

Volunteering in India

By John Inman

When I stepped off of the plane at 9:30 AM (10 PM Sheridan Oregon time) Sunday April 4 in Madurai, Tamilnadu, South India, it was hard to believe that I was there. This was the unlikely culmination of a journey that started long before the 38-hour trip from Sheridan Oregon to Madurai India. My journey started with my passion to introduce my little girl Kinnera to her culture and my desire to give back to India, the culture that gave her to our family.

In November of 2003, Lynne Twist, one of the founders of "The Hunger Project" and a worldwide fundraiser was in Oregon for a book signing for her new book, *The Soul of Money* www.soulofmoney.org. After her talk, I told her my story and asked her how to get involved in India as a volunteer. She suggested that I explore Seva Foundation (pronounced say-va and means service with heart in Sanskrit) www.seva.org. I had not been an international volunteer before and had never set off on such a journey, but I took the first step by talking to Lynne.

I had just completed my masters degree in adult education in 2003 and felt that offering my knowledge as an educator was my best option in creating interest in me as a volunteer. It turned out that Seva was looking for an adult educator for a partner in India.

I e-mailed my background and resume to Suzanne Gilbert at Seva and to my surprise, she e-mailed me back that her partner in India, Lions Aravind Institute of Community Ophthalmology (LAICO-Aravind) was interested in having me come to India to work with them. Before the conversation with Lynne Twist and call after call and e-mail after e-mail to different non-profits with not a returned call, there was finally a hand offered asking me to participate. I was both terrified and elated.

Unlike most international volunteers, I was going on my own, not part of a mission, university, government program, or non-profit group. I started conversations via e-mail directly with Preethi Pradhan at LAICO-Aravind and discovered that they were looking for someone with my specific expertise to introduce learner-centered training strategies into LAICO-Aravind with the intent to improve learning and the effectiveness of their training.

LAICO-Aravind would provide room and board for me when I arrived in India but I had to get there on my own. As I did not have funding for the trip, I used airline mileage for a ticket to India and back. A few good friends helped with donations to help me defray some of the other costs of the trip. Even with room and board covered and my flight to India covered, costs still exceeded \$1,000. I was grateful for the help.

I booked the flights, ordered my passport and visa, got my shots, purchased clothing, and got everything in order to travel. I had never been away from my family for more than a couple of days and I was now going to India for 18 days. My whole family was anxious.

And now I was standing on the tarmac at the airport in Madurai India, half a world away from home. I had been instructed to meet the Aravind Van at the front of the airport. The driver spoke no English. The drive to Harmony, the Aravind guesthouse, was full of new sights, sounds, and smells. My senses came alive.

Madurai is not your typical tourist destination except for those on spiritual journeys to see the temple. A visit is like stepping back decades. Madurai is in the southern most state of India, Tamilnadu and is inland toward the middle of the state. Madurai is known as India's largest village, a village of 1.4 million people. If there is a city center, it is the temple complex. Meenakshi Temple is the oldest Hindu Temple in India. Construction started 2,500 years ago and the last addition was added in the 1,300's. The temple is dedicated to Meenakshi, the wife of Siva and sister of Vishnu. This marriage is said to have brought together the two opposing branches of Hinduism paving the way to unity among Hindus.

I had no luggage except my backpack. Lufthansa had left my bag in Frankfurt. They gave

me 4,000 rupees in Chennai, about \$80, to help me get settled until my bag showed up. My bag was finally delivered to Harmony on Wednesday. Luckily I had kept my essentials in my backpack. It was Sunday and the only day off for the Aravind staff who work six full days per week. Preethi came to Harmony to welcome me and then arranged for her husband Keerti to come by on his motor scooter to take me to find clothing. Riding with Keerti was my first of many trips on the back of a motor scooter, which is the primary vehicle for those who can afford something other than a bicycle in Madurai.

The predominance of motor scooters is one of the first things that I noticed in India that is different than in the US. The vast majority of the personal vehicles in Madurai were motor scooters where in the US it is clearly cars and SUVs.

All I can say about experiencing traffic in Madurai is that it seems as though absolute chaos is choreographed into order. The roads are filled with people walking, kids, bikes, rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, small cars, busses, trucks, motor scooters, carts, cows, goats, and more all in constant motion. At first glance you would think that everyone would collide, but in the two weeks that I was there, I never saw an accident.

I thought it was ironic that we are so preoccupied with safety in the US; car seats, seat belts, traffic control, you name it. None of this exists in Madurai. Seeing a family of five on a motor scooter is common. Driving looks like a continuous game of chicken with few getting hurt. By the end of my trip, I could only chuckle every time we missed another vehicle or person by two inches.

On Monday I started to work at LAICO-Aravind. I was given an office and a computer, toured, oriented, and given projects and by the middle of the week was in full swing working to make a difference in this extraordinary training institute for Aravind Eye Care System.

We tend to take electrical power and the conveniences it brings for granted in the US. I found that there was far less waste of resources in Madurai. Every plug, light, fan, or appliance is switched and nothing is left on. Even the water heater for the shower is switched. With the frequent blackouts I experienced, without this level of conservation of energy, I would imagine they would rarely have power.

In my experience, all of the common areas in buildings are open to the outside with only rooms or offices air-conditioned. This was so for my office at LAICO-Aravind. In a region where the low temperature is 85°F and the high is over 110°F, this saves a lot of energy. I of course chose the hottest time of the year to visit Madurai. April and May regularly are well over 100°F.

Hot and cold running water? Think again. All I ever saw were cold water taps except in the shower. There is not much need for hot water when it is continuously hot.

Aravind was started by one man with a vision to change the world, Dr. Venkataswamy. At 58 he retired as a government Ophthalmologist and founded Aravind with the vision to eradicate needless blindness in the world. At 85, he now has the largest eye care system in the world and his learning institute LAICO-Aravind is training hospitals in 3rd world countries across the world to fulfill this vision. And I now was a part of that vision as a volunteer.

Can one person change the world? From what I saw, the answer has to be yes. Aravind now has 3,500 employees, 5 hospitals, and delivers 5 village field eye camps every day, all leading to the delivery of over 200,000 sight restoring operations per year. This effort combined with 100's of thousands of corrective lenses dispensed per year is giving back lives to those who have lost hope. In India there is a saying, "A blind person is a mouth with no hands". The life expectancy of a blind person is only 2.5 years. Aravind is helping change this trend of blindness through their work.

Worldwide, a person goes blind every 5 seconds and a child goes blind every minute.

Aravind is a key member of an international movement, "Vision 20/20: The right to sight" www.v2020.org changing lives around the world. Vision 20/20 was created through a partnership between the "World Health Organization" and the "International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness". The Vision 20/20 mission is to eradicate needless blindness in the world by 2020, reducing the net number of the blind in the world to 35 million by 2020.

Each of the 15 days that I was in India was extraordinary. Each morning I would get up at 5:30 AM and head out for a walk by 6 AM. On these mornings I walked miles of Madurai and saw many areas of the city. I was always an oddity, a westerner out so early in the morning. People were setting up shop at roadside stands, having tea or coffee with friends, milking cows and goats, fetching water, and generally getting ready for another work day in the cool of the morning.

The city was the pasture for the cows and goats. They grazed on organic garbage around the city and helped keep the city free of decomposing waste. Their waste is collected and used for fuel and for other uses. These animals are a critical part of the ecosystem in the area and were ever present where every I went.

I found the people on my walks to be very friendly particularly when I smiled and said hi. The kids loved to come up and say hi and practice the few words of English they knew.

I took many pictures on these walks while trying not to be too intrusive. I did not always find this easy. On one occasion, I walked through an area of abandoned shipping docks where there were a 100 or so very impoverished people sleeping in the middle of the pavement. It was just dawn and I raised my camera to take a picture trying not to be too obvious and a mother jumped up and grabbed her baby and ran across the road to me asking for rupees. I said what I was supposed to say in these circumstances, "No rupees, no rupees" but to no avail. She ran up holding her baby out to me saying "Food, food". I gave in and reached into my pocket and took out the only change I had, 8 rupees, which is about 20 cents and a day's wages for this lady and gave it to her. An older lady ran up and tried to take it from her. I would have been better off not have gone through that area. I was lucky that I saw little of this depth of poverty on my trip even though poverty was everywhere.

The trip I took to an eye camp in a village was a life-changing event for me. Frank, an MBA student from Spain, and I arranged to accompany a team of doctors and nurses on Saturday to an eye camp in Nainarkovil 2 1/2 hours south of Madurai, a village at which Aravind had never set up an eye camp before. We all met at the hospital at 6:15 AM. The nurses packed the field hospital into the van and then we set off. Nurses and doctors at Aravind are a special people, hardworking and dedicated to the mission of Aravind. After medical school, all of the doctors do their residency at Aravind. Where Ophthalmologists around the world will average 200 surgeries per year, Aravind surgeons will perform 2,000 to 3,000 surgeries per year. There are few places in the world where a surgeon can learn this level of performance. Many surgeons are women as were the two doctors that we accompanied to the eye camp. Most surgeons get one day per month off, work at frequent eye camps, and are leaders the world in quality of surgery and eye care. High quality and volume are the principles that are taught to hospitals around the world by Aravind, which helps them address the growing number of blind in their countries.

The nurses all come to Aravind from villages as teenagers. Villages nominate the highest performing girls to go to Aravind and then over three years, the girls are trained to be high quality nurses. Aravind brings in 100 girls at a time to train, provides room and board and a salary of \$55 per month. The girls pay \$4 per month for their room and board, a mandatory \$35 per month goes into savings, and the rest is spending money. They are trained to be nurses, as well they are trained in finance, keeping a household, and raising a family. By the time they have

worked seven years, they will have a dowry of \$1,000 and a valuable career making them highly attractive prospects for marriage, which is important in Indian culture. For a village girl who might have had few options, this is an extraordinary opportunity.

On the way to the eye camp we stopped in a large town for breakfast. Frank and I found the doctors to be very protective of us. They made sure that we did not eat or drink anything that would make us sick.

During the drive I pulled out my photo album and passed it around the van. This was always an excellent icebreaker as the doctors and nurses were able to see my family, my hometown, Oregon, and my home. They loved the pictures and as usual, they loved the pictures of my daughter Kinnera.

One of the pictures was of downtown Sheridan at 10 AM on a weekday. The nurses were amazed at how clean it was and that there were no people and no traffic. Even in the smallest of villages, the streets are busy with people, animals, vehicles, and commerce. And one cannot help but notice that there is trash throughout the region. There did not seem to be the taboo on littering that is so important to us as Americans.

When we arrived at the village, the nurses quickly got to work setting up the field hospital. Frank and I simply got out of the way. As they were setting up, people started to arrive for eye exams. Usually after Aravind has visited a village several times, they have about 300 people show up for an eye camp drawn from the local region. As this was the first eye camp at this village, we had about 150 people show up.

At an eye camp, complete eye screenings are done on old and young alike. The doctors and nurses screen for cataracts, eye infections, Diabetic Retinopathy, trauma, low vision, and many other conditions that lead to blindness. Corrective lenses are dispensed on the spot to those who need them, free to those who can not pay. Those who need surgery are given a bus ride to the hospital where they will have sight restoring surgery and then are brought home, all at no cost. 2/3's of the surgeries that Aravind does are free of charge and 1/2 of the surgeries are provided to villagers coming from villages where there is no health care at all. Those who pay for surgeries pay \$120, which includes room and board and these paying patients' fund the rest of the surgeries done at Aravind as well as provide money for the expansion of the mission.

While at the eye camp, Frank and I ventured out for a couple of hours interacting with the village children and getting a sense of the life and culture of these beautiful people. I am sure that we were among the few westerners, if any, to have visited this village. We were an attraction to say the least.

The village population was about 500, which is about the average size for a village. The number of villages is large compared to the density of towns that we are used to. As an example, in the district that Kinnera is from, which is the size of Polk, Yamhill, Marion, and Multnomah counties combined, there are 850 villages.

Every village, town, or city has a lake and a temple as the center of spirituality and community. South India is in the 5th year of a severe draught. The lakes have been dry for years and the lake in this village was no exception. The draught has been devastating to the people in the villages who depend on crops for existence. Typical crops include hot peppers, rice, sugar cane, bananas, coconuts, and vegetables.

The temple complex is also the center of commerce. Footwear is not allowed in the temple so when we went in to visit the temple during our walk, our sandals stayed outside. We just missed a farmers market at the temple and were able to witness an auction for roosters. An ancient drill was at work in the temple drilling for water in a futile effort to bring water to this desperate village.

When we went into the temple, one of the spiritual leaders approached us to give us a

tour. He spoke some English but we believed him to be almost deaf as he constantly yelled. It was a fascinating tour and we discovered that someone of importance had commissioned the construction of the temple at the turn of the last century and this village was very proud of the temple.

On our walk we watched a blacksmith repairing an axle from a two-wheel cart. He had been working on the axle when we arrived at the village and was still working on it when we left hours later. His shop was an open fire with a billow, an anvil, and a hammer. It was as though we had stepped back 400 years in history. The vast majority of work in India is done by hand. We saw virtually no equipment. Even rock and concrete are carried in baskets by hand.

I found the girls to be very shy and the boys to be bolder in the village. Three children came to see Frank and me when we got back to the eye camp but it took the girl's 1/2-hour to venture in to say hi. Once in, they asked me for my autograph. This was so touching. I loved interacting with the children.

I traveled with Oregon post cards with stickers on the back that had the names of my family, our complete contact information, and a picture of my family. I gave each of them a post card and wrote on the back, "To my friend from your friend John" and signed the card. The children were thrilled. I also traveled with small packs of M&M's and gave one pack to the kids. They really do not melt! This too was a big hit. They beamed. I also showed them the photo album of my family, Oregon, Sheridan, and our home. The children loved this and in particular were very interested in my Indian daughter Kinnera. It took quite a bit of explaining to make this relationship understood.

At the end of the day, the nurses packed up the field hospital, 25 patients were readied for a bus to the hospital, which often can reach 75 for bigger eye camps, and our team then left for Madurai. On the way home the doctors arranged for us to stop at a different restaurant, one that they felt would be better for Frank and me. We had a great dinner and I took group pictures and mailed copies for each nurse and doctor. They loved the pictures Preethi told me later.

Aravind will often have 10 to 20 volunteers, students, doctors, professors, or dignitaries at Harmony at any one time. Guests usually eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together at Harmony. One of the joys of being at Aravind was sitting and sharing experiences and ideas with people from around the world at meal times.

Harmony was staffed to support the guests that came into Madurai from around the world. Our housekeeper, Ghilda Mary, was fantastic. She spoke English fairly well and had a great sense of humor. Aravind usually rotates housekeepers every year through Harmony but Ghilda had been there three years because she was so good with the guests. We were quite spoiled. We also had a cook, housekeeping help for Ghilda, and Andrews the yardman who guarded Harmony and kept up the grounds, which were beautiful. I am not sure but we believe that Andrews was retired from the military and had no family. Aravind gave him a meaningful position and care for the rest of his life. He was a dear man.

I was fascinated by some of the customs. Understanding some of the cultural customs was sometimes difficult but I fully accepted them as appropriate. Some interesting customs included: Ghilda and the cook slept on mats in the kitchen at night. Andrews never entered the guesthouse and slept outside on a mat on a bench. And when I was honored with an invitation to Preethi and Keerti's home for dinner, Preethi ate after Keerti and I ate and had left the table.

While living in Madurai, I ate nothing but south Indian food. Ghilda and the cook made excellent south Indian meals every day. The ingredients were always fresh. Fresh juice and porridge for breakfast and a rice dish and at least one curry dish at every meal. Ghilda would make eggs for breakfast for those who wanted them. If we had meat for dinner it was usually a chicken dish and we always had Indian bread of some sort. Since hot peppers are a staple in

south India, some of the food could be a bit hot. I found the food to be excellent.

On Sunday morning the day after returning from the eye camp, I boarded a train at 4 AM for the south tip of India to visit the sister of an Indian friend from Oregon. Alice David was to pick me with her brother-in-law George Thomason in Nagercoil, which was five hours by train from Madurai. I was on an air-conditioned sleeper for the trip down and back. On the way down I slept for a couple of hours and then got up and stood in the door of the train for the rest of the trip taking pictures and taking in the beautiful scenery. I found the trains to be well cared for and in great condition. The train system is extensive and I learned that the Indian National Railroad is the largest employer in the world, employing well over a million people.

Cape Comorin, at the south tip of India where the three oceans converge is a spiritual place both for Hindus and others. Many tourists visit the area. Alice and George took me all around the area visiting the Round Fort, an English fort created to protect the West Indies Company, the Ghandi Memorial, and the Rock Memorial dedicated to Swami Vivekandanda. He was known as the wanderer as he wandered all of India getting in touch with the poor and then traveled around the world introducing India and its spirituality to the world. The Swami taught that "Service to humanity is service to divinity".

The temperature was close to 110°F, which is not the time to be doing sight seeing I decided. Hot is not too bad, but milling around in crowds looking at memorials is not fun when it is that hot. At the Rock Memorial, since it was a temple, footwear had to come off. Try walking on solid Granite when it is 110°F out. Most of the Indians and I fried our feet and ran from shady spot to shady spot to try to keep our feet from burning.

Nagercoil, Alice David's hometown and my train stop, is 20% Christian, a higher percentage than other places in India. India as a whole has only about 2.5% Christians. I found two different Christian traditions in India. First were missionary Christians and then there were Syrian Christians. Syrian Christians could trace their faith and families back 2000 years to St. Thomas who introduced Christianity to India in about 54 AD. The missionary Christians are much newer to India within the last couple hundred years. The first was a German missionary in Nagercoil and this is why the high percentage of Christians there. I personally found it uncomfortable that Indian Christians who were converted by missionaries had their family names replaced by western names. Ghilda Mary, Andrews, Alice David, George Thomason, were just a few examples. I loved the Indian names even though I found some to be hard to pronounce, particularly in south India where names can be very long. Preethi is a Syrian Christian and maintains her heritage and is married to a Hindu as well which I found very interesting. My family is Lutheran and Alice belongs to the Calvary Lutheran Church in Nagercoil. I was able to visit her church and learn a little bit about her faith.

Of the 15 days that I was in India, I worked 11 full days. There was so much to assess and learn and so much work to produce as well. And so little time. At times I didn't feel that I would be able to get anything done by the time that I left. I ended up working on six different projects while at LAICO-Aravind. Some of the projects I was accountable for producing specific outcomes and for others I was invited to provide insights. I am continuing to help with some of these projects from home and anticipate participating for some time to come.

1) I was asked to participate in strategic planning for Aurolab, Aravind's manufacturing arm that produces lenses, sutures, and pharmaceuticals for their eye surgeries. Aravind created its own manufacturing company with the help of Seva Foundation to initially reduce the cost of lenses for cornea surgeries. Through innovation and engineering Aurolab was able to reduce lens costs from \$200 per lens imported from the west to under \$5 per lens. They did the same for the other products. Aurolab now supplies to other NGO's around the world. 2) I was asked to review maintenance training used to train medical technicians. 3) I helped define the attributes of a

proposed Performance Management system. 4) I helped develop a model for training guides to help nurse's train new nurses on the use and maintenance of critical medical equipment. 5) I created a model for online curriculum designed to teach remotely located doctors how to detect Diabetic Retinopathy. 6) But the most fun I had was delivering four workshops to nursing managers from the hospital on how to train using learner-centered strategies.

Preethi explained to me that Indians from the age of six are taught in a system that discourages asking questions in class. They simply are not used to participating in discussions or being asked to respond to questions. They are trained to listen. My work involves active learner participation and my mission at LAICO-Aravind was to teach these managers to do what I do, engage learners in active participation in the learning process.

The nursing managers spoke little English and had a cultural bias against participation. Some luckily understood English enough that they could help me translate for others. In my second through fourth workshops, Preethi joined us as an interpreter, which was extremely helpful. I had to adjust my curriculum on the fly to address language barriers in my third workshop, which I had written before I came to India. And through all of this, I had the most fun in my life training.

These ladies were wonderful. We had so much fun and boy did they learn. I truly believe they were the best students I have worked with. I also enjoyed the respect that they showed me as an instructor, part of the cultural bias I really appreciated. I was addressed as sir, certainly something that I have never experienced in the US. This work was the core of why I was invited to India. It was also one of the most powerful learning experiences that I have ever had. I believe that I got far more from the experience than my learners did.

The final workshop that I delivered was the Friday before I was to leave. It was a short one-hour workshop that provided an assessment exercise that required the learners to write their own Instructor Guide. Immediately after the workshop I joined a major event at LAICO-Aravind, the inauguration of the Technology Information Forecasting & Assessment Council-Center of Relevance and Excellence in Diabetic Retinopathy. Aravind was to be India's primary research center for Diabetic Retinopathy, which was quite an honor. Many dignitaries spoke and I was thankful that all speeches were in English.

The inauguration created plenty of excitement for Aravind and Harmony. The governor of Tamilnadu was in attendance as well as many dignitaries from around the world. Streets were blocked, security was high and Harmony had armed guards with machine guns to protect our fellow guest, the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, Dr. R. Chidambaram. He was the man that was responsible for the creation of India's nuclear capabilities.

That evening, Dr. Kim, the director of the new research facility took everyone at Harmony to a prestigious hotel for dinner and we had a beautiful outside buffet. It was quite a treat to be able to join this whole event.

On my last Saturday while working to wrap up all of my work, one of the ladies at Aravind, Reena, agreed to take me shopping for bangles and anklets. She invited another lady that knew the shops well and out we went. It was quite an experience going up little shopping alleys and into small little shops where there was no room but to sit on the floor. These shops and there were hundreds, were alive with people buying everything from cloth to toys and silver or gold. I came away with several boxes of gifts that included a large variety of bangles and silver anklets.

I was finally at the end of my trip and it was time to wrap up my work and hand off to those who would continue the projects. By the end of Saturday, my work was done and Sunday was spent packing and saying my good-byes to all of my friends. Sunday was quiet and I had time to reflect upon the lifelong friendships developed, the leaning that I experienced, the

contributions that I made, and my life that was now changed forever.

As I reflected on what I had experienced and learned, one of the things that stuck out in my mind was how gracious everyone was. People were so respectful and inclusive and genuinely appreciate and asked for input. Working with the team members throughout Aravind was truly a pleasure. I also felt that most Indians focused far less that we do on collecting material "stuff" and far more on creating a sense of meaning in their lives. By the end of my trip, I began to feel that the preoccupation with wealth and material accumulation that is so prevalent in our culture borders on obsessive. I certainly question far more now that I did before purchases just for the sake of having something.

If there were any doubt in my mind that God has a hand in our lives, this experience eliminated that doubt. There were far too many coincidences that brought me to Aravind in India. My masters work from OSU in learner-centered education is offered in few places, OSU is one. My daughter Kinnera had vision threatening eye infections and her village had no medical care. Lynne Twist introduced me to Seva Foundation while in Oregon for a book signing that I would have missed if I had not signed up for her news letter from Pachamama Alliance www.pachamama.org. Seva Foundation was the only NGO looking for an adult educator for their partner LAICO-Aravind in India. LAICO-Aravind was looking for someone with my specific education in a culture that normally does not use my methodologies. And Aravind is dedicated to bringing sight saving eye care to villages across the world that have no medical care. The circle was closed but I do not believe it was by accident. I believe that God gave me this gift of service and I am grateful and blessed to have gone to India to do this work.

For those who are interested in a complete presentation on my trip, I have a documentary on Dr. Venkataswamy and Aravind and a slide presentation of my experiences with stories. I would love to give this presentation to any civic group, church, organization, or school. Contact me at 843-4680 or at jinman@wetherhaven.com to have me join your group to share my experiences.