

John and Brenda's visit to India - Spring 2012

On Sunday 12th February we left a snow-covered Capel on the first stage of our journey to Vidiyal. From Heathrow we flew overnight to Mumbai to catch a domestic flight to Cochin. This was not our first visit to India - we had previously done the Golden Triangle - so we weren't completely unaware of the culture shock you get as soon as you land. However, the heat, the noise and the smells still hit you. Negotiating the security checks at Mumbai was no mean feat, with the women's queue stretching back as far as the eye could see, but we made our flight and arrived safely in Cochin. From here we took an overnight train to Madurai, sleeping surprisingly well in our air-conditioned compartment.

Jim, Sharmila, Arockiam and Poobalan, the lad we have been sponsoring for four years, were at the station waiting for us. Poobalan presented us with bunches of roses and although he spoke hardly any English, it was very emotional meeting him. He took Brenda by the arm and held on steadfastly during the short drive to the Royal Court Hotel where we were presented with beautifully-scented garlands.



Later that afternoon we started meeting the Vidiyal children when Jim took us to the Main Drop-in centre. As at all the centres we visited, we received a really warm welcome - beaming faces, excitement and a real desire to try and communicate. They were keen to use the English phrases they had: "What is your name? My name is....", "How are you? I'm fine." but how we wished we spoke Tamil! In the courtyard at the back there were youngsters of all ages having fun in a safe

environment. They were being supervised by a group of lads in their late teens and early twenties. We learnt that these were Vidiyal alumni. They were all studying for degrees in a wide range of subjects (Physics, Economics, English and Sociology) but were so grateful for the support and encouragement they had received in the past that they wanted to contribute in their turn. What better testimony to the work done at Vidiyal?

We had brought balloons for the children and despite what we had been told, we hadn't realised the delight they would bring to their faces. No matter what their age they all joined in, playing with them in a completely unselfconscious way.



The time spent at the Drop-ins is carefully structured with time for play, time for homework, and forums with a variety of activities, including updates on children's rights. We were most impressed by the way the children settled down cross-legged on the floor, with their schoolbooks, and got on with their homework. You could have heard a pin drop! Every child receives a healthy snack before going home about 7.45pm.

Some sponsors in England had asked us to take cards/gifts, and it was a pleasure to hand these over. Jim was also delighted to receive feedback from Capel Primary School about a joint project. Before we left the centre, we were shown the small computer room run by a specialist IT teacher, and the library where the children take responsibility for organising the borrowing of books. They were more than happy to explain their system.



We subsequently visited the other Drop-in centres at Mapalayam, Ambethkar Nagar and Muthupatti. Everywhere we were met with the same smiling bright-eyed enthusiasm. Mapalayam, near a slum, is being developed. We were welcomed here by a lovely example of kolam, and were given a demonstration of how a beautiful design is developed from an arrangement of dots.



The children here were keen to ask questions about us and our way of life, and to show us their school textbooks and what they were studying. John played chess with a lad who was no mean opponent: John won one game and lost one!

Ambethkar Nagar is situated in a more rural area. The accommodation here is quite basic, and we sat outside and enjoyed more singing including the Beaver Song - a legacy of Will's which they all sang with great gusto. The local villagers stood around watching with interest and amusement. This was the poorest area we visited. We saw women queuing to draw water at the standpipe on our way there, and on the way back, the only light to be seen was from the cooking fires outside the shacks; it was

pitch black otherwise. It was obviously an area where there was a great need for provision for the youngsters.



Muthupatti was a very different Drop-in being based at the Vidiyal Centre, in the same premises as the Nursery School. Children living in the Shelter Home were joined by those who lived locally. We spent a very jovial time here with lots of singing and dancing. Again, it was good to see children of all ages joining in with all the activities, showing respect for one another and not being at all self-conscious.

There is much more to Vidiyal, however, than the Drop-ins. One morning we paid a delightful visit to the Nursery School. We timed it perfectly because it was one little girl's birthday, and we were able to join in the celebrations. The Nursery School is housed in a very light, airy building. We were welcomed by a percussion group and we were asked to light the welcome candle.



Some children had prepared recitations for us and we sang "The wheels on the bus" while they did the actions. We then joined in the various educational activities, bead threading and matching games being

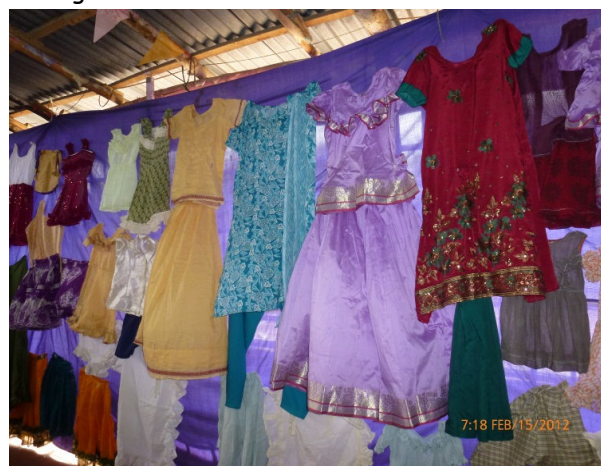
very popular. Each day the children have two snacks, and a meal cooked on the premises before they are taken home by the helpers.

That same morning we visited the Reception Home which is nearby. At that time this housed 21 lads and 7 girls, in separate accommodation! These children all have troubled backgrounds and are often brought here by the Police. Their days are carefully structured with lessons in Tamil and English, activities such as karate, yoga and other sports, chores and time to watch TV. Most importantly they have individual contact time to try to address the issues which have brought them here. Some of the boys looked quite tough and too old for the balloons and toy cars we had brought, but they enjoyed playing with them nevertheless. Everywhere we went, we noticed that the youngsters seemed very happy with simple, unsophisticated things, unlike some of their counterparts in Britain.

We also spent some time with the girls who were very keen to ask us questions. The Reception Home provides a refuge for girls who, for example, have run away from home, sometimes to avoid an arranged marriage, or who have been abused, or who have been brought in by the Police. They are offered a re-education programme so that they can deal with their particular issues and hopefully have a better future. For Jim this was obviously a very important part of his work, and the fact that the Police seek his help with these youngsters is a mark of the esteem in which he and Vidiyal are held.

There were two other memorable occasions during our time in Madurai. One morning we visited the Tailoring Unit where a colourful display of garments made there had been mounted for us. We were introduced to a dozen young women aged from 16 to 30 from the surrounding slums, some of whom had had no previous education. They were doing a six month training course to acquire skills which would enable them not only to make their own and their families' clothes, but also to contribute to the family budget, avoiding being forced into less

salubrious employment. Angammal, their teacher, was delighted and proud to show us the patterns they followed. On satisfactory completion of the course each student is given a sewing machine to enable her to earn her living, so keep buying the sewing machines from the Virtual Gift Brochure!



The lunch for the elderly was another very moving experience. This takes place every six months, and we arrived to find 61 women and 6 men from the nearby slums sitting cross-legged on the ground. They were so pleased to see us that some of the ladies rushed up and threw their arms round us. Vidiyal staff served rice and curry while we served bananas. Not a grain of rice was left. Following the meal we were asked to distribute a sari to the women and a shirt to the men. Their gratitude was tangible.



The lunch for the grannies and granddads, like the tailoring classes, are important links with families. In addition to responding to a real need, they raise the profile of Vidiyal in the local community and

encourage families to allow their children to participate in the Vidiyal programme which is so crucial to their futures.

Our two final days in Madurai were very special. On the Saturday we went to the water theme park at Athisayam. The girls swam fully clothed, and Brenda followed suit but found it very weird. The air was filled with screams of delight as everyone tried the various attractions. It was heart-warming to see these children who came from such deprived backgrounds enjoying themselves and having such fun. How they appreciated this special treat!



Memories of the farewell programme are still fresh in our minds. We arrived to find everyone dressed in their Sunday best. First we enjoyed a splendid



karate demonstration, then we moved to the roof area for an excellent dance display and a well-rehearsed performance of an allegorical drama written by Jim focusing on Dalits' rights. Fireworks lit up the now dark sky, and we moved down to the

garden area for the traditional lighting of candles and singing of "We shall overcome". At Curry Evenings we have always found watching this on video very emotional, but words can't begin to describe what it feels like standing there, in this circle of 200 children and adults, all with their individual candle, reflecting on what that light symbolises.

We did find time to do some sightseeing in Madurai. Jim took us to the Tirumalai Nayak Palace, and Sharmila, to the Meenakshi Temple. Then, under our own steam - in more than one sense! - we went up to Ooty in the Nilgiri Hills on the narrow gauge train, as seen in the BBC's Indian Hill Railway series, before joining a group for a tour of Kerala. This included spending a night on a houseboat on the backwaters, and a ride in an autorickshaw to Lighthouse Beach at Kovalam which Vidiyal children have visited in the past.

It was a truly unforgettable holiday but the overriding memories will be of the children who are allowed to thrive thanks to the commitment of Jim, Sharmila and their team of helpers, and to their selfless dedication to the cause. Their unstinting hard work makes such a difference to the lives of some 300 children, opening up horizons never imagined possible a generation ago. Here, we need to keep fund-raising for NewDawn to sustain the level of support in these difficult economic times, so if you would like to see some more photos and hear more about our visit, put the date of this year's Curry Evening in your diary: **Saturday 17th November 2012**. Do try to come along.

