

India

(Phoebe Nobes ex MO 2016)



Summer 2016

Travelling alone is something I had never done before, but thankfully it all went to plan. I did have to spend 8 hours in New Delhi's airport as my flight was delayed two hours but this allowed me to become accustomed to the environment around me. Two things I learnt were that it is inevitable that a baby will be crying on the plane, and that everyone is very helpful. It was a very strange feeling to be looked at by everyone in the airport because I was western and my skin was white.

It was also my first time in Asia. The first thing about India that struck me was how colourful the clothing, houses and vehicles were. It was a change from the usual brick and grey we get here and I appreciated how cheerful it made everything.

Odisha (formally Orissa) is India's poorest state. This became clear to me driving back from Bhubaneswar Airport. Wild dogs were walking the sides of the road, diseased and broken. They all looked very similar which was strange to me as we see such a variety of dogs here in the UK. Also the streets were very dirty and there was a problem with litter. Cows also roamed the roads, they were treated better than the dogs and were frequently found lying in the middle of the busy traffic. We also saw many monkeys; some were just outside the school. It was like our own private zoo, and was so lovely to see them behave with complete freedom.



Palli Unnayan Seva Samiti (PUSS) is a home for children who are orphaned or have parents who cannot care for or educate them. It is situated about thirty minutes from Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha. Two Scottish university students happened to be at PUSS as well which was not made known to me till a week before I went. Mary, who is the granddaughter of Professor Malcolm Harper (the fundraiser benefactor and the main reason PUSS is still running today) had been before when she was my age. She brought her friend Kate and they were both interested in teaching children, and were a great help.

Kuku Patra, the secretary and main spokesperson for PUSS was our hostess for the trip. She was an incredible, inspiring person as she has dedicated her life to help these children. I always felt safe because she was there, she made sure our food and water was clean and I never got ill in my four weeks.



The school looks after around 200 girls and a handful of boys. It has around 20 day pupils from the local slums and around 15 college students. I spent the first day shadowing Mary and Kate to get an idea of what I would be doing. I have had experience with teaching before, tutoring Maths and English at a Kumon centre over three years, but this has been one-on-one teaching and was different to teaching a class of upwards to 20 students. I learnt that this can be challenging to do because you have to make sure all the students are engaged. I found class participation a useful tool, to have children come up and write on

the black board, or have a conversation in front of the class.

I was teaching the youngest children, classes 2 to 5, from aged of seven to ten. However, some children start their education later, which means that in Class 2 while most of the children were seven, one girl was twelve and a day boy was fourteen. It was challenging to make sure that the lessons were suitable for all ages.

The government-prescribed syllabus is outdated and focuses on written English. This meant that the children were excellent at copying anything written on the blackboard, but when questioned, they struggled to understand what they had written. I tried to make it more understandable, using pictures, actions and more class participation. Whenever they wanted to write on the blackboard, such as to fill in the missing answers they called “Me Sister!”, I tried to change this to “Can I write?”.

I also read some children’s stories such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Gruffalo* and Dr Seuss. Class 2 were taught a butterfly song and coloured in paper butterflies to put on their class wall. But of course, with a school full of girls, everyone wanted to colour in butterflies so we made around 200 and put them on the walls above the classrooms. Class 3 helped make a beanstalk by writing days of the week on the leaves. Class 4 drew wonderful storyboards on *The Three Little Pigs*. And Class 5 drew a story board of one of the syllabus tales *The Ungrateful Goldsmith*.

I also took spoken English classes which allowed a lot more freedom in what we could



teach. I focused on basic English conversations including practicing asking and answering questions in topics such as describing who they are and their daily routine.

When there were no English Classes, I helped with their computer class. Even

though they don't have access to the internet, they learn basic skills on using a computer, drawing pictures in Paint and editing text in Word. This class was also mainly textbook based and I think this class could be much improved if they did have internet access.

We also ran seminars for the college students who stayed at PUSS. They study at the nearby colleges and take subjects such as engineering. We held mock interviews, and had them have conversations and presentations on a variety of topics such as their hobbies, the environment and their daily routine. We presented our feedback individually after each had presented. It was amazing to see their progress throughout the four weeks. This opportunity for them to speak is important as most job interviews are conducted in English.



Every Friday afternoon there was a yoga class, which I looked forward to as I did a term of yoga at Marlborough College. Of course, they were all much more flexible than me!

On Saturdays there were many extracurricular classes for the children that I enjoyed going to and participating in. They had a music class, drawing class, karate and dance (modern and Odisha). There were some incredibly talented children. I loved to see them enjoying their time out of school and pursuing their passions.

They were always redoing my hair and giving me makeovers, right before we had a massive dance party for one of the many festivals. They have some

amazing dancers, and I enjoyed copying their moves. We managed to get hold of some face paint and for the last weekend we had an evening party, painting the kids' faces.



During the afternoons, weekends and festival days when school was not in session, we were able to do some proper sightseeing. Bhubaneswar is known as “temple city” and it is easy to see why. We saw some amazing temples dedicated to various deities.

One of the most memorable was the Konark Sun Temple which was in the shape of a chariot, with iconic stone wheels on the sides that can accurately calculate the time to a minute. Another was the Shanti Stupa at Dhauligiri that is a Buddhist temple and looks over the flat landscape of the city and surrounding countryside. It had a great sense of peace and tranquillity which made it one of my favourite visits.



During one day out, we visited PUSS's sister charity; the Society for Children (SOCH) which rescues children from railway stations. It is the first charity of its kind in Odisha, and has rescued over

2000 children since 2012. We talked with some of the counsellors and accompanied them around Bhubaneswar's railway station. They do such wonderful work, as many homeless children can be found travelling the trains or begging in the stations. SOCH provides temporary shelter, food and clothes and aims to reunite children with their families.

A few children from a nearby prostitute colony joined PUSS during my time and they were readily accepted, making quick friends which was lovely. A young girl who was around 5 years old named Goody came from this colony. She used to live with her abusive father who locked her in their one room home for most of the day. Her health was not good - she had TB and had an infected, puss filled abscess on her neck. When she arrived at PUSS she was immediately taken to hospital where she was operated on, without any pain anaesthesia. It was a very traumatic experience for a young girl, and she unfortunately associated it with coming to PUSS, but with time, I think she will understand. She often missed her father, which was sad because he treated her so poorly.

Gina and her little brother Bhabani arrived at PUSS during the final week of my visit. Gina was around 8 years old and she was responsible for looking after her brother who was about 3. Bhabani was very malnourished and this led to him being almost entirely blind. He also cannot walk or talk but PUSS is doing all it can to help him recover. There are hospital appointments and an eye operation scheduled in the next few weeks. This should help both of the children and allow Gina to enjoy being a child herself.

Prity had spent her life at PUSS, she was only 18 and was married. This was unusual, and because she didn't have a birth certificate, one was made for her stating that she was 22. She had a beautiful daughter who was less than one year old. We visited her in a slum to try and convince her in-laws to allow her to continue her education. Now that she is married, she lives with them serving as a cook and cleaner for them, looking after her child rather than studying at college. Kuku had a long talk with them while we sat in their house where the one small room serves as a sleeping place for eight people! We managed to take Prity and her child back to PUSS, but her husband's family were not happy about it. It was hard for me to understand the family situation. Even though they were very much in love, the husband was still more devoted to his family. It makes it worse to think that he can just leave her and get married again, yet she cannot because of the social stigma across Indian communities.

Apart from teaching, we also helped in the office. PUSS have several counsellors who talk to the children and then type up the reports in English. We helped with correcting their grammar. Also when Kuku had to write letters to

the government on issues regarding children and the state of the sewage, we helped correct her English. We accompanied Kuku to run many important errands. She had to write an application for an award (which she won). We also met the mayor of Bhubaneswar several times, which was not expected. He has done a great many things to help tidy up the city, closing the main shopping area from vehicles and having designated fruit and stall selling places on the side of the road. We met with him to talk about the sewage problem. There is no public drain near the school and the sewage flowed onto private land. This became a problem when the owner decided to build on the land. The sewage had nowhere to go and swamped the playground whenever it rained. We talked with the mayor about this, and he promised, that in the next month, he would install a public drain. In the meantime, he would dig a hole for the waste. I really hope that he keeps his promise.

I would like to thank you for your part in making this experience happen for me. I have so many happy memories from the experience of working and living with these children. This was an incredible adventure, one which I will treasure forever.

