

MY VISIT TO SYLVIA 17TH – 24TH MARCH 2010

ANNE-MARIE ROSE. MARCH, 2010

For me, my second visit to India , but my first to Southern India and Tamil Nadu.

Anthony and Joanna Gilpin and I emerged from Chennai airport on Thursday morning to the heat and the morning rush hour, to be met by our driver for our three-hour journey to Thiruvannamalai. We were immediately bombarded by the noise of car horns and quickly made the discovery that Indian drivers seem to drive where there is a space rather than by the rule of the road!

After our arrival at our hotel in Thiruvannamalai, the rest of the day was spent in unpacking, relaxing and acclimatizing to the heat.

The following morning we set out for the hospital , to be greeted at the gates with a state welcome;- “hearty welcome” written in coloured chalks in the gateway, garlanded, showered with rose petals, foreheads anointed, band playing – TOTALLY overwhelming!! Next, a tour of all the departments of the hospital which left me feeling very humble when I realised just what Sylvia has accomplished with the help of a relatively small number of supporters in the years she has been there.

In the afternoon Joanna and I paid a visit to two different centres for mentally-impaired children .The children were pleased to see us and gave us flowers before we watched them sing or recite, making the best of their less than perfect surroundings. When we left the children gave us a bag of apples and bananas!

Saturday morning was spent going round the villages with 1st-year nursing students from the Nursing College who were advising the people about diet, and testing for the onset of diabetes, and then we had the privilege of going to the family home of one of the deaf pupils. This was out in the countryside and very basic,- thatched roof, only three small rooms to hold everything (even the animals during the monsoon), cooking and washing facilities outside, but with electricity and television provided by the government. We walked round the father`s field with him, were shown the animals and noted that due to the failure of the monsoon last year, his well had very little water in.

At 4.30p.m., Tony and Michelle having arrived from London, we set out for the school and another overwhelming formal reception, with beautiful garlands, dancers and a band, and being showered with rose petals! Sitting in the school courtyard we were treated to a

display of Indian dancing by the girls, all performed to the beat of a drum (and music for us to hear): it was very difficult to realise that the girls are profoundly deaf, and keep time by

the vibration of the drumbeat. This was followed by short speeches by us all! ,then the bonfire was lit by Tony Allinson, with fireworks and dancing from everyone – great excitement!!!, and a barbeque. It was at this point that I was introduced to Rogan, the eight-year old boy who I sponsor, giving him some Lego kits as it was his birthday.

Sunday – Mass at the church in the town then another visit to the hospital, and in the afternoon, inspection of the progress of the new Nursing College buildings – a very dusty and precarious experience!

Monday – and for Joanna, Michelle and me, a day out to the coast. A fascinating drive through the Indian countryside with new sights at every turn, on and finally –THE SEA! A walk on the beach, souvenir stalls, haggling for silk cushion covers and carved elephants, a meal in a restaurant and finally the drive back to Thiruvannamalai. In the evening, there was a reception at the hotel with the Senior Staff from the school and the hospital followed by a buffet meal.

Tuesday- our last day, and for me as an ex-teacher, another visit to the school and a highlight of our visit to India. I felt privileged to be able to go into the different primary classes, take part in some of the lessons, talk to the children who are all so happy, meet Rogan again before inspecting the kitchen, the garden, the dairy and the dormitories and have lunch with the children. At the end of my visit, Rogan presented me with a wall decoration which he had made in class.

My final memory is of all the children standing in the school entrance waving goodbye ,as I was collected by Anthony and Joanna for our final drive to Chennai, overnight stay there, and early flight back to Manchester and reality.

In conclusion I would like to thank Sylvia and everyone else for making this visit so memorable for me – to turn hearsay into reality – life will never be the same again – to have so much as opposed to so little!