

Visit to Rangammal School in Tiruvanmalai. 7 – 8 FEBRUARY 2010. Andrew & Elizabeth Lowe

We arrived early on a Sunday morning on the Sleeper train from Trivandrum and were met by taxi, which took us to Sylvia's Residential School for the Deaf. A large welcoming party was assembled on the steps to greet us, with ceremonial shawls and rounds of applause. We were quite overcome and felt like imposters!

After a drink and a quick change we attended mass with Sylvia at the beautiful church of Our Lady of the World, followed by lunch and a tour of the school. We were impressed by the teacher: pupil ratio of 1:8 and the happiness of the students as they showed us their impressive dance routines. The boys were cricket mad and Andrew was happy to play with them and show off his batting. We also organised some games for the younger children and girls, which was a challenge as we quickly had to learn a few useful signs to communicate the rules.

The following day we sat in on a wonderful language and drama lesson in Standard 1. The teaching was truly inspirational as children were learning to speak despite being profoundly deaf, through the medium of story and props. Elizabeth did a short stint of teaching in Standard 2, whilst Andrew observed Maths teaching in a Year 9 group. The standard achieved was very impressive, as the students have ten hours of Maths per week. They manage to do this as there are only four basic curriculum subjects and the subject does not require language fluency. They were very interested to know how many subjects English schools did and that their Maths ability was equal to that of A' level students here in England.

Later that day we visited the 200 bed Memorial Hospital and clinics developed by Sylvia and were shown around by Mr Jayaraj, the Community Development Officer and Counsellor for Community Medicine. Sylvia was very much at the helm in her office, which she shares with a large untidy dog (yes, really!). The hospital was absolutely spotless with an atmosphere of calm and efficiency and has clinics for dialysis, diabetes, maternity and an ICU as well as the normal casualty and surgical wards. They are doing particularly good work with HIV patients and these are treated alongside other patients. The authorities were proud to show us how the incidence rates had fallen, owing to better drug treatments and public Health Education and Counselling Programmes.

When we returned in the evening, we rested awhile before again organising some games for the students and watching the older students perform a Japanese-style dance in the garden pavilion. They all wore beautiful costumes made by Sylvia (is there no end to this lady's talent?)

Later we did the bedtime rounds with Sylvia, who makes a point of seeing every child settled for the night. We heard about their early lives and were moved to sponsor a 14 year-old boy, Palanivel, ourselves.

Throughout the visit we were treated to the most amazing curries which were specially cooked for us. Our thanks go to the cooks, to Shanti and Ms Himalatti who looked after us royally and to the teachers who took such an interest in us. We hope to return their hospitality when two of them visit Yorkshire in April.

Before we left, we presented the school with a large suitcase full of useful and attractive gifts. The bulk of these were very kindly provided by Diane Ward and the faces of the children as they pored over them were a delight to behold. They also appreciated the laptop, contributed by Michael Lydon, as they only had two others.

We had tears in our eyes as we left the following Tuesday and the impact of that visit will never leave us.