



“Now breathe in and out slowly...”

# 14 Days in Chennai

By Evelyn Wong

Project Naadi was launched in December 2011, in collaboration with Showers of Blessing Ministries, an Indian Christian organisation led by Pastor Dr Samuel Mohanraj. This project took place in the rural outskirts of Chennai, the bustling capital of Tamil Nadu, from 18 to 31 December 2011.

Ask any of us in the team and you will hear random trivia that reflect our diverse experiences in India. On the one hand, we might share things along the lines of “I think I gained 5 kg from this entire trip by eating Curry Pops” or “the little boys there can climb trees like monkeys”. Then, at the other end of the spectrum, there are stories about children who have lost their parents to illnesses and are now orphans, or widows who have been thrown out of their family homes because of their diminished statuses in society. We have learnt and witnessed firsthand how families managed to live in cramped, dreary shacks with nothing but the hard floor to sleep on. Along with the moments of comic relief came bittersweet and, at times, emotional experiences that reaffirmed our motivations as medical students to give our best because they trusted us to do the best for them.

This pioneering medical expedition was led by Dr Pang Ningyi (medical officer in full-time national service) and Dr Chua Ying Xian (National University Health System Emergency Medicine resident). The team comprised of 32 members, including students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM), graduated doctors, as well as graduates from other professions and faculties. Our aim was twofold: to serve the poorest and

the most marginalised communities of Chennai, and to expose young medical students to the needs of the world. Our goals for the trip included: running clinics, screening of diseases, village education, and community involvement.

## Project Freedom

As part of our community involvement, we visited seven rural villages. One of the main deliverables of Project Naadi was to build a toilet in Kalavai Village. The toilet was essential in helping to improve sanitation and hygiene for the villagers. Throughout the four days, we helped with digging the foundation, constructing the pit for the safety water tank, mixing clay and transporting sand and bricks. Our team also participated in the planting of 250 tree saplings purchased with project funds. These trees will bear fruits, ensuring future sustainability for the villagers.

It was a great learning experience and a lesson in humility for our team, as we worked hard, building the toilet brick by brick. Our weaknesses and ignorance were in stark contrast to the wisdom of the villagers with their knowledge of common techniques and simple science.

We travelled around the rural villages teaching simple English, geography, arts and crafts, and holding various health education sessions, such as the correct way to brush teeth. On Christmas Eve, we visited Sanganavaram Village, a village for gypsies, to spread the joy of the festive season. Gypsies traditionally live on the fringes of Indian society and are deprived of economic opportunity, upward social mobility and social integration.

**Project Love**

We conducted one full day of free ambulatory clinics near Kalavai Village. Our aim was to screen for a variety of rural diseases (e.g., cataracts and malnutrition), in conjunction with local health workers. Our two doctors were kept busy attending to about 150 patients, who had a plethora of conditions such as acute infections, previous strokes and suspected malignancies.

Other team members helped out with crowd control, dispensing medicine, vital signs recording and data collection with history taking. We were greeted with a steady stream of patients and our clinic lasted into the night, even through a blackout. During this experience, the quote "to cure sometimes, to heal often, to comfort always" seemed to come alive in the rural setting. Even when there wasn't much we could do, offering our reassurance seemed to make a difference.

**Project Hope**

One of the main highlights of our trip was visiting a home for HIV-positive children. Shelter Charity Home was founded in 2005 by Pastor Dr Solomon Raj. This was one of the five homes for HIV-infected children around Chennai. Shelter Charity Home houses 28 HIV-infected children. It also has eight caregivers, all of whom are HIV-positive, except for the cook. Many of the children suffered from stigma from society. We were able to interact with the bright and lively children, engaging them in games and local activities and teaching them English, health education and other essential life skills.

Their needs are simple and they struggled for acceptance. I am impressed by their courage and faith, and wish them better days ahead. The main reflection I brought home with me was: with the little they have, they gave so much more; with so much I have, how little do I actually give.

**Future involvement**

This collection of experiences and memories that accumulated from the trip has given us a small insight on the larger world of overseas community involvement. Project Naadi has come a long way. This expedition was built with long hours of planning and teamwork in the face of the constant roadblocks that we overcame.

We have learnt a little about Medicine but a lot about humanity. Our friends from India have opened our eyes to a whole new culture and a simple way of life. They have made us realise the resilience of humanity and in turn, reaffirmed our desire to care for the poor and the sick in our midst.

For more information on Project Naadi, you can visit our website at <http://projectnaadi.wordpress.com> or reach me personally at [iffywong@gmail.com](mailto:iffywong@gmail.com). **SMA**



*Evelyn Wong is currently a third year medical student from YLLSoM. The writing in this account was inspired by the beautiful people she met in India. Their tenacious spirit in holding fast to their dreams in spite of their circumstance is a constant encouragement in her journey in medical school.*

Photos: Chua Ying Xian (Class of 2010),  
Michael Warren Lim (Class of 2014),  
Ivan Lee (Class of 2013),  
Pang Ningyi (Class of 2009),  
and Evelyn Wong (Class of 2014)



The Project Naadi team with friends they made in Chennai



Building a tuition centre from scratch



Evelyn dining with some of the village children



Teaching simple English