

‘Our relative *discomfort* was easily forgotten’

Principal **Sunita Verma** and her practice manager travelled all the way to India to spread some Christmas sparkle.



Great spirit

In line with our goals for our practice, Sparkle Dental Boutique, my Practice Manager Kavita and I decided to take an alternative Christmas break by travelling to India to undertake some voluntary work.

We arrived in Lalsott, a remote village in Jaipur, on 30 December 2007. Jaipur is the capital city of the desert lands of Rajasthan, and was once the capital of Indian royalty. Our accommodation wasn't quite regal, with huts made from cow dung and a few unexpected guests including bats, rats, mosquitoes and field mice! Electricity was intermittent and washing involved cold bucket baths. We certainly missed our home comforts, but with great spirit amongst the volunteers and camp staff we spent many a night round the campfire under the stars.

Heart-warming

Wherever we went we were greeted with 'Hello, what's your name?' and followed by

hordes of children wanting to find out who we were. Their boundless enthusiasm, eagerness to learn and smiles warmed our hearts, and our relative discomfort was easily forgotten.

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Our voluntary work involved helping with local projects. Kavita worked in an Indian *Aanganwari* or day care centre. It was her role to lead young children from



the ages of 2-6 in creative games and activities to develop their mind-body coordination skills. Very often, older siblings are prohibited from attending school as they are made to care for their younger siblings while their parents work. With increased enrolment of younger siblings, the older siblings are immediately freed of supervision and allowed to regularly attend school.

Hokey cokey

I worked at a local school where I helped children with English. We invented games on boards, did the hokey cokey and made masks which we used to teach the children about colours and shapes.

Kavita and I joined the rest of the volunteers to decorate the classrooms of a local primary school, in order to make the environment more conducive to learning. We were dropped off at the school each morning and together with our team of volunteers from Holland and Sweden, we were left to paint.





In one of the two classrooms I worked in, I decided to paint Lord Ganesh, the elephant god, as this is one of the best-known and most-worshipped deities in Hinduism. Ganesha's elephant head makes him easy to identify and he is widely revered as the Remover of Obstacles and patron of arts and sciences. He is also the deity of intellect and wisdom and therefore a good choice for the classroom. Having won 'Most Attractive Practice' at the Private Dentistry Awards, it was great to be able to leave a touch of sparkle in Lalsott for the children and teachers.

Revelations

Resources and materials were limited and it became evident at an early stage of our voluntary work that not all of the donations that people had made to this charity, Real Gap (based in the UK), were filtering down to the community and the children. This was a shame as so much needed to be done.

That being said, we were thrilled with the huge improvements we had made to the once cold and dreary classrooms. The children, teachers and local villagers were also pleased as we had a constant stream of visitors coming to watch with great intrigue.

Back in the comforts of England, Kavita and I feel that it has been really rewarding to get involved in a charity project rather than just donating money as I had previously done. It was also fantastic working with a new team of people from all walks of life, with different languages, cultures and ideas of how to go about doing things. For me the trip reinforced the importance of education and how fortunate I am to be in my position due to the education that I have received. As a result, I have now completed training with Volunteer Reading Help, a national UK based charity, and will be spending one afternoon each week going into my local school and reading with three disadvantaged children between the ages of 6-11.



Real Gap

www.realgap.co.uk

Volunteer Reading Help

www.vrh.org.uk