

## **Kolkata Immersion Experience 2017 – Student Account**

Early on Friday 2nd February twenty fifth years and five teachers met at Dublin airport to embark on the Kolkata Immersion 2018. Having prepared physically by collecting supplies, getting injections and fundraising; as well as mentally by doing group work and learning about the city and the Loreto programmes, it seemed weird that the time had finally arrived. After many hours of exciting travel we finally arrived in Kolkata airport on Saturday morning. We were met by our two bus drivers who we grew to love as well as our trusty yellow school bus. We will always remember that first bus ride as we got our initial glimpse of Kolkata, zooming through the traffic and Indian music blasting from the radio. We were struck by the new smells and humidity which was nothing we could have imagined. With little time to adjust to the jetlag, we visited the Mary Ward Social Centre which was set up by Sr. Cyril, an Irish nun who came to Kolkata in 1956. We got the opportunity to meet and listen to Sr. Monica who now runs the centre. The volunteers told us all about their work and what we would be helping with during the next fortnight. They all spoke so passionately and proudly about the work they do and the people they help. We learnt about the Multi Activity Centres (MACs), Rainbow rooms and Brickfield schools which we would visit as well as their programmes to protect against human trafficking and teaching young adults lifelong trades such as tailoring and baking. All these programmes revolved around education which encompassed Mary Ward's beliefs as well as approaching the poverty with a long term goal.

Each morning we visited Loreto schools such as Loreto Entally, Bowbazar, Sealdah and St.Vincent's and in each school we were welcomed with an assembly. The children as young as four dazzled us with performances, often with choreographed dances with flips and lifts. Given such fantastic welcomes we then had to take to the stage to sing Irish pop songs as well as ceile songs, but unfortunately we weren't a patch on these incredible primary school children! After the assemblies, we split into twos and threes to teach classes. Here we saw the pride in the students and how they valued the privilege of education. We taught subtraction or parts of the body and all the girls were incredibly eager to learn. We realised how quick we are to forget the value of our education in Ireland and how much we moan about homework or tests. These children loved to be challenged and wanted to learn as much as possible.

Next we drove further away from the city centre to the MACs. These are small, informal classrooms built in shanty towns for children who are unable to attend school due to many reasons such as child labour. The Loreto volunteers go each day to teach the children basic Maths, Bengali or Hindi and English for 1 or 2 hours with the aim of helping the children to, hopefully one day, obtain a good job and move further away from poverty. On our arrival the children performed and then welcomed us with flowers and bindis. Although these children don't have much yet they wanted to share everything they had with us and took so much pride in showing us around their village. The language barrier made it hard to teach but it showed us the importance of expression and how much you can communicate with a smile or a silly dance. Soon the children were singing head-shoulders-knees-and-toes and colouring in rainbows. We returned each day to the same MAC which meant we got to know the children and I think we all found it very motivating to see them learning more each day. This is a fantastic example of the Mary Ward Social Centre's dedication and their work in making child poverty and domestic labour unacceptable.

Finally, in the evenings, we travelled back through the rush hour traffic into the city, which was both chaotic and exciting, to visit the Rainbow children. In each Loreto school there is a Rainbow room on the top floor. These were set up by the Loreto nuns to provide a home for children whose English is not good enough to attend the Loreto English-medium schools. They learn in local government

schools during the day and come back to the Rainbow rooms at night. Many of these girls are from poor families or orphaned however once they reach a high enough standard of education they move up to the Loreto schools which gives them unimaginable new opportunities. We spent time playing chasing, skipping and colouring with them in the courtyard of the schools. Talking with the older girls was very empowering as they told us about their life stories and what they wanted to do after school and at the same time normal as some just wanted to chat about celebrities and music!

On the first Saturday we got the opportunity to visit the Brickfield school programmes which are outside the city in areas called Brickfields. These can be found all over India where migrant seasonal workers are employed to do manual labour to make bricks for the construction industry. Families come to the Brickfields during the monsoon season in their hometowns. Each family member has an individual role in the production of bricks from shaping the bricks, carrying them and laying them out to bake in the sun. They earn £0.13 for every 1000 bricks they make. The family must work relentlessly to reach quotas and for this reason many young children are involved in dangerous manual labour and don't receive any education. This Loreto programme runs for six months during the working season under the permission of the Brickfield owner. For many it may be the first and only education these children receive. They sat on bricks in the open air with a blackboard propped up against a tree and sometimes a tarpaulin was hung for shade. They seemed shy than the city children and far less advanced but they equally loved when we sang some silly songs and played a game! Although we could see the progress here was slower the volunteers were determined to educate and to continue to set up more "schools"

During the two Sundays after mass we had cultural outings where we visited Victoria's monument which was built during India's colonisation and "Mother House", set up by Mother Teresa, originally a Loreto nun who lived in Loreto Rathfarnham before moving to Kolkata and founding the Missionaries of Charity. We also got the chance to visit New Market and to practise our haggling skills to buy colourful scarves and spices to bring home as gifts and mementos.

Each day we arrived back to our accommodation exhausted and yet we were still excited for what tomorrow would bring. By evening time we were counting the minutes until dinner when we gobbled up all the different curries to feed our doubled appetites! We finished each day with a reflection where we were given the time and place to discuss anything we had found difficult or striking that day. This was vital to make sure everyone was feeling their best so they could give their best to the programme. We would then close the reflection with everyone's highlight. Each and every night the children featured as even in the toughest situations you could see happiness in their smiles and hope in their eyes. It's so easy to only see the rubbish in the streets and to focus on the injustice of the system or the millions suffering but playing with the children, working with the volunteers and hearing individual stories reassured us that these people will continue to work for a better India long after we have gone home. Each girl left the city having learnt something from finding a new confidence to seeing a different perspective for what's important or a new value of her education. We may have gone to Kolkata with the mind-set that we were going to help thousands and fix all the problems but on our arrival home we realised that they are already doing that for themselves and the children in the city taught us far more than we could have ever taught them.

We are all so grateful for this opportunity and we can't thank everyone who made it possible and supported us enough, particularly our parents and teachers.