

FRIENDSHIP & UNDERSTANDING REPORT (INDIA 2011/12)

I have just got back from being a volunteer teacher at Sri Chaitanya School in India. My project was based in Tangutur, Andhra Pradesh not too far from Nellor. It's a very small village that hardly anyone in the state knows about. We had to get a train from Hyderabad to Ongole which is the nearest big town and then our host, Mr. Ramana came to pick us up in a small van. It took us 30 minutes to get to the project and we were greeted warmly, with a lot of staring and were given a tour of the school and accommodation.

I lived in a small room upstairs from the headmaster's office along with another girl, Beth, who was volunteering with me. The headmaster's wife, Venkayemma was living in the room next door to us along with her son, Raja and her two nephews, Bolu and Gopi. We all shared the bathroom and the outside/balcony area as well as the cleaning area. The boys were 12, 16 and 17 and were very sweet. Raja was very helpful when we first arrived and showed us all around and how to do things. Our room was about 13x13 feet for two people and there was a separate area for us to do our own cooking. The roof was tin that was held up by wooden beams which didn't look very secure and were a great fun place for the rats who were living with us. The floor was concrete and mud and the windows were rectangles cut out from the concrete walls. Our roof had leaks and so when the monsoon arrived in November the bedroom got flooded! It soaked our whole kitchen area and was then coming closer and closer to our bedroom. The roof got unbearably hot after the 'winter' period and I was struggling to live there. With the heavy rain that we would get and then the horrible heat, our walls would sweat and make everything very damp and unpleasant. My partner and I got quite sick from it all.

After 5 months, we all moved to a new house which was being built when I first arrived. After the move, it was really like we were living with a host family. Beth (my partner) and I shared a room that was about 10x9 feet, the headmaster's wife lived in the room next to us, we had a shared kitchen and bathroom and living area.

When I first arrived, I was treated much like a guest and it was very hard to make them understand that we wanted to help out and feel like the family. At first, Raja and Bolu, would come and give us our rice in our room but after some persuading we were allowed to do it ourselves. We washed our own dishes and even offered to do theirs too. During the year, we were always fed by the host family though.

All the washing of clothes was done by hand by myself. Most families get theirs done by the grandmother or a maid. I was worried about how hand-washing my clothes would go but I was taught by one of my students who lived in the village how to do it the "Indian way" one afternoon. She was desperate to help me so I let her hang them up for me. She was also the headmistress's niece, Dharani.

Making friends was a bit scary because of the language barrier between you and the locals. Even the teachers at the school had a very poor level of English. It was easy enough to become friends with the teachers at school because I spent most of my time around them. Amala was my first friend and we remained very close for the rest of the year. She was a nursery teacher who had very little English but it improved so much during the year. She would often take us to her house to meet her mother and brother. She lived in Tangutur in a very small house for 4 people. It was a one room house and they had two beds. There was also an area out back which was the bathroom and the cooking area. Amala is only 22 and her mother has already started on the lookout for a suitable husband. Amala tells me she is quite nervous but then again she would rather an arranged marriage than a love marriage.

Suseela was another very close teacher friend, she taught Upper Kindergarten. She is married and has a girl who has just turned 10. Her husband works in a tobacco factory and her daughter is studying at Sri Chaitanya. She says that it's very hard because her husband does not help in the house and they are both working. She has to cook all the meals, look after her daughter, clean and go to work so they have enough money to afford food. She told me one time they both were very ill and couldn't go to work and so they did not have enough food for the week. Suseela's husband would put his needs in front of hers and of his daughter's and would eat all the food they had without a care. I also made various other friends in the village such as the man from the tailors, the railway station clerk whose name is Naligala, and neighbours around us.

Getting to know people in the village was really nice because if you got to the market area in the afternoon after school you will meet so many people you know on the way and they will wave and smile back at you, especially the children. Getting to know the local shop keepers is also nice because they greet you with a beautiful smile too.

Celebrating festivals and days such as teacher's day and children's day at school with your students was definitely a high for me. I would say that celebrating Holi in the school with all the children was my favourite day of the whole year I was there. All the kids brought coloured powder and coloured water in their bottles and were dying to start the festivities all day. The headmaster was not keen to let them celebrate until 2pm but the children were bursting to start. There were a few outbreaks of children throwing powder at each other before then but at 2pm it went mental. Children running around screaming, jumping, smiling, laughing, etc.

When I got 6 weeks off for my summer holiday, I went travelling and toured the whole of India. It was an amazing thing to do and it was all so exciting. I saw so many new things, met so many new people, I loved the whole time. Having said all of this, my homesickness caught up with me sometimes.

December was a pretty hard month as it was nearly Christmas and you are usually with your family. It didn't help that I had been really ill and that I were still living in the old accommodation. I'm not really sure how I coped with it. I just told myself that I knew it was going to be hard and that people have sponsored me to do this, I have so many people supporting me back home and I was not going to let anyone down, especially my students.

Leaving Tangutur after all those months of getting to know people and becoming part of the community was hard. I didn't realise how much I was going to miss it and all my friends until the day I was leaving. Saying goodbye to Amala was the hardest but we are going to stay in contact. It's hard to stay in contact with anyone from the village though because no one owns a computer (so emails are not an option) but they feel their English is not good enough to respond to a letter. I still am going to send letters back to check up on the teachers and the school. I'm sure my host will send a letter back, even if it does take him 3 months.



Returning home was very odd. In some ways it felt like I had never gone to India but then in others it felt like I had no idea what country I was in. Going to the supermarket was particularly hard, it's all just so overwhelming. Prices for things also gave me a shock and the fact that I can understand people who are talking in the streets made me feel funny. I haven't been back for very long now but

I am starting to adapt. I'm sure things will come up that I will find weird but I'll just have to get used to it. I have emptied my wardrobe and given nearly all of my clothes to charity. I have done a big clear out already of all these things that I have but do not really need. I survived on very little while I was in India and it doesn't take much to be happy.

My year in India really was an amazing experience and I am so glad I did it. It has made me a more confident and open person. I am more autonomous and am no longer afraid to travel or do anything by myself.

It has taught me to never be afraid of anything and to have confidence in myself. You only live once and this was possibly a once in a lifetime opportunity. I don't know if I will ever be able to return to India so I made the most of my year and did everything I could possibly do to make it one of my best.

Going to India has definitely made me want to go other places, especially in Asia. And teaching has made me want to continue working with kids. It was a great experience as I figured out that I really like teaching (even though it is very challenging) and would like to continue in that direction.

My host was very interested in my culture but did not understand it most of the time. I would often tell him how things worked in the UK compared to in India and he was very curious to know. I think my host could learn that men need to do more work in the household. Mr Ramana did do this and he even helped cook one time which was a shock to everyone. I also think he should get a driver's licence before he decides to drive the school minivan!

We can learn that patience is a great thing to have, you do a lot of waiting in India, and you always need to be prepared for it to take twice as long as you thought it would take. Religion is very important to them and it is very serious. Everybody loves to show and tell you all about the Gods they pray to. Tangutur was very open to having different religions throughout the village and the school would have holiday days for all religious festivals. Also everybody likes to celebrate here. Anything that is worth celebrating is celebrated. I think it's really nice that people care so much and the family always get together, no matter how small your house is, you will host a party for the millions of family members that you have. It's really lovely that families are so close and I think that is something that we could learn from them.

Since I got home my relationship with my 2 brothers is so much better and with my parents too. I realise how important they all are to me and so I make sure to make an effort to keep us all close. I have also been reunited with all of my friends and even have a better friendship with them now. I learned that it's very important to have a close family and friends because you will always appreciate someone to lean on if you need any help and these are the people who will always be here for you.

All in all I had an amazing year and would do it all over again in a heartbeat. Thank you very much for supporting me and your very generous donation made my India experience possible.

Ellie Tod x