

## **Volunteering With The Missionaries Of Charity**

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I arrived in Kolkata towards the end of May 2018 having been in India for two weeks already. I had been travelling around Australia, Indonesia and South East Asia for over five months but this was the first solo arrival in a new city I'd had in a while. I took a classic yellow taxi from the airport to my arranged accommodation at Monica House in the grounds of St James' church on A.J.C Bose road, right opposite the Mother house for the Missionaries of Charity where I was to spend the next three weeks volunteering. On arrival I was told there was in fact no space for me and that I should walk down the road to the Baptist Missionary Society, where they may have a bed. So I did, in 45 degrees Celsius, with all my possessions from the last five months on my back. Although only a ten minute walk, I had been defeated by the heat but was greeted by the lady in charge who did in fact have room.

In planning my year out I was in search of a situation where I could volunteer but without the pre organised and charging programs which I felt were popular and possibly less testing; somewhere my actions were making a difference as opposed to a cash contribution. The Missionaries of Charity was set up by Mother Teresa in 1950 with the mission to care for the mentally ill, former prostitutes, people with AIDS, abandoned children, refugees, lepers, the aged and on it goes. But most importantly, this care is provided without charge and to all, regardless of their religion or social status. In Kolkata alone there are 19 homes in which the Missionaries of Charity care, each with different needs. There are over 4,500 sisters working tirelessly each day to maintain the running of these homes, supported by a number of Indian women named Mashis who, in my experience, are some of the strongest women; dealing with the day to day difficulties within the homes, providing example to the part time volunteers.

You are not required to call in advance of arriving in Kolkata if you wish to volunteer. The Missionaries of Charity website was extremely limited, the only information I could find about my arrival or what volunteering I might be doing was that I should simply 'show up' at Shishu Bhavan (the home for children) at 3pm on any Monday, Wednesday or Friday with my passport. On arriving at the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), a walled garden and dorm buildings providing accommodation and food for many of the volunteers, I was shown to my four bed female dorm where I was delighted to find my first non bunk-bed in a long time. As I organised myself I spoke to the lady named Jane in the bed next to mine, an eighty-year-old mother of nine from Long Island on her seventh volunteering trip to Kolkata. Jane explained to me everything I needed to know before I began and filled me in on information the website had not, telling me stories from her first day volunteering many years before to experiences from that morning. That evening I went to dinner in the cafeteria set up for the fifty or so volunteers in BMS and sat with Jane who held the attention of the table with her stories of Kolkata as we ate a £1.20 meal of daal, rohtis and vegetable curry.

The next morning I met Zoey, a nineteen year old from Oregon who'd arrived off her flight in the middle of the night, at 3pm we found our way to Shishu Bhavan for our orientation, lead by a long term volunteer from Greece who explained the different types of care required in each home in order for us to chose where we would like to volunteer. Sister

Margret, responsible for the volunteers, then sat down with me and the ten or so other volunteers orientating separately and discussed our options. The volunteering day is split into two shifts, after mass at 6am the first shift runs from 8am-12pm, then the afternoon runs from 3pm to 5:30pm. I chose to split my time between Shanti Dan, a home mainly caring for mentally and physically handicapped teenage girls and women; and Shishu Bhavan, the children's house, in particular handicapped infants and toddlers. Sister Margret blessed and gave me a necklace with a pendant of Mother Teresa and pointed in the vague direction of the toddlers wing for tomorrow.

After 6am mass, all the volunteers made their way to a small room in the Mother House to join Sister Margret in a morning prayer and to find their volunteer group. My morning volunteering in Shanti Dan was a bus journey away and so a group of Mexican girls on their fourth or fifth week of volunteering lead the rest of us to the bus stop, ten minutes walk from the Mother House. Passing through the rough edged streets of Kolkata, children ran alongside us grabbing our hands saying 'Auntie, Auntie' and gesturing to their mouths and stomachs. The Mexican girls, warned us not to give money or sealed food packets in case they only sell it back to a shop and take the money to their 'guardians'. We took the 166 to the nearest bus stop to Shanti Dan and were greeted at the door by laughing children and their mothers who held our hands and thanked us in Bengali. Shanti Dan is a large walled community of women, many of whom had been subjected to sexual, emotional and physical abuse, some with overwhelming mental disabilities; a number of which resulting in attempted suicide. Our role in this community was to provide assistance to the Sisters and Mashis running it and help maintain this safe haven of sorts for them. We walked around to the back of a building passed women sitting with their heads tucked to their chests, rocking and wailing. I lent down to put a hand on one of their shoulders but was quickly brushed away by a Mashi, who lifted this frail women over her shoulder and took her back inside.

In a small courtyard behind this building was twenty or so women, each with their own disabilities and traumas, standing in soapy buckets sorting through the laundry of the day. A few women waved us over and gestured for me to take the clothes from one bucket and place them into another. One of the more experienced volunteers reassured me, saying, 'if your doing it wrong you'll know'. Three or four of the volunteers helped with this too, scrubbing the chequered clothes until the faeces stains were cleared and wringing out the clothes. From there the clothes were carried in buckets up three flights of stairs, by the willing patients, up to the roof where three volunteers were waiting to fill a hundred or more washing lines. With most days the temperature reaching 45 degrees Celsius, the rooftop heat was unbearable; and after two hours of the sun beating down on our heads we took a break at around 10.

We took twenty minutes in the shade to drink masala chai and some digestive biscuits an American volunteer had brought from home then we would go into the halls to spend time with the patients. On my first day walking into those corridors I didn't know what to expect, nor what my role was to be. Many of the women sat on the floor, legs tight to their chests, fiddling with their hair or rubbing their thumbs against their palms. The older volunteers went ahead, kneeling down beside the woman, saying good morning and telling them how beautiful they looked today. Some women responded with wide toothless smiles and reached out their arms to hug them or hold their faces, however, many women sat glazed

and vacant not able to meet eyes. I followed the older volunteers, not sure who to approach, watching the way they interacted with these women. I wasn't sure where I was needed or who would tell me so I sat down next to a woman who looked to be in her late sixties, but who I later learnt was in her mid-thirties. She beamed a toothless grin and began using her left hand to make my hand massage her right hand. She knew what I was supposed to be doing. I looked around and saw the rest of the volunteers had also sat down and begun massaging and moisturising hands and feet and painting nails in bright and random colours. It soon became clear that once the heavy lifting of laundry was done, our role was to provide tender, love and care to these women who were in dire need. At around 11:30 the Mashis began ushering the women into a dining room at the end of the corridor, some began to yell and hit one another, not able to understand. Ten or so women were unable to stand and sit at a table and so were left to eat on the floor in the corridor. We gave each of the woman water and a plate of rice, daal and banana, occasionally a boiled egg, which they worked around the plate and ate with their hands skilfully. After clearing the lunch we made our way back to the bus stop. The afternoon journey back to A.J.C Bose street was always far more crowded and sweaty than the morning and with the bus swinging around each corner I ended up falling onto the driver a number of times. Zoey and I went back with the rest of the volunteers for lunch at BMS and a short rest before making our way to Shishu Bhavan for the afternoon shift. Above where we'd had orientation was a room with thirty or more cots and a large floor mat at one end with toddlers bodies strewn in awkward angles. Bengali music was blaring out of a radio in one corner and Mashis sat around the wriggling toddlers, spoon feeding them water and playing simple interaction games with them. On first look it was clear many had cerebral palsy, some more severe than others. Again without much of a hello from the busy Sisters and Mashis I took an apron and sat down on the edge of the mat next to a chubby faced two year old boy who later I found out is called Thomas. His legs were tensed and stiff and so I placed him on my lap and began to bounce and sooth him to which he began crying. A Mashi came over and showed me, overcoming the language barrier, how to hold him, as he didn't like to sit or lay on his back. The afternoon went quickly, occasionally speaking with the other volunteers around but mostly focussing on the child in front of you. At around 5pm the Mashis brought small bowls of what looked like smooth daal or something similar to me for the children's dinner. I sat, feeling quite young and un-experienced trying to spoon feed a toddler and watching the older volunteers, clearly mothers at home, while trying to master the art of keeping the food in their mouth!

At the end of my first day I felt a little clearer on Mother Teresa's mission but still a little lost on how I was to help. I hadn't expected to be painting nails and bouncing toddlers but I found that as time went on and with each differing day I learnt the volunteer's role. I found that each day I would learn a new face and then learn mine, so that each morning I'd walk down the corridors of Shanti Dan and those new faces would light up. By the second week, when walking into the corridors, a girl with burns fragmenting her face and not much older than me, ran into my arms singing 'Auntie Milly, Auntie, Milly', spinning me around and bringing the other women to clap along. It was clear that these women needed stability and love and amazing that in only a week the other volunteers and I could begin to be a part of that. Of course the language barrier existed between us but what I was most struck by, not just here in Kolkata but over my travels as a whole, was our ability to bond over silent interactions. The longest conversation I had in Shanti Dan was with a woman wearing a long

brightly patterned dress, looking far more put together than many of the others. She sat at the end of a corridor and called out to me, 'Auntie', for some nail cutters. I brought them to her and didn't leave her side until two hours later. She was desperate to get her story out, just as desperate as the rest, but with the ability to do so. Her name was pronounced as Ajana, from Malaysia but married into an Indian family. Her husband had passed away and she found herself alone in India, her mother and brother dying in Malaysia a few weeks later, and nowhere to go. She explained she was a Malaysian diplomat but that the Indian authorities had accused her of terrorism, arrested her, took of her belongings, broke her fingers and tortured her until they found she had nothing to tell. She awoke in a street in Kolkata and the Missionaries of Charity took her in. She stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the other women in Shanti Dan and did not require the intense care others did, but she was in need and the Sisters were there. Only after speaking with Ajana did I really understand how many stories there were to be told.

In the third week of volunteering I felt I knew the routine and arrived for the morning meeting with Sister Margret, at the end of which we all find our group and walk together to our morning shift. The group of Mexican girls who usually lead the way and understood the bus system had left the week before and so I found myself heading towards the 166 bus stop, knowing the route. It wasn't until Zoey and I turned around to see all fresh faces, new volunteers shocked by the streets of Kolkata, following us that we realised we had turned into the leading volunteers. Now when we walked into the corridors in Shanti Dan the women knew us and we introduced the new comers to them. With such a fast turn over of volunteers we quickly took on new responsibility. The Mashis began to learn our names and I asked Ajana to translate from Bengali so that we could communicate better with them. That is not to say it was not still challenging, still the afternoons in Shishu Bhavan were some of the most difficult, dealing with these innocent children in so much pain they couldn't understand; but now I understood that Thomas didn't like to be held in a certain way and that each child's pain could be relieved in different ways.

On my last day of volunteering I had mixed emotions, part of me ready to move on to the next step, deep appreciation for some of the volunteers and patients I had met and whom I still speak to; but also a feeling of guilt in leaving and going back to the backpackers lifestyle and then to the luxury we live in at home. Many of the volunteers I met in Kolkata were on their third or fourth trip there and spoke to me about the leaving emotions and the draw to come back. Although the individual daily and momentary challenges of volunteering had effect on each one of us in differing ways, the community created by the volunteers carried all along and it is that group mission to promote the good that draws people back.