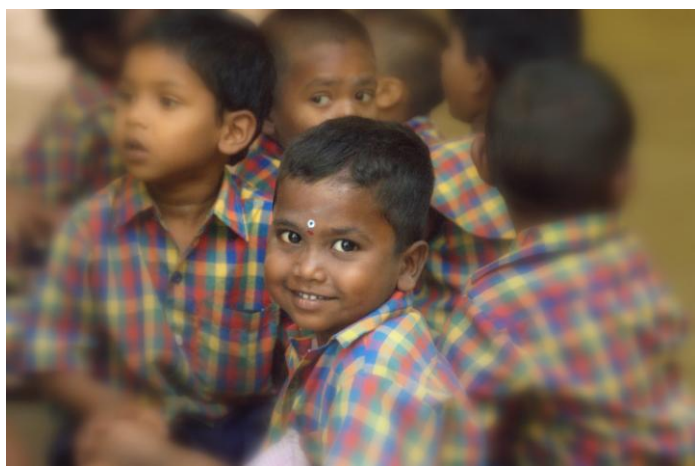


As we left Manchester airport on Sunday 1st February one single snowflake passed the window of the plane. Britain was about to feel a real wintery blast and we were heading for 30^o C plus. Our baptism of fire was the manic city of Chennai where, in the space of less than an hour we witnessed a slice through Indian life from smart hotel to pavement poverty, slums edged onto the rivers and traffic that defied belief. That is, until we settled down to a pace of life that accepted the intriguing diversity of an emerging country in every shape and form.

A nine hour train journey through South India took us to Madurai and a wonderful greeting on the station from Jim, Shamilla and six of the delightful sponsored children. With yellow roses!

As first timers Jim carefully introduced us to Vidiyal life beginning with the Vidiyal Centre in Muthupatti. This is a beautiful place, airy and peaceful. The nursery class was actively enjoying lessons totally suitable to their age. I introduced them to the song 'The wheels on the bus go round and round', which seemed very appropriate as buses form a large part of their life. I was very interested to see the simple way the food was cooked and prepared for the tasty lunch everyone received.



Across the road from the Vidiyal Centre is the Reception Home where young girls and those rescued children who need initial care live. These children are well looked after but a regular change of toys would be beneficial if we could provide them.

The boys downstairs are a lively and mixed group, one of whom arrived that morning, brought by the police as he had been found in much need. He will be assessed and placed

appropriately given time. Peter had balloons for them providing fun for all. Our son, Simon is a keen photographer and his digital camera gave great delight to all the children.

The rest of our first stay in Madurai saw us visit a Water Park with 70 of the children for a fun Saturday out, several visits to the various Drop-In Centres and visits to families who had been displaced from the Mellawasal slum.



We took a tour of what remains of the slum as it is being slowly knocked down. Many people gravitate back to the area to meet up with their friends. It is not a good area. The new site for some of the families is much more open and has good light, the possibility of electricity and water reasonably close. Vidiyal has paid for bricks, flooring and roofing material for several homes of the sponsored children. The families are building the 10 feet square houses themselves. We met several sponsored children and their families who are wonderful warm people. Some sewing machines provided by our Virtual Gift Catalogue were evident and lots of cards from folk in Britain were shown to us. These are treasured possessions.

The main centre in town is a very well used building. At about 5pm the children arrive from school, begin their homework and spend time with each other. Staff are on hand to offer support where needed. Simon was quizzed by the young men about education and job prospects and I spent time discussing the poems of R.L. Stevenson. Peter discussed Maths and Geography homework before playing with the kids and the balloons. I seem to remember I taught some girls the steps for a Cumberland Reel of all things! They are better dancers than I.

Trekkers, the club for 7-11 year olds at Capel Methodist Church give 25p of their subs. to NewDawn India each week. They had completed some information sheets about themselves with photographs and I showed them to a similar number of 7 to 11 yr olds at Vidiyal.



Sharmila had made some templates in Tamil and we spent time with the children as they completed their sheets. The handwriting and drawings are beautiful. Sharmila translated the sheets ready for my return but two needed no translation as the written English was excellent.

The time spent with these children is so beneficial to them in building confidence and creating self esteem in a variety of ways as well as complementing their education.

We left Madurai to take a four hour hair-raising taxi ride to the hills north around Coimbatore. Our destination was the old colonial hill station of Ooty (Ootycamund) or Udagamandalam as it is called today. This was our fun trip as we went up the mountain on a rack and pinion railway, pulled by a 1919 locomotive built by Swiss engineers, travelling at 5-6MPH for five hours through mountain passes and tea plantations with black smoke from the coal fired engine bellowing out. It was an unforgettable journey with wonderful scenery and friendly travelling companions. After our short break we hit the trains again for a journey into Kerala and Trivandrum.

Our first visit was to the Sneehadeepam Hospital where Thomas Varghese is the administrator. What a warm and welcoming man he is! The hospital is a genuine mission hospital supported by the trust for many years. It has no connection with Vidiyal but is happy to fall in with the name of 'New Dawn' as they appreciate its meaning.

The hospital caters for approximately 70 patients each day. Local buses arrive each hour at the stop near the hospital, the patients get off, are treated and make their way home on the next bus. What a way to deal with waiting lists. Clinics go out to the villages using the ambulance driven by a driver/evangelist. Each clinic begins with a prayer, reading and song. Back at the hospital there is a new x-ray machine, dental equipment

and chairs and other simple means to treat patients by the truly dedicated staff.



When asked what was needed we were shown a rather antiquated ECG machine. We are now in the process of replacing it and, as costs are coming down, we will be able to fund a new one for around £650. This is essential equipment and they have only one. We will gladly accept donations for this type of equipment, if you would like to offer support in this way

A visit to the Y.M.C.A. Boys Home to the south of Trivandrum reinforced the work that has gone on there for many years.



The 25 boys are well looked after and they are happy. A new computer centre is being built close to the site and bulldozing was under way to provide the foundations.

This area rapidly became an impromptu cricket pitch for the boys. No bats, just sticks. And they were good. The trustees of the 'Y' were very welcoming treating us to a delicious evening meal and a formal presentation of their proposals for the computer centre. This will be looked at by the trustees of New Dawn to see if we could offer some help.

We returned to Madurai for the remainder of our trip, before our return to a wintry Britain.

We were entertained by an amazing farewell Celebration where all 250 plus children who come into contact through the Vidiyal programme were present, either as participators or audience. What an evening! Karate, drumming, dance and drama followed our garlanding with rose garlands. We were treated as honoured guests which was so unexpected. We were given seats as quite rightly, we do find it hard to sit on the ground! Everything that the children did was exceptionally well prepared. They also enjoyed it. The drama where the characters were monkeys reinforced the harm to family life caused by early marriage. Jim and Shamilla work hard to bring self esteem and reinforce children's' and women's rights. This drama was a most enjoyable production that highlighted these issues.

The excellent meal of chicken biryani -for 270 - was followed by the moving candle lighting ceremony where every child lit a candle to light the darkness and symbolise the light that comes to them through participating in Vidiyal.

Our final day was a bonus. Another nine hour train journey did not appeal so modern India provided the answer. Thanks to Simon's 'Blackberry' we took a one hour flight back to Chennai. Before we left this gave us the opportunity to present several sewing machines to the girls who had completed the six month Tailoring course. As a former textile teacher I was very impressed by the way the girls had been taught with such dedication. It was a pleasure to present the machines paid for by the Virtual Gift Catalogue gift receivers.



And one final experience. If you thought Vidiyal is only for children, think again. Everyone is considered, especially those grannies that do a lot of the caring for the children. A feast had been arranged for 65 older ladies [and one man]. The ladies sang to each other, and I had to make an

offering. Thinking what Jim could translate with speedy ease found me singing 'Glad that I live am I'. The feast was most memorable. Banana leaves acted as plates [they are used for special occasions] and tasty piles of various rice dishes and curries were placed by the barefoot helpers, including us, on each leaf. After the food each lady was presented with a new sari and a small toiletry gift. These ladies are a real blessing to the centre, to each other and, quite literally, to us as we were blessed by them.



We left India knowing we had had a genuine adventure and an experience of a lifetime. Most of all, we were so impressed by the dedication and utter hard work of Jim, Shamilla and the team at Vidiyal as well as our friends at Trivandrum. Every penny we raise is money well used. Sadly, we quickly realised that the present world economic climate has reached India as we found a steep deterioration in the exchange rate and food price inflation of nearly 25% per annum. This will be felt by all our work in India, but much is still good value for money so we don't need to feel too despondent. We just need to keep on fund raising!



We could write much, much more but would rather share it, and a few of our photos, with you at the Curry Evening on 10th October 2009. See you there!