

INDIA



I Came across Project Mala while researching gender inequality in education across India and the rural areas of Uttar Pradesh. Amazed by the aims and successes of the organization in reducing the gender gap and educating hundreds of underprivileged girls over their 25-year period, I emailed Anne hoping to ask some questions about Project Mala's success. Inspired by the work, I set out to make the trip to the project to experience the challenges and efforts first hand.

After a tiresome flight followed by 36 hours on an Indian train, I arrived in Varanasi and was greeted by the driver of project Mala, Dakta. He was called Dakta as it was rare to be born in a hospital at the time of his birth and so they thought Doctor was a good name for him, however misspelt it and it was never changed.

I had plenty of interviews to conduct with teachers and office staff but wanted to spend as much time with the children as possible - making an influence on them with my time there. The reception I received from both staff and children when looking round the school was astonishing. I expected the younger children to be slightly timid or apprehensive of a young western girl walking into their classrooms ,but I've never seen faces light up like theirs. I quickly picked up saying 'Namaste' to everyone, and was always greeted with ear-to-ear smiles from all the boys and girls.



Throughout the day I picked up on so many of the great initiatives that have been brought in to help the children in and outside of the classroom. I could hear the sewing machines beavering away making new uniforms for the various year groups, cooks preparing a ginormous vat of rice and vegetable curry for lunch, see children reading various Hindi and English books in the library or playing cricket in the field. There was constant development to the school buildings too, with desks provided for the secondary school students, a new computer lab and listening classroom with laptops and headsets to help improve IT skills and spoken English, not dissimilar at all to my IT experiences in England. All the classrooms were peppered with fun posters or the children's work and drawings - there is a beautiful mural painted in honour of Project Mala's 25th anniversary which really gives the children ownership and pride in their school and their work. This is something I really picked up on when asking them how they feel about it.

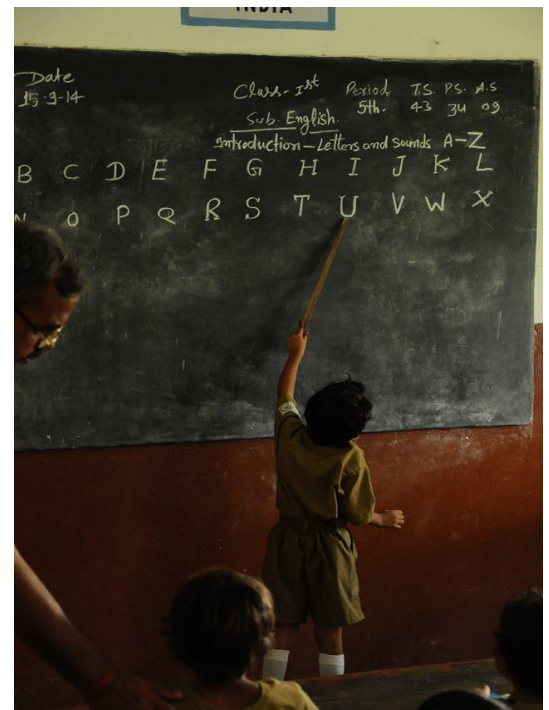


As I made my way up the year groups I was surprised to see so many girls still in each classroom. I had been led to believe that girls tend to leave education in rural areas to fulfil duties at home, and that attendance was much lower in the older age groups. It is testimony to the hard work and ideals of Project Mala to see how well individuals and entire female year groups are doing in school, something I became aware of when viewing the data on attendance and achievement that the office diligently collects. While in the very top two classes there were less girls than boys, I was told that the girls achieved better in certain subjects and were more focussed and harder workers. I sat in on lessons through middle school and secondary school, impressed by the answers I received when testing the pupils

on their grammar, spelling and pronunciation. In classes 8,9 and 10 I was able to quiz entire classes on complex biology while only speaking in English. Receiving GCSE standard answers from students only aged 13 in a foreign language was mind-blowing and something I wanted to explore further.



When conducting interviews with the staff at project Mala I was made aware of some of the strange and historical things that have led to gender inequalities in education. Project Mala has done its best to eliminate as many of these as possible but outside of school it is hard to change the views of society; particularly in rural India. Some of the results I gathered from my interviews were shocking. Girls in rural India are treated far more inferior than the boys, even by their own parents. This is because the girls are viewed as property of the parents of the boy they will marry. As a result of this, little money is invested into the females education and upbringing as parents and society feel it will be a waste as once the girl marries they will no longer belong to them, and instead to the husbands family. It was things like this that shocked me the most. The teachers and workers at the school and even the children viewed this as completely normal. Yes a whole different culture to me but I was still in shock by some of the ideas that are so embedded in society there.



What surprised me most about spending time with the children in the evening was their dedication to studying. Here I was in the middle of nowhere talking to students who had the bare minimum of contact with Westerners and the main activity they were most interested in was getting us to teach them more about what was taught in the classroom. When I sat down I would have biology books, English grammar books, chemistry books or more pushed in front of me and 15 eager faces waiting for me to ask questions or explain concepts. It was completely staggering. The children wake up at 5am in order to fit in yoga and exercise before studying before school, and are forced to have the lights turned off at 10pm to stop them reading all through the night.

For someone who struggles to make 9am lectures on a weekday morning it was slightly embarrassing and inspiring to say the least. When I'd ask what they wanted to do when they left school, their aspirations were direct and thoughtful,; "Doctor." "Doctor" "Engineer" "Doctor" "Engineer"... etc. Yet almost every single one came from a family where the father is a farmer and the mother is a housewife. I've no doubt the same drive is reflected in the rest of the students who aren't boarding at the school.



I have never been treated how I was there at Project Mala. The girls and boys worshipped the ground I stepped on and it took me a while to settle in and accept this, instead of wondering why they wanted to play with my hair, massage me every night or cover me in henna. The culture difference of a typical Manchester university student compared to that of the girls at Project Mala is beyond comparable. Even the sight of my phone and the chance they had to take pictures on it, was to them, what it was like for me as a child at Christmas.



Reflecting on my time in India at Project Mala, after settling back into uni again and fully recovering from a pretty bad water borne infection, I can safely say it was an experience of a lifetime. I hope to have the opportunity to one day go and visit the schools again and see the amazing work that they are doing out there. I also hope that through research like my own and work like Project Mala's one day the girls of India will have access to quality education and the situation will hopefully significantly improve in time.

Without the travel fund this life changing experience would not have been possible so I would like to thank the University of Manchester for the opportunity and support I was given!

