

Clare's Diary

30th March 2011

Wednesday

This morning I wake up to a frog in my bathroom, I am debating whether or not to give him a kiss and see if the man of my dreams appears but decide against it when I realise the only way he could have arrived is by sewer. We breakfast in the communal hall amongst the trees before driving a short distance to one of Gram Vikas' villages. Here, the locals who previously relied upon an economy of poor agriculture and hard labour are able to live comfortably with clean running water and electricity generated by a dam which they built with Gram Vikas' help and a new programme for biofuel. Because of the improved agricultural productivity, the farmers no longer need their children to work in the fields which means that they can now go to school- one of which is our next port of call. When we arrive at the school, the kids are all settled into their afternoon classes although once again the arrival of the cameras cause a little chaos. We have great fun playing and laughing with the children who without Gram Vikas' help simply would not have an education.

Thursday

Mum and I buy some wonderful tribal art from one of the villagers before we head back to Bhubaneshwar from where we will depart for Delhi. Whilst travelling I get the chance to chat to Malcolm who fills me in on the work that VSO do. At any time, the organization has about 2000 volunteers on placement all over the world. What they do is incredibly effective, often, especially in India, small NGO's are established to do all sorts of things from improving healthcare and livelihoods in rural areas to promoting environmental issues in some of the most populous cities on earth. Frequently these organizations do not have the access or resources to employ consultants or specialists within the field; VSO recruit experienced volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds including healthcare, business, communications and numerous others, and place them with these charity partner NGO's. The idea is that the volunteer is then able to disseminate some of the skills they have learned to the team that they are working with, enabling them to improve the work that they do. This approach seems cost and resource effective and has a bigger impact than one can imagine, as I have seen in the case of Gram Vikas.

Friday

New Delhi is entirely different to any other Indian city I have been in. Colonialism is everywhere, the streets are clean, wide and the pavements shaded by trees, the buildings are statuesque and we are surrounded by embassies from nations across the world. I almost feel like I am back in West London again until we cross back over into Old Delhi, where the hum drum of Indian life brings a reassuring sense of reality back. Dominick Walsh, Kerry's finest photographer has joined us in Delhi and he, Malcolm and I are taking some photos. We go to the beautiful Jama Masjid where we climb the tower that has overlooked the city since 1656. On this trip I have been eaten alive by mosquitoes from head to toe. Fortunately we have our very own MacGyver in the shape of Micheál Morrissey, one of the crew

who hearing my complaints immediately provides me with painkillers, antibacterial steroid cream, insect repellent, plasters and a bar of soap. I couldn't ask for a better Escort! This evening we are all honoured to attend a reception at VSO's headquarters where I get to chat to the amazing people who are their volunteers.

Saturday

I am a little worried when I see our mode of transport this morning. Dad and I will be touring the city on a cycle rickshaw which means a hard seat, no shade and guilt that I am expecting another human being, who has probably not eaten as much as I have for breakfast, to cart me around. However, our driver-cycler is delighted to be a part of filming and takes his job very seriously, making sure nobody gets in the way of the camera. He takes us to a beautiful street which houses some of the oldest buildings in Delhi, remnants of the Moghul Empire.

Sunday

A delicious day off during which I cram in as much study as I can. Since arriving in India I have heard that I now have a PhD interview the day after I return. Yikes.

Monday

Today we visit a second of VSO's partner charities, ASTHA which provides education and services to children and adults with disabilities in Delhi. First we attend one of their integrated education centres where children with and without disabilities are taught together in an effort to begin the destigmatisation process. Here we partake in a class before getting a chance to play with the kids. We are in one of Delhi's poorest areas and I am glad that I have brought my hairbrush with me so I spend some time brushing the kids hair. One little girl, Durga doesn't leave my side afterwards which touches me. These children have so little and yet I find myself hoping that they at least have love; sometimes in India it can feel like it is in desperately short supply. We travel back to ASTHA's office afterwards where we meet some of the staff and volunteers. I hear about the telephone service they have just established which provides information to people with disabilities across the country. This one line serves 1.2. billion people. However I feel inspired by the fact that things are changing and the work is starting to be done; I even start to think about conducting some research in India in the future!

This evening we are delighted to be attending a dinner at the Irish ambassador's residence. We are hosted by His Excellency Kenneth Thompson and his fabulous wife Sule, who also happens to be a clinical psychologist. We have a delicious dinner in wonderful company, an evening to remember indeed!

Tuesday

We begin the day with a drive to another VSO partner SWECHA, an inspirational charity which began as a campaign to clean up the river Yamuna in Delhi but has become a consensus about the necessary positive changes that must take place in society. We are privileged throughout the day to gain insight into SWECHA's green the gap campaign which begins in the dumps of Delhi. Everyday, rag pickers pour into the cities dumps to sort through piles of food, material, rubber, plastic and everything else. The rag pickers salvage what they can before selling it onto material markets for next to nothing. SWECHA

employs tailors who pay the rag pickers a Fairtrade wage before turning the waste into recyclable products. We visit the tailors workshop which is bright, well ventilated and spacious, a veritable paradise in comparison to typical working conditions. The tailors are of course paid Fairtrade wages and are entitled to proper breaks and working hours. Following this we are taken to one of Delhi's swankiest malls where Green the Gap have a stall. I cannot believe that the things they are selling, gorgeous handbags and purses among them (a number of which I am now the proud owner of) have been made out of old car tyres and waste fabric. This is just one of SWETCHA's projects which is slowly but surely changing the world.