

We have devoted this newsletter to feedback from the recent visit to Madurai by supporters and trustees. These are some of the thoughts and experiences of 18-year old Elly, on her first visit. We think it is well worth reading.

This summer I was lucky enough to accompany New Dawn India's biennial trip to Madurai in India. Having never been outside of Europe before, I had no idea what to expect. After an 18 hour long, 3 flight journey, stepping off the plane in Madurai was like arriving in another world. For me it was almost bewildering, but as soon as we met Jim and a number of the children at the airport I felt completely welcomed and at home.

The drive to the hotel offered up my first glimpse of the real India. Nothing can prepare you for what it's like to drive through the streets of an Indian city. Wealth and poverty are thrown together in startling contrast – city life is vibrant and alive with noise, heat, smells and colours you can only really grasp when you experience them for yourself.

On arrival at the hotel, we had breakfast with Jim and the children that had been there to welcome us at the airport. Although we were all completely exhausted after being awake and travelling for nearly 24 hours, it was almost too much to ask of us to sleep straight after being plunged into the bustling world of rush hour India. The others were excited to be back and I was simply overwhelmed by everything I had seen so far. Having breakfast with the children helped us to calm down again, to feel more integrated, and despite the underlying awkwardness that's often present at any first meeting - they made me feel more at home than they could possibly imagine. It was a real privilege to share my first moments in India with them.

After a few hours sleep, we were collected by Jim at the hotel and taken to Vidiyal's main centre. We all had a fantastic evening. The children were so excited for us to be there and it was great for me to spend some time with them – playing games, blowing up balloons, watching them dance etc. It really was a wonderful start to my India experience.

Next morning, we visited the Vidiyal shelter home. Some of the fondest memories I have from our visit to India are of the shelter home. It truly is a sanctuary, a beautiful place of safety for the children. Inside is a world away from the poverty of the slums and whether it's acting as a home, a drop in, or a school, it is a place where children are allowed to be children, a place of laughter and happiness. Across the road from the shelter home is Vidiyal's centre for juveniles. Despite their circumstances, all of the boys housed there agreed that the centre had become a home to them, a place where they are treated well and with respect. It was eye opening to meet the young boys who live there and to hear some of their stories.

That evening saw my first real taste of slum life. Throughout Madurai evidence of the hardships and poverty of slum life can be seen wherever you go. However, spending time in the slums with the children is an experience on a whole new level. We visited several of the slum drop-ins throughout our stay in Madurai; Ambethkar Nagar, Mapalayam, Melavasal, Thideer Nagar and Avaniyapuram.

In Melavasal, we were invited into some of the homes of the children. This was one of the most memorable moments of our visit. One man showed us his work tools, I was fascinated; he scours the gutter running outside his home for precious pieces of metal. His pride and dedication were overwhelming. As always, the children asked us about their sponsors in England and in each home they showed us their collections of cards, letters and photos, which were treasured and kept amongst their very few possessions. All of the families were welcoming and seemed incredibly grateful to have us in their homes. This was what really touched me; I don't think they'll ever understand how much of a privilege it was for us to be there.

The majority of the families living in Melavasal have moved back there from Avaniapuram. When the government destroyed a large quantity of the Melavasal slum many of the families moved out and created a new slum area in Avaniapuram on the outskirts of the city. Now, Avaniapuram resembles a waste land; many homes have been destroyed and very few families are left. For us, it is so difficult to imagine the nomadic lifestyle of the urban poor of India and the effects that it has. Melavasal slum is government built, and the communities of the former Melavasal and now the Avaniapuram slums were torn apart as people were forced to move from homes they had built themselves into the block, one room flats of Melavasal. For me, it was almost heart-breaking to witness. Day to day life for these people is hardship enough, let alone being treated with disregard by their own government.

Avaniapuram drop-in is also where we met with the working-boys. These are boys and young men working in bonded labour. This is a part of our visit I will always remember; the discussion we had with them was truly insightful. They asked us some important questions about England, the rights of people and children here, averages wages and what each of us did for a living.

Another highlight of our visit was the very much anticipated Rights of the Child Festival. It was an awesome celebration of everything the Vidiyal children have achieved. The music, dances and play (written by Jim himself) were all spectacular and it was wonderful to see so many of the children we had been getting to know in the limelight. It was fantastic to see so many parents there too. The festival really was a benchmark as to how far Vidiyal has come as an instigating association of child rights.

We met many very important groups of people during our time in India. Putting on the feast for the elders at the main Vidiyal centre was really special. It was great to meet the grandparents of so many of the Vidiyal children and to be able to give something back to them in thanks for their support. We received many blessings from them, and it really was a humbling experience for me.

Another group we met and talked with was the tailoring unit, founded and supported by Vidiyal and NewDawn. Many of these are mothers of the Vidiyal children and it was touching to see how far they had come using the skills Vidiyal had taught them. One of the women memorably said that she'd never learnt how to read or write, she never thought she'd be able to learn a skill like sewing. Now, she not only knows how to make clothes she can sell, she can make them for her own children too. She was so thankful to Vidiyal and the pride she took in her own work was really touching. The tailoring unit were a shining example of how such a simple thing can give people so much.

Towards the end of our visit, we accompanied 60 of the sponsor children on a weekend trip to Kanyakumari, the coast at the Southern tip of India. This has to be one of the most enjoyable parts of our programme. It was truly heart-warming to see the children enjoying themselves in the sea and playing games on the beaches. We visited some beautifully breath-taking sights too. It was with a sense of pride that we walked around these very Indian tourist spots with the Vidiyal children at our sides. It was a privilege to be able to do so too – one would think an outing with 60 children would resemble a school party, but it was more like a family holiday and we all felt like a part of that family. It really was a fantastic weekend spent with the children, we got to know some of them really well – particularly those that rode with us in our air-conditioned mini bus!

To visit a place so culturally and politically different from our own was truly eye opening. Each and every member of the Vidiyal family is an inspiration. Saying goodbye was heart-wrenching. Leaving India felt like leaving family behind; Jim and Sharmila had welcomed us into their home, the staff and volunteers into their work, and the children into their lives. Everyone we met in India gave us all so much. I know I came home a better person. What I've taken away from my visit will stay with me forever and in that sense, it really was the trip of a lifetime.

Elly

Come and join us to hear more at our annual  
**Curry evening**  
On  
Saturday 12th November  
at Capel Community Church, Days Road.

To book your place phone Neville on  
01473 310574