

Incredible India 2007

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"Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me."

This summer I and the eleven other members of Team India were lucky enough to spend five weeks in G. Kallupatti, a small village 60km north of the temple town of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, South India. While we travelled to India on behalf of Lasallian we worked for and with another charity, [Reaching the Unreached](#) or RTU, the brainchild of Br. James Kimpton, a member of the De La Salle order who has lived in India since the 1950s.

If there was ever a place to see Christ's work in action it is here at RTU. Its aim is primarily to help those who are unable to help themselves. However what started as a solution to the problem of orphaned and abandoned children has grown to encompass, help and inspire the entire community. In the beginning RTU existed simply to place deserted children, who are, more often than not, female, in a secure family environment with a mother or Amma, herself often a widow or an outcast, and six or seven other children with similar backgrounds. Nowadays though while the children's villages are a huge part of RTU's work, there are many other projects running alongside them in order to ensure the continued health and development of the community as a whole. For example, faced with poor government schools and uneducated children with grim futures, RTU built several schools, including an Open School for slow learners and those who are returning to education after a long absence. Similarly a clinic was set up to deal with the many health problems suffered by the local villagers and once a week a mobile clinic visits surrounding villages where healthcare would otherwise be unavailable.

It was however the work of the housing department which we were most interested in. Most villagers in G. Kallupatti live in tiny huts made of woven coconut leaves which are stiflingly hot and uncomfortable during the dry season and certainly no match for the monsoons during the rainy season. As such,

RTU has set about replacing these with strong, durable brick houses designed to last these families a lifetime. Already G. Kallupatti has been transformed- every street has at least some houses with RTU's telltale blue whitewash – but there is still a lot left to do; too many families are still living in appalling conditions. Which is why, over the five weeks we spent in India, we helped the local stonemasons and villagers build twelve brand new houses and gave twelve families a new home. The recipients ranged from an elderly lady whose husband had died and her daughter, to a young couple awaiting the birth of twins. The smiles on their faces and their gratitude towards us and RTU made all those difficult mornings on the site digging foundations in the blazing heat so worth it. Their lives had been transformed and it was so rewarding to feel that we had, in some small way, been a part of that.



Most of the group left Britain with little to no knowledge of building sites, brick laying and roofing. We were, at least in the beginning, more of a hindrance than a help to the locals who could easily have built the houses without us.

But if we were making things more difficult, they never made us feel less than welcome and were eager to teach us everything from how to lift breeze blocks correctly and how to mix cement to the Tamil words for things such as "spade" and "roof tiles". We may not have spoken the same language, but we found that smiles and laughter go a long way and soon we found friendships developing between us and the local people we worked with.

When the houses were finished we were lucky enough to be able to attend a housewarming ceremony at each new home. These were quiet and simple affairs consisting of a short prayer and the lighting of a few candles. Whether Hindu or Christian or sometimes a mix of both, they were deeply spiritual and moving. We felt blessed to share food with the families in their new homes and were overwhelmed by their gratitude. We felt it should be us thanking them for taking care of us on the building site for five weeks and for allowing us to experi-

ence their culture and way of life – we may have helped build them a new house but they had given us precious insight into life in a developing country, they had broadened our horizons and widened our perceptions of the world. A new home seemed poor repayment for having such a profound effect on our lives. The housewarmings also offered us a chance to look back and reflect on our physical journey to India and immersion in a culture so different from our own and our own personal emotional journey from ignorance to awareness, innocence to maturity. We realised we had all come a long way.

When not on the building site we spent most of our time in Anbu Ilam (in English, House of Love) Children's Village. When we arrived on our first night, all was quiet; you could be mistaken for thinking that we were the only people living there. But by early the next morning we heard the shouts, giggles and laughter of over one hundred children who were living alongside us. All of these children have tragic backgrounds – they may have lost their parents to AIDS, been abandoned and left to die at birth or witnessed their mother or father being murdered. Many had travelled alone at a young age from northern cities like New Delhi and Calcutta to reach the refuge of RTU. However we only knew this because an adult had told us, the children themselves were the happiest and most loving I have ever met. When they smiled the whole world seemed to light up. They had boundless energy and loved to see us try to remember their names or how to count to ten in Tamil and soon had us playing complex games with them or pushing them on the swings. We sat with them at study time where they would teach us to write our names in

Tamil and every night we went to prayer time which was a beautiful, peaceful and often amusing half hour with prayers and hymns organised by the children themselves. Of course, spending so much time with the children meant it was very difficult to say goodbye. As they thanked us and we them there wasn't a dry eye in the house. When they came to give us a final hug goodbye they said "no crying, no crying!" and while, at the time, it only made us more upset, I realise now that they made a valid point: we should not have been sad that we had to leave but rather glad that we had come in the first place. It was, I think, during our time in Anbu Ilam that all of us realised the truth of Jesus' words "let the little children come to me...for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

In conclusion, India was a once-in-a-lifetime experience which will stay with our group, I'm sure, for many years to come. Someone once said "I do not know the way. But with the help of others, I can make a path" and our time at RTU really illustrated the truth of that statement for us. The combined effort of Bro. James, the people of Tamil Nadu and western benefactors has lead to the transformation of so many lives, the formation of new paths for so many children. And likewise we came to appreciate that whether it's eating curry for breakfast, surviving terrorist threats at Heathrow Airport or digging foundations in blazing heat, it's always easier if you have friends around you to help you along the way. We feel that our time in India was five weeks well spent for both us and the people of G. Kallupatti and we hope that [LDWP](#) will continue to support the work of RTU for many years to come.