



A Summer in India - *by Jackie Sinclair*

Jackie, daughter of John Sinclair of Southend-on-Sea Circle received a £300 contribution from the Bursary Fund for a Charitable project in India last year. She was invited to the Circle dinner in October 2009 to talk to the brothers about her trip. This coincided with a visit from West Essex Circle which included Peter Martin, Secretary of the Fund, so the opportunity was taken for the picture opposite.

"This summer I travelled to Kolkata, India, to work for an organisation called Suas Education Development. Suas is an Irish charity dedicated to supporting quality education in under-resourced communities. It has partnerships with education non-government organisations (NGOs) in India and Kenya, and through the partnerships, Suas supports the education of thousands of school-aged children.

I was selected to be part of a team of 11 volunteers who would work with an organisation called Vikramshila. Vikramshila works with teachers and teacher educators, children and community, government systems and educational institutions to realise its mission of: "Making quality education a reality for all children in India".

It was around midnight on 17th June when we arrived in Kolkata and I can remember the first thing that hit me as I got off the plane was the heat. The second was the smell. The city was quiet at that time but we soon discovered the next day that our guesthouse was located on a very busy, bustling street in the Muslim quarter of Kolkata. Everything you could possibly imagine was sold in the various markets along the road.



Jackie with some of her pupils

When we first arrived at our guesthouse I thought I had drawn the short straw as I ended up with the only camp-bed in the house while everyone else had strong, sturdy wooden beds.

The heat was absolutely unbearable for our first few weeks. It was rarely sunny but incredibly humid and we would often come home from school wringing our clothes out.

On a typical day I would be up at 7.30 and take a rickshaw to a very basic hut around the back of a police station. Here I worked with street children aged 3 to 11 in groups that could range in number from 5 to 80. The children had only a few words of English so our lessons were very basic and involved a lot of visual aids.

At around lunchtime I would travel approximately 1½ hours on the bus to a girls' high school where I taught Communicative English in three different classes to students aged 11-15.

When we first arrived at the high school – Dakshineswar Bharati Bhawan – we were told that the head-teacher was depressed by the poor attendance at her school and the low levels of achievement in comparison to neighbouring schools.



This shows, from left to right, Gerry O'Doherty (President, Southend-on-Sea), Jackie, Peter Martin and proud father, John Sinclair

At first the head-teacher showed little interest in our programme, telling us that the girls had "no merit" and seemed dubious as to how we would run our classes with the language barrier. This lack of belief in the students' abilities was reflected in their low levels of confidence, so we tried to build on this by bringing some fun into the classroom.

The English Curriculum in West Bengal is very boring and outdated, mostly comprising of written grammar exercises, so we tried to make our lessons more interesting and interactive, often taking the students into the school grounds and facilitating discussions in small groups. One of my favourite days was when we threw the students an English-Irish-style birthday party, playing traditional games like Musical Statues, had them write birthday cards to each other and sang around a birthday cake.

We also managed to organise a school trip – their first ever – around the historical monuments of the city. Despite the fact that our students had all been born and raised in Kolkata, very few of them had ever had the opportunity to venture beyond their communities.

My summer in Kolkata was filled with ups and downs. It was heartbreaking to witness the extreme poverty that many of the children I worked with came from, to see the huts along the railway line that they called home and to know that absenteeism usually meant that their homes had been destroyed by the monsoon rains, or that they were out working or begging. But the realities of their daily lives never showed on their smiling faces or constant enthusiasm.

India is a beautiful, magical country and I have been deeply touched by the selflessness and humility of those I had the pleasure to meet and work with. Never have I experienced such widespread hospitality and friendliness. Barely a day went by when I did not receive some small gift from the children I taught – usually a flower they had picked on their way to school. We were made to feel so welcome, particularly by the people who lived on our street who took a great interest in us and would always help us to find our way around. The children on our street organised a football tournament for Independence Day and invited us to take part. I wonder if visitors to our towns and cities get such a warm reception, but sadly I doubt it.

I would like to end by thanking the Catenian Association Bursary Fund for the very generous contribution of £300 towards the cost of this project. I had a truly amazing experience in Kolkata over the summer and not only have I got a lot from it but also hope that we have made some difference to the children and communities that we worked with. Please remember them in your prayers."