

Sarah Parry: Trip report from India

In July 2005 I went to India for the first time. It was a trip I will never forget! I went with my good friend Claire Hughes who I had lived with during my first year of uni, Emma Ford who has since become a good friend too and is now a social worker, and Amy Cushing who is a close friend of Claire's. Amy and Claire were familiar with the Asian continent as they had spent 8 months teaching English at a school in Malaysia and had subsequently travelled in Cambodia and Thailand. Emma had heard a great deal about LIM's work in India through her involvement with the organisation and was much more advanced professionally than the rest of us. Although I have always travelled a great deal, I had never thought of going to India before but felt I should go to see if we could set up a programme for volunteers as we had done in Romania. I had mixed feelings about the trip from the beginning as I wasn't sure what to expect and felt a little disloyal to Romania. However, I was very excited both about seeing what could be done and about meeting the children who's faces I had seen so many times in Newsletters.

We landed in Mumbai (aka Bombay) very late at night. Emma and I had never really met before but had plenty of time to become acquainted on the flight. Claire and Amy had managed to get some cheaper flights so we met them at the hotel. Although it was the start of the monsoon season it wasn't raining at that point and the warm night air and surroundings reminded me of Bridgetown where I used to holiday with my family when I was younger. When we got to the hotel we had a quick chat and then went to bed. The next morning we had the most wonderful mango smoothies and set off to the airport. We were travelling to Coimbatore from where we would go down to Erode, Tamil Nadu to the Bethany orphanage.

Erode, Tamil Nadu

When we arrived in Erode the team from the Bethany fellowship met us and had flowers for all of us which made us feel so welcome. This was the first time I experienced Indian driving at its best. I was convinced we would all die before we got there. Indian drivers make the Romanians look cautious! Anyway, we arrived in one piece (if not a little shaken) and went to meet Anita. Anita was Pastor Jenson's wife and co-manager of the projects in Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately Jenson was away in Srilanka so we didn't have chance to meet him. We were invited to eat with her family each night and were brought lunch in our rooms every day. We lived very comfortably in the bible college which is on site.



The children in the Bethany orphanage were wonderful. They were first introduced to us through song as they all lined up and sang to us. The children were obviously happy, however we soon realised they were very *controlled* and lived by a strict regime. We got a little worried when it took one of the helpers a good twenty minutes to find the key to the toy cabinet and there was just a cricket set and darts board inside. We could see the carers looked after the children, but they were not loved or played with much. None of the children wanted to hug us or get particularly close.

That night we discussed what could be done in Erode. Our first day had been a little difficult as Anita didn't know why we were there and had assumed it was a church trip as Emma was from LIM. It was also clear to us by this point that we could expect little help from the people there as their primary concern was the church and local community rather than the children. We also had some problems in terms of miscommunication and culture clash with one of the main members of staff. Claire and Amy reminded Emma and I that much of what we saw was a result of the culture rather than anything personal.

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While we were in Erode, we went to the market and shops to buy all the girls hair bands and the boys bangles. We also bought loads of art and craft games. Their orphanage was extremely bare so we got some wall posters they could colour in. Claire also bought Indian Junior Monopoly which we had our doubts about. The children loved their head bands and bangles. We had noticed the boys were much better adjusted than the girls which we put down to the absence of a house mother. Thus, we focused our attention on all the children but separated them into four groups: young boys, young girls, older boys, and older girls. We took one group each and circulated. This worked really well as we got to know all 54 children pretty well. They were so excited to just play and make things. Despite our initial scepticism, Claire also managed to teach all the children how to play monopoly and it was a smash hit! We made all manner of wall posters, cards, and jewellery. We also played *duck duck goose* (a favourite in every country I have ever been to) and generally had a wonderful day. That night we all felt really positive and happy that we brought a little light hearted play to the children.

We all had so many ideas of what teams of young people could do in Erode and felt as though we could finally see what we may do there to support the children.

Anita asked us if we would like to go to Kanyakumari, the area of Tamil Nadu worst hit by the tsunami in 2004. We had a very long drive down there and it was so hot! I wasn't feeling very well by the time we got there (largely due to low blood pressure). We were taken round someone's house which had replaced their old house thanks to humanitarian aid. It was basic but fantastic to see what a difference humanitarian aid was making in this region. The families we saw would literally be living on the desolate streets if it weren't for these houses. A short while later I was sick and passed out briefly but felt better soon after. After looking round a couple more houses, we had the opportunity to go with some fishermen on their boat. It was wonderful and the first time we all felt as though we were just having fun. After a walk along the beach, we started our long journey back.

Dhamapuri Leper Colony

While we were in Tamil Nadu, we were also taken to the Dhamapuri Leper Colony. This was something I had not been particularly looking forward to. It was another long drive and I was feeling a little fragile as I had been so ill the day before. I was also very anxious about being sick again as I was desperate not to appear rude or discourteous. Eventually we arrived at the colony which was much bigger than I thought and covered a large land area. This was particularly surprising as all the locals we had asked for directions had denied its existence! We took loads of bread and a few other things. When we got there it suddenly dawned on all of us that nothing could have prepared us for what we saw. It still makes my heart sink when I think of how those people were living. We went to the first community in the colony and tried to distribute the bread. One lady showed me her new born baby and Anita told me she was saying there was nothing wrong with her, which we could all see. Her baby was simply wearing a carefully placed leaf. I remember that one of the first people I saw was a man with no arms or legs. He shuffled over to us and I went over with some bread. Only then did it occur to me that I had no idea how to hand it to him. Luckily he was very gracious and took it from me. At that point I began to get a ringing in my ears which, in hindsight, was probably due to stress.

We then moved on to another community which had a few more amenities. They kindly offered us a 7UP drink each which was such a surprise after the first community we had seen. Although this community was better off materially, I saw two women with virtually no faces left. I couldn't believe people still had to endure a life like this.

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The third community we went to were the most affluent and had very small concrete huts which were a luxury. We were ushered into one such hut and asked to say a few words. Luckily Emma said a prayer which seemed appropriate to all of us by that point. I tried to say a few words but I seriously doubted we could do anything to help this enormous problem they faced. When we got to handing the bread out, most of the older people just asked us to give what we had to the children and young people; perhaps because they were giving up. They touched our skin and Amy and Emma's hair as they had never seen fair white people before.

One thing that will haunt me forever is just how graceful and dignified the people we met were, even though they lived in appalling conditions. On the way back to Erode, Anita told us how they risked getting stoned every time they left the colony to beg. Words can't describe how horrific it was.

That night on the long journey back something awful happened. The driver was no doubt tired as it had been another very long day. The roads were also as busy and hectic as ever. I was just dropping off to sleep, which had taken several hours, when there was a huge thud and we came skidding to a halt. I flew out of my seat and looked around to see what was going on. My first inclination was that we had hit a tree. It was only a few minutes later that Amy said she thought she had seen a man walk out in front of us. We were so confused because no one would tell us anything. However, it soon became all too clear what had happened as hundreds of angry people swarmed round the minibus. We were told to cover our arms and hide in the back of the bus. It was absolutely terrifying! All we could hear was shouting. We felt the bus moving and Anita told us to stay out of site and that we were pulling into the police station. We waited in the minibus in the car park of the police station for four hours. We had been told to hide as the situation could have got much worse if they had realised there were four white girls on board. Slowly, we were fed bits of information and it transpired that we had hit a man who was drunk.

The next part I could not believe. They told us we could leave without paying a fine if he was ok but that the hospital had discharged him with blood coming out of his ears due to his cast. We couldn't quite believe the low value put on this man's life. We wanted to do something but were powerless. Emma prayed for him but Claire, Amy and I felt totally helpless. Eventually, we heard he would probably be ok but had to leave the minibus for some reason we never got to the bottom of. We had to jump from the minibus we were in, into a 1960s VW. I say jump as we literally had to jump so the crowd who had waited outside the police station couldn't see us. Something then went wrong with this bus and we had to wait for someone from Erode to pick us up. I was so tired and upset by this point I can't really remember what happened after that but we got back very late and all felt very low. That day we had seen Indian culture at its most harsh.

The next day was our last day with the children. We were all rather shaken and I was certainly quite glad to leave Erode. I found the people quite difficult to understand but totally fell in love with the children. They were amazing little troopers who were so resilient. I admire them all so much. On our last evening we made bracelets with all of them and generally had a beautiful evening with these amazing children.

During 2005 and 2006 we tried hard to develop a volunteer intervention programme in Erode with LIM. However after another volunteer trip in July 2006 through which the volunteers experienced similar problems to us, we had to take the difficult decision not to support them. There were serious problems with the basic infrastructure and staff which although managers of LIM recognised, were unwilling to change. This was a difficult decision to make and to this day it is the only project we have ever walked away from. Our thoughts remain with the children and we hope the situation improves.

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Back to Mumbai

Before we could get up to Goa, we had to go via Mumbai. This was the first time we experienced the monsoon as it had not yet hit Tamil Nadu. We had planned quite a few trips but in the end finished up in Pizza Hut of all places (with a spicy pizza) and the Marriott Hotel with cocktails (much needed at this stage of the trip.) If I am completely honest, I would have seriously considered going home at that point if someone had offered me a ticket. I was really struggling to stay positive.

Goa

We arrived in Goa the next day and Tricia met us at the airport. She was amazing! Within minutes it was obvious how dedicated and driven she was to help her children. We practically discussed our entire business plan for the forthcoming year on the way to Shallom house. When we were introduced to the children and staff at Shallom House we were all so relieved. Shallom House was basic to say the least in terms of the structure of the building and materials they had. However, the love seemed to literally flow through the staff and children and the place just felt like a family rather than a children's home. I decided to try to put Erode behind me and look for what could be done in Goa.

I can't emphasise enough how amazing Tricia is. Unfortunately Graham, her husband, was in England when we were in India but I did meet him briefly in the UK and he was lovely. They both seemed to have such a great presence in Goa and knew so many different aid organisations. They were held in high esteem by everyone we met. They also lived off so little in order to support their life in Goa. It was remarkable what they had managed to achieve.

Tricia introduced me to a lady called Dr Mina who is a consultant paediatrician. I tried to explain as much as possible what we had done in Romania and what we could do in India. She agreed to try to help where she could. She was an inspirational woman and it was an honour to meet her. While we were there we also went to a home called Dammaden for children with HIV. They were beautiful children. We weren't there for long but I remember a little boy called Michael who wasn't very well when we were there. The children were not allowed to integrate into normal schools and we all thought how great it would be if students could go there to play with them.

While we were with the children of Shallom House we just played with them. It was so lovely to see such happy, loved, free children again. However, I was introduced to a girl called Christobel who had MS. She had never received treatment and she lived with her mother who was just fourteen when she had her and was very childlike herself. She looked so uncomfortable it was awful to see her. When I returned to the UK, I tried to find a physiotherapist who could help her but sadly she passed away before help could reach her. However, the physiotherapy support we arranged for other children is still in place and helping several children.

On the surface Goa seems much more westernised than other parts of India. However, when you scratch the surface it bares many similarities in the way women are viewed and treated and the family infrastructure.

We successfully worked in Goa with Tricia and Graham with volunteers during 2005, 2006 and 2007. When we ceased work with LIM in late 2007, we decided it would be unwise to continue our work in Goa in association with LIM in 2008. However, following the requests of Tricia and Graham we are reinstating our project in July 2009 and it will continue for the foreseeable future in association with Tricia and Graham's Lighthouse Trust which is registered in India. Our programme will help them in their work with the children at the children's home (now called the Lighthouse Children's Home

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rather than Shallom House) as well as support Tricia and Graham as individuals as they need more personal support to continue their work.

New Directions

In 2008 we started a new project in Hyderabad, India. Our volunteers work in the Raspoola slum which is home to 100,000 people. Our volunteers administer the Bayley Scales of Infant and Toddler Development to assess which children are at risk of developing developmental delays. Intensive Interaction and medical clinics administered by the Wishing Well charity are then implemented. This project has been devised by Dr Suzanne Zeedyk and Dr Cliff Davies. We work in cooperation with the BHUMI organisation and the Osmania University. 28 volunteers have pioneered this project this summer and we have been amazed and delighted by its success. Jane Miller, CAST Project Coordinator has largely been responsible for this success with the volunteers. We look forward to 2009!

Some final thoughts

There is no doubt that Tamil Nadu was the hardest part of my trip. The team at the Bethany fellowship are good people and run their ministry effectively. They successfully reach many people in the local community. Their presence in the tsunami region was also visibly welcomed. They also have close and established links with the Nammakil Leper Colony and do much good there. However, I am still not quite sure how they can not be doing more emotionally for the children living in the Bethany orphanage as they are living on site. The children are happy and content, but they need love. The girls (especially the older ones) are also in desperate need of positive loving female input through a house mother.

Words can not express what I think of Tricia and Graham. They live virtually on the bread line away from their friends and family in order to provide children with nothing with more love than any child could possibly hope for. They are truly inspirational!

The India Appeal has made progress largely due to Tricia and Graham, Dr Mina, Hayley Lee and Vicky Eyre managing the volunteers which has freed up a lot of my time, and Jane Miller's unwavering support!

In a nut shell my heart will probably always be in Romania, but I am keen to do more work in India. I hope to return soon and see how the children have grown and changed over the years. I would just like to thank everyone for making my trip what it was, and I am grateful for seeing the real India. Working in India has been great preparation for our work in other countries such as Uganda and Belarus and I am so glad I had the experience I did. We are really enjoying our work in Hyderabad and can't wait to restart our work in Goa. Working in India will always be a challenge, but I like those!