

Visit No. 31 (1st–12th November 2006)

Hello everyone! I'm starting to write this report on the plane home from an excellent visit to India. We did not publicise this visit because of issues to do with my personal safety and a possible threat to our work in India. But now we (myself and Paula Corney our newest trustee) are on our way home.

I would like to start by telling you about our last evening in India spent with Jacob, Jessie, Jemie (their daughter) and our senior boys and four of our past Boys Home boys. The four had made a tremendous effort to come to see me. Selveraj travelled from Chennai – seventeen hours each way by train, Vivekandan travelled from Kodikanal – fifteen hours each way by bus, as did Laksmanapandi who had arrived a day earlier. Pramod travelled from Bangalore – twenty-four hours each way by train. Each boy came to offer personal support, concern and understanding, knowing, as all of the children do, all about the events of the past few months. Their love and kindness made me feel very humble. **Sitting and eating with these young men who are the surest possible sign that what we do is right, was something that I wish you could have all shared.** It was a wonderful evening; their coming spoke volumes.

We began the trip by returning to Sri Lanka to see Father Terence. Since our amazing meeting after the Tsunami we have kept in regular contact via email and had made plans to continue our work together.

After our arrival Father Terence took us to see the houses that had been helped (in a small way) by donations from staff at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital and The Vidiyal Trust Medical Group. This was directly after the Tsunami. The people living in the houses were fishing labourers who had lost all that they possessed in the disaster. It was lovely to see the modest homes, meet some of the families and have a cup of delicious ginger tea in one home.

We then visited a widow, who lost everything in the Tsunami. We recently made a donation to put a roof on her home. She, her elderly mother and small son live in absolute poverty. We have offered some more help and the boy will be sponsored by us. We are also going to sponsor nineteen other children, mainly from the fishing community that was so devastated. They remain with their families but will attend a study centre daily, have food, uniforms, books and school equipment provided and Father Terence has opened a bank account for each child. So, sponsorship also provides almost £2 monthly in savings, which will be given to the child at the end of schooling. It is an excellent way of working and a member of Father Terence's congregation, Patrick, will act as a liaison contact with us.

Father Terence is also trying to build a community centre for his parish; he has nine hundred (yes, 900!!) at his Sunday school.

He told us a lot about the problems in northern Sri Lanka, the people there are starving. Blockades have stopped food from getting through and what little is available in store is priced out of reach of most. Children cannot get milk; it really is starvation. He is deeply concerned.

In the evening we met the nineteen children we plan to sponsor. Most of them had "Mum" with them, they are so grateful to know that their children will be able to go to school. It has expanded our work!! No problems here about how funds are used, our sponsorship money will go through church accounts and the whole congregation know of our involvement; everything is totally open.

We had a lovely day there and spent the night in a beachside lodge under a corrugated roof during an amazing tropical storm! Sri Lanka was wonderful and it is good to be able to help such a committed man with his work and to be involved with the church there. We do not intend helping more than through some sponsorship, as our India work must remain our priority, but as Father Terence said "God sent us."

Early start for the airport next morning and we were back in India, were met by Jacob and went back to the Hotel Rockholm where I have stayed over the past nine years, not exactly luxurious, but very much "on the ground" of the local area. It is the Rockholm who have trained three of our boys (two of whom came on our last night) and they are now experienced and qualified chefs, earning good salaries. We are very thankful to the hotel – where they still make the best chips in India!

Much of the next few days were spent with Jacob planning for a major change in the way we work in Trivandrum. Jacob and I are very keen to move the children from the somewhat cramped rented buildings we are occupying now to a more rural area and on to our own complex where we can expand

and consolidate our work. I think that I should explain that after the expulsion of our children from the other organisation nine years ago, we have had a series of rented buildings, the latest being reasonable, but not big enough. We have stayed where we are because the local church is good, but we have to look to the longer term, and the children are getting bigger and space more cramped!

Thanks to churches in the Norwich Diocese, some very generous individual donations and your continued sponsorship we are able to do this and should be able to be settled in our own complex in around fifteen/sixteen months, which is really exciting. This has always been our longer term plan.

So, here are the plans!! We have arranged and paid for the purchase of a piece of land, about an acre, which will house a thirty place Boys Home, a Girls Home, a small school, and an office, with a meeting hall and staff facilities above! Land in Kerala is about three times more expensive than Tamil Nadu where we have been working, so land costs are expected to be about £18,000. **The land will be registered in the name of the Indian Trust of which I am Settlor/Convenor, with documentation drawn up by a Registry agent and checked by an Independent Auditor.** This ensures public awareness and openness about who owns the land and subsequent buildings and their purpose. It also means that the purchase and ownership of the land will be public knowledge. The trustees will have overall responsibility for the land and buildings, the trustees are known to the local community. **We have passed a Trust resolution that if/when the Trust stops functioning, or in forty years, the land and buildings will be given to the Church of South India.** This has been made clear in discussion with local people and churches. To keep this totally open and transparent we have appointed two new trustees in the area in which we will build, both well known in, and recommended by, the local and church community. All of the new work will be with the knowledge and help of local churches; I visited the local Church of South India parish and pastor when we viewed the land, the same church where I helped to conduct Jemie's marriage nearly three years ago.

As soon as registration is complete we will start building (the monsoon may hold us up a little). An engineer has already drawn up basic plans. However, we will be able to start working before the major building begins, as there is a rather dilapidated building already on the site, conveniently in a corner area. We plan to renovate this as soon as possible and this will enable us to offer a temporary school to some of the neediest local children.

On our trip to the area we visited some families in a fishing community, conditions for them are really bad. It is these children who will initially benefit, staying with their families but attending our tuition centre. The school will offer breakfast, tuition, additional classes will take place at the local church school with the children returning to us mid afternoon for drinks, snacks and more tuition. We will pay for the lesson we buy from a local school, thus meaning we are not duplicating facilities that already exist.

The two main buildings are planned for our existing resident boys and girls, with a separate central dining and kitchen block. We should be able to double the number of children in each home. There will also be an office come meeting block (to offer facilities for destitute elderly ladies). **Costing**, again building costs are about three times higher than Tamil Nadu (where we originally planned to build) but we anticipate the four buildings to cost about £60,000 in total. Tenders are not necessary (and these can easily be bribed anyway); we will use our trustees local knowledge and known local builders. Local people know exactly what we are doing – the builders want to be part of it. This gives a total cost for land and buildings of approximately £80,000. We have that sum available – just!

This will give our children a wonderful environment in which to live, grow, work, and will enable us to expand our capacity. We are thrilled with the land and surrounding areas. We will be based about half a mile outside of the nearest town. There is a sense of calm and peace there, which was tangible.

Jacob will spend time in the locality over the next few weeks, we will need to appoint two teachers and support staff. Jacob will also visit churches in the Diocese to locate the really needy children. Our increased capacity means we will be able to accommodate sixty resident children who will live with us and thirty more will attend the school. We will also develop vocational training facilities and also plan to offer day care facilities to some of the destitute elderly. Jacob, Jessie and our staff will live on site.

So, an exciting concept! Schools break up for the summer around April and open again in June so April 2008 is the date earmarked for moving the children and June 2008 for the project to be fully operational. We will, of course, keep you informed of progress and I will need to go back in a few months to countersign documents.

I am aware that the "Indian Trust" and "The Vidiyal Trust" (our new England charity) are still causing some confusion. In a nutshell The Vidiyal Trust is the England branch with four English trustees. The "Indian Trust" of which I am settlor or convenor has me and five Indian trustees. Perhaps two halves of a whole functioning **openly** together!!

Another development was to link with a Southern England Rotary Club to purchase 2 ambulances for the Regional Cancer Centre. I set up funding of an original small van with another charity (when I was with them) some five years ago. This is now at the end of its life so I have been "middle man" to replace the vehicle, with the Rotary Club hopefully meeting half of the costs. This is still under negotiation, but is an essential for the Palliative Care team – if the Rotary plans do not come to fulfilment we have resolved to buy the vehicle ourselves. We had dinner with the local President and also went to the centre. Our link there has been strengthened by two training courses conducted for staff in the past year or so. One I did myself (bereavement and loss) and the other was conducted by Preb. Peter Speck (who is also a sponsor), on palliative care issues. We hope to offer further training later. Paula as a dietician, will be particularly useful to them as a training link, and is already in discussion with them about tube feeding, and brought some interesting powder samples home. Once finances are in place the ambulance will be purchased and one of our sponsors is donating funds for staff and running costs of the ambulance. We are really grateful for that. It was good to meet up with the staff again.

Other bits!! We spent a half-day on my friend Manoj's brand new air-conditioned houseboat, as we plan to take the children on a trip next time I go. Apart from visiting the homes we also took the boys and girls to a water theme park for a day. They loved it and somehow stayed in the water for about five hours!! They are all fit, well and thriving. See the photos!

We were a bit worried about illnesses. A new mosquito borne virus called Chikungunya is almost at epidemic proportions in parts of southern India now, including Trivandrum, and dengue fever has also moved to the southern half of India. One of our new trustees went down with viral fever, which seemed to have affected several of those we met during our stay. Thank God we were fine, apart from slight tummy upsets probably caused by the humidity, which was extremely high, as much as spicy food.

I began this by sharing the wonderful night last night. That was about being with the children, though these boys are young men now. The future has to be about the children. This visit has assured the future of the Boys and Girls Homes, consolidated our work with Father Terence in Sri Lanka, arranged the purchase of a new ambulance and most important of all rebuilt our foundations and restored stability.

I have not said where our new work will be, I/we will!! Everything that we do will be open, transparent and right. For the time being the fact that I dared challenge those concepts in another area leaves us still feeling vulnerable. I hope that you will understand that and why we are still guarded.

We are enclosing photos of the land we have purchased and of course of the children. For our sponsors we are also enclosing letters and cards from their child.

Finally, our thanks to you for the overwhelming love, trust and support that has kept us afloat in a very difficult year. We are not out of the woods yet but I still know that being prepared to stand up for what is right is imperative. I did not realise when I did so that the cost would be so high. But that is the past. Now we move onwards and the incredible smoothness of this visit, where doors have opened in an amazing way has confirmed that we are doing the right thing.

Paula, as a long term sponsor and our newest English trustee was witness to all negotiations and conversations about past and future. She wants to learn as much as she can to ensure our long term future, along with Jo (who has made six visits already) and Suzy (who visited last year). They realise that it takes time out there to really know what is going on, to understand different cultures, traditions and attitudes. Looking back over thirty one **working** trips (over 109 weeks) I can see a pattern of learning that has been thrilling, confusing but essential for work in a country so different in every way from ours. It is **essential** to have "ground" knowledge, it takes a long time to build up the contacts and experience to have that, and to work out what is really going on around you. It is when you have enough contacts and local knowledge away from projects that you can look at them more objectively. I think it was Brian Keenan who said "You can't run projects from platforms." Someone

has to keep a hand on the tiller – **and to be allowed to question and challenge**. Our Trust has put systems in place in India, Sri Lanka and the U.K. to ensure that this will always happen. As trustees of your donations we will always use our knowledge and expertise to ensure that we fulfil the sentiment I expressed in my third visit (it's in the report) that Matthew 25:40 will always be our benchmark. To do this we have to ensure that your funds really do reach those who really need them. We take our responsibilities as stewards of your money very seriously indeed.

She will protest at me saying this but I want to publicly thank Suzy who has worked tirelessly over the past year, particularly at times when I thought I was going under, to telephone and speak to many of you personally when that awful letter was sent (some 150 copies we think).

And most of all thanks to you, our sponsors who enable the work to happen, for your prayers, love, letters of support and real concern. We are stronger now than ever!! And wiser.

We will be in touch as soon as possible to give sponsorship details; in the meantime funds continue to be sent to Father Terence and Jacob. Funds have helped to repair lives after the Tsunami, and will continue to do so in both of our areas of work. We have helped the Cancer Centre to reach those who otherwise would have experienced unimaginable suffering without pain relief. We have done other things like provide toilets in three homes (of our home sponsored children). We have plastered and put a secure roof on another home. We continue to sponsor the education of several college children. We still pay for diabetic and TB drugs for two families; we were able to ensure that Rajan's (our driver) wife had good surgical treatment when she needed it recently. We have helped the church that our boys and girls attend when they were in a crisis situation and we have given numerous one off donations to street destitutes, and yes, I know who the real destitutes are.

So on we go!! Please continue to pray for us and our staff and children as we move onwards – together.

We are continuing with our gift scheme for the children because it works so well. If you are a sponsor, and you would like to send us £10 with **three signed gift tags**, we will provide birthday and Christmas presents and a new school bag at the beginning of the school year, to your child. It is safer than risking the postal system and it ensures that all our children are treated in exactly the same way. Please remember to make cheques payable to **The Vidiyal Trust**.

A very happy Christmas to you all – and heartfelt thanks.

Pat