

Volunteer Experience Report by Janak Mistry

Introduction



The charity work that we carried out for the foundation lasted 2 weeks from the 1st July – 14th July. In these 2 weeks, we all learnt a lot about rural life in Tamil Nadu and also how local people behave and socialise as well as discovering the difficulties they experience in everyday life. When we first arrived, we had to make our way from Chennai to Tiruchirapalli via a 6 hour train journey. Once we reached our destination, Paul Rasan and David kindly picked us up at the platform and drove us in the minibus to Paul's home village of Pillyarpatti which was around a 4 hour drive from the train station. Paul and David founded and work for the Ford Trust which is sponsored by the Kamla Foundation and the both of them oversaw all the activities that we did in the 2 weeks and also acted as translators from Tamil – English and vice versa.

When we arrived to the village, they took us to an ashram (religious pilgrimage) where we stayed for the 2 weeks. It was a nice place with its essential basic facilities such as western toilets, beds, showers and even air conditioning. Once we all had unpacked and settled in, we walked to Paul's house which was about a 5-10 minute walk and discussed the 2 weeks programme with him and David. They were both very enthusiastic and supportive and outlined the structure of the programme and what we will be doing in the 2 weeks. Paul's house is also where we ate our meals everyday thanks to his wife's amazing south Indian cooking!

The programme basically consisted of three main areas – visiting orphanages, meeting and engaging with local women's group regarding equality and empowerment and also agriculture and farming methods that were being used.

Women's Groups (empowerment and equality)

During the course of the 2 weeks, we must have met around 5/6 different women's groups across different local villages. These groups were formed in such a way as they acted as unions whereby protection and support for women is key. Whilst meeting them, they told us about their daily activities such as household work as well as sowing and making material to help earn a living. The sewing machines were sponsored by the foundation. We discussed their problems such as being too remote from services (health) and the lack of young women's social groups leaving many young women vulnerable. On one occasion, we set a whole day for a community festival just for the women that we met in the different villages. This was just for young and old women as they did not feel as comfortable talking to the

men and so myself and the other 2 lads were to have this day to spend time working on our projects (farming and orphanages). However, the festival consisted of the women meeting the girls of our group and having social discussions with them and also serving food to them. The turnout consisted of about 150 people and so was a very busy but enjoyable day. The focus this was to ensure that women from different villages can meet and interact with each other to ensure greater support and social interaction for them. Obviously so discuss problems with other women would be beneficial for them as they would understand what they were going through.

Community Festival



Orphanages (old persons and children)

This was my project along with 2 others (kasia and chhaya) and we had to visit old people's orphanages and childrens homes to discover the problems these institutions were facing and try to think of possible ways to help their situation through our work in the foundation. Firstly we visited an old people's home and listened to and spoke to these poor old abandoned women who told us of their emotional stories of how their sons/daughter/families had just abandoned them and left them on the streets. We found out that despite the institution caring for them and providing basic needs and facilities, that healthcare services were of a far distance as well as their friends and a few members of their families which were in other homes but far away. To overcome this, we thought of providing the institution with a vehicle so that the old women could visit their brothers/sisters/friends once in a while who were placed in other homes as well as regularly visiting a hospital/doctors surgery to ensure the maintenance of their health. The only way we could provide this vehicle however, is to fund raise and make donations. This will be done in the UK through contacts at University asking for donations and trying to create

social events around campus as well as door-door canvassing explain to people what our cause is for.

Old persons home



We also visited a childrens home, where again the main issues seemed to be that of remoteness to other places of social activity and services. Because of the land space, it may be possible to have a playground or things for the children to play as well as study - again fundraising and donations will have to finance this. Playing and interacting with the children was a really enjoyable experience though, despite them being too young to speak English, we played games like cricket and football with the kids as well as splashing in the river and getting soaked!

Entertaining the children!



These projects were mainly carried out in the second week of the programme however; all of the places were visited in the first week as well to provide us with a background and a context to the place. As well as engaging with local groups in the villages, they also took time to show us their villages by taking us to a nearby medical centre also visiting 2 local schools to speak with local teachers on how the education system is taught. We found that despite their poor economic and hardship social situations that the level of intelligence of the children was of a very high standard. This is because they would see education as a route out of poverty and so children seemed to be very disciplined, well behaved and respectful of their teachers and studies. In one of the villages, we visited the construction of the well that the foundation is sponsoring which will provide the locals with a regular close by water source. In every village, the people were so friendly and always provided us with food and drink as well as engaging in key discussions with us.

Discussion with teachers in local educational institution



Discussion with the students



Overall, the 2 week programme was truly amazing. It went so quickly and I think everybody would have loved to stay and to even go back next year. Paul and David and Paul's family and the other helpers were all great, they all looked after us really well and made sure we had an experience out there. The hospitality of the locals was overwhelming, despite not having much, they were always willing and ready to offer food, drink and their loving hospitality to us. It was also a good experience to see how these locals live their lives and how different everyday life is for them compared to what we have. I learnt the value that basic living is all you really need and that these local people will appreciate the most important things in life. I came to appreciate their lifestyles and left wanting to help even more and to continue to help the Kamla Foundation in whatever way I can in the future. I would love to go back again next year and recommend this programme to anyone thinking of participating in charitable work.

