

# Travel Grant Report

Helen Salvage – Dehradun, India, Summer 2012

I spent this summer in Dehradun, Northern India, working with the Latika Roy foundation, a charity which works with young people with developmental disabilities. The foundation runs several projects, including the Vocational Training Centre and Karuna Vihar Special School where I spent most of my time. My role here varied depending on what was needed on any specific day but I spent a significant amount of my time helping to produce learning resources, as visual representations are used a great deal in both centres. I also worked with classes, assisting teachers with academic, arts and crafts and physical activities.

During the evenings I also attended the foundations inclusive after school project, Latika Vihar. Here local children, both with and without special needs, have the opportunity to play and have fun, something which is much rarer in India than in the UK. As well as spending time playing and dancing with the children here I was involved in an on-going project to improve the library facilities Latika Vihar offers. When I first arrived the library consisted of mostly donated books, predominantly written in English and far too difficult for most of the young people to read (both because they were aimed at an older audience and because English is, at most, a second language for these children.) many of the books were also damaged or outdated. We therefore sorted through all the books, throwing out a significant number of them which were not being used. Those books we wanted to keep but needed repairing (in particular picture books, the only books which were regularly being read) were sent to be fixed or on occasion rebound. We also properly numbered and logged the books in order to enable the Latika Vihar staff to keep track of them better and set up a coherent borrowing system. The plan is to now order more books and shelves which allow the books to be more attractively displayed to encourage children to pick them up.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was the language barrier. However, by learning a few key words in Hindi and using non-verbal communication skills I was able to communicate effectively at least most of the time. These skills I feel will be very useful in later life, in particular my new appreciation of the importance of body language will enable me to better communicate, even with those who share English as a first language.

While in India I stayed with a family, something which allowed me to see how people really live in Dehradun. The opportunity to try real Indian food (as opposed to British 'Indian' curries) in particular was a great experience. My appreciation of the culture was also enhanced by trips I took, with another volunteer around the local area. As well as exploring the centre of Dehradun we took weekend trips to the nearby cities of Haridwar and Rishikesh. In Haridwar we were able to watch the nightly ritual of bathing and praying in the Ganges, as well as visiting a few of the beautiful temples there (my favourite being Pawan Dam, a temple filled with beautiful glass mosaics.)

My time in India was a great experience, and I learned a lot both about the culture there and about myself. In particular I realised the value of communication, and how difficult life can be when you struggle to make yourself understood. Although there were ups and downs, particularly as I was quite homesick to begin with, it was a brilliant experience. Getting to see a culture so different to my own first hand was very rewarding and has reminded me just how much what is 'normal' can change depending on the cultural context. The experience has also reconfirmed my desire to become a teacher in later life as I found working with young people to be an incredibly rewarding and enjoyable experience. The time I spent in India was one of the most difficult, but also best times of my life. It wasn't always easy but I am very glad I had the opportunity to do this.