the river crossing and Olympics and of course, singing and dancing too.



I have taken so much away from my time with the organisation this year, not least a great introduction into social work. I had an amazing insight into the culture of India and the way it operates. I was welcomed into and became a part of both Jim's own family and the wider family structure that Vidiyal provides. There is no doubt that through all its hard work, and lots and lots of love, Vidiyal changes lives. Jim's dream that one day Vidiyal will be run by for and of the slum communities themselves is taking shape and becoming a reality. This is such an exciting time for the organisation and for all of those involved, including sponsors here in England, and I feel privileged to say that I was, if only for a short time, part of the amazing things going on in Madurai thanks to Jim and his ever expanding team.