

**Penney family visit to the Tamil North & East of Sri Lanka – October 2019**

A little over 3 years after our previous visit to the North and East of Sri Lanka, in the company of Dr Velautham Sarveswaran and Mr Henry Amalraj of Assist RR, we touched down in Colombo and left one tubular mode of transport for another – a ubiquitous white minivan – and took our chances with the tuk-tuks, painted trucks, kamikaze drivers, goats and the world’s most nonchalant cows. We wove our way eastwards steeped in the gloriously green otherworldliness of it all, adjusting to the spicy sweet assault on our senses with every refreshment stop along the way. It is, we surmised, Tamil’s way of having fun with foreigners to blow their minds with a red hot curry before dropping them into a soporific stupor with a sweet milky tea.

Approximately 24 hrs after leaving our house in Solihull, UK, we arrived in Passikudah – our base for the first two nights and the launch pad for a week of immersion in projects funded through the exceptional benevolence of supporters of Assist RR and IMHO USA.

**Day 1**

Our access-all-areas journey began on the stunning beaches of Vakarai – a fishing community decimated by the 2004 tsunami, displaced by the civil war that ended in 2009 and one still a very long way from making a full recovery. Here we welcomed the opportunity to chat with the families who are relatively recent beneficiaries of the boat project we fundraised for in August 2018. We spoke to members of the 25 families who share the 5 Assist RR/IMHO boats now fishing nightly 75km off Vakarai’s coast, netting considerable payloads on each foray into the darkness. They leave at 6pm in the evening and return at 5am the next morning.



Since 2004 they told us, they’ve had little work and when they did their earning capacity as fishing boat labourers was capped at 350Rs per day (approx. £1.50). Since having a one fifth share in a boat, engine and nets, their earning capacity is now averaging 3500 Rs (approx £15) per family, per day. A 10 fold increase in their income and an inestimable increase in the life prospects of those families and their children. So what has this allowed them to do? They have bought furniture for their homes, motorbikes for themselves and jewellery for their wives - a detail we were delighted to hear as it highlights a level of comfort they have long since forgotten. In doing so these 25 families alone will have provided a welcome stimulus to the local economy, enhancing their sense of independence and self worth with every rupee exchanged. If we had turned around and headed back to the UK there and then, we would have left very happy.



From here we headed to Sampur to meet with a handful of the recipients of the 320 temporary shelters funded and built by IMHO and Assist RR in the area.

From makeshift foraged dwellings to homes that stand up to the elements, these displaced people have rebuilt their lives in tandem with their rebuilt homes. They were healthy and happy and very, very grateful.



One woman who fled as a refugee to India and later returned as a displaced person, has impressively capitalised on her homes proximity to the local temple to turn part of it into a shop selling garments she makes beneath her porch. A fine example of when aid gives the first and, often, the only leg-up necessary to gift people back the control they crave over their own destiny.

## Day 2

Lurching southwards, we hugged the Ampara coastline and handed over two more boats to 10 very grateful families in Tirrukkovil. Here we met and chatted to the wives and children of the fisher men - poignant smiling reminders of the very welcome ripple effect of successful and effective livelihood projects. How joyful a thought it is, after years on or below the breadline, that those children may soon have a bicycle to call their own or the wives may be able to stride out proudly in a new sari. Dignity, we've come to appreciate as a family, is found in the smaller details of existence.



That afternoon we headed back to Kulmani Base Hospital (North) where Assist RR handed over a phaco machine to the hospital and with that, facilitating the hospital in offering onsite cataract surgeries indefinitely. These extraordinary machines are extraordinarily expensive, so all the credit must go to the single minded determination of Dr Sarveswaran for picking up two phaco machines at a fraction of the cost in a medical auction in the UK and

airfreighting them to Sri Lanka. Who knows how many people's sight will be saved as a result? It is not fanciful to think that the number will run into thousands.

## Day 3

Shifting our new base to Vavuniya in the margins of the previous day, we slept very soundly in Sarves' beautiful new venture, the Ananthi Hotel, which is just as well as we had a very early start the next morning to Thalayadi, Jaffna.



Here we handed over a further 8 boats to 4 fishing societies– 2 for Nagar Kovil East, 2 for Nagar Kovil West, 2 for Thalayadi itself and 2 for Vettilaikerni. 40 families will benefit, with a whole lot of fish to catch and hopefully a whole lot of economic stability in the short term, followed by even greater economic prospects in the longer term. We had great fun witnessing the stoic formalities of the Tamil people during the handover ceremony, losing out to the giddy selfie-seeking excitement afterwards. There are hundreds of languages around the world but a smile speaks them all.



From here we skirted around the Jaffna peninsula as far as Pandattarippu, pondering how close we were to India whilst looking out across the Palk Strait. Here too we had the privilege of engaging with previous beneficiaries of the boat projects and one of the administrators who documents the yields of all the boats in the surrounding fishing villages. The incomes here too were very much more comfortable (up to 45,000 Rs per month, per family) than when the families didn't have their own



boats - albeit not to the levels they were enjoying on the south east coast line. When trying to understand why this was the case, two factors emerged as possible explanations. The boats in the north east typically cover a much smaller geographic range and they drop their nets at night and retrieve them in the morning. As delighted as they were with their new found incomes, and as earnest as the pleas were from those who came to ask us for more boats so that they too could benefit

there is, it seems, scope for sharing of best practice when rolling out livelihood projects.

On our way back to Vavuniya that night, we stopped off at a shopping mall in Jaffna having being bullied by our children to buy them a KFC – code for anything but rice n' curry. Clearly we have failed as parents in at least more ways than one. The last laugh was ours though as no amount of money or pleading could have bought them a piece of chicken that wasn't spicily 'zingered' for local taste buds. The backdrop to our pitstop was every bit as whimsical – as hoardes of western clad, helmet carrying, mobile phone wielding teenagers emerged from the latest Bollywood film (Pikil) a whoppin' and a cheerin' like dervishes on hot coals. This certainly wouldn't have happened in Sarves' youth, growing up in Nelliady! The contrast to our experiences earlier that day could hardly have been starker. The internet is changing Sri Lanka from the inside out, just as it is everywhere else – yet relatively few in the Tamil north and east have the luxury of frivolity.

## Day 4

Determined to mock the notion that jet lag was even a thing – Sarves again bounced us out of bed early the next morning to be at Vavuniya District General Hospital for a cataract surgery camp that lasted all day. Rolling so much goodness into one day is food for the soul. We were privileged to witness 30 of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised patients imaginable, entrenched in poverty, and destined for permanent blindness in one or both eyes, all assembled under one roof and cared for as



if they were family members by all those who gave their support. The phaco machine used by the saintly Dr Saga Pathriage (a Sinhalese surgeon who trained in the UK, who gave freely of his time, and was accompanied throughout by his wife Sureka) restored the sight of each patient with his magic hands. The machine was the second of the two donated by Assist RR through Dr Sarveswaran earlier in the week. Henry, Sarves and Dr Nanthakumaran (Director of the hospital) made sure that all patients and staff were fed, watered and treated with the utmost respect throughout the day.



You'd have to be made of stone to not be moved by how the kindness of a few impacted directly on so many. Not only, as the patients told us, were they excited about seeing the birds in the trees or reading their holy books again, they were also fizzing with the anticipation of resuming their livelihoods as labourers, farmers, gardeners, cooks and child minders for their own grandchildren. Moreover they were, at times, overcome with gratitude for dodging the bullet of irreversible darkness. It was literally enough to make a grown man cry to just be there.

## Day 5

Waking to the pat, clap, wallop of fireworks to celebrate Diwali in a Hindu heartland - at half past five in the morning – was different and we were grateful to miss only a few heartbeats. The festivities had begun and so too had our day. That afternoon we ventured into the jungles of the Mannar district on red clay roads that snaked through swathes of rice paddies, coconut and palm plantations. Boisterous peacocks, outdone only by streetwise black faced monkeys, mocked our passage and we startled the odd toddy infused local. We were, evidently, the last thing some people expected to see. We were on our way to an off-grid village near Cheddikulam, with 150Kgs+ of clothing on the back of a flat-bed pick up.



The clothing, donated by kind Tamil Diaspora in the UK, was given out as Diwali gifts to babes in arms, very elderly villagers and all ages in between.

As ever, that which we might otherwise cast aside in the West is highly prized by those a whole lot less fortunate than ourselves. They were delighted and we saw close-up how easy it is to make someone's day.



## Day 6

On our last day 'in the field' we drove from Vavuniya to see for ourselves the extraordinary Malavi Central College Girls and Boys Hostels donated by Dr Wilam and Vidya Jayaratnam - a fantastic project implemented by Assist RR (Sri Lanka) through donations that benefitted from the UK government's gift aid scheme through Assist RR (UK). If you are ever within driving distance you really must go to witness them for yourselves. Currently 78 girls between the ages of 11 and 18 and 28 boys are steeped in an education that would otherwise be lost to them, in a warm supportive environment that is nurturing not just their academic attainment but their development as young people. It is, quite simply, an inspiring and heart-warming example of what is possible when people make good on the vision and generosity of benefactors like the Jayaratnams. Their kindness has transformed the life chances of every child in their care and of all those to come. They have achieved something very special and are entirely deserving of every accolade that comes their way.



And so it came to pass – our time rattling around the highways and byways of the war and tsunami effected areas of the Tamil lands culminated with a 3.30 am departure for Colombo. The cows were sleeping, even if the police and army checkpoint personnel were not.

We arrived back home 24 hrs later, tired yet enormously grateful to have had the privilege of seeing how truly transformative just some of the joint projects between Assist RR UK & IMHO USA have been.

Between them they have achieved so much already. They and their supporters, for thousands of primary and secondary beneficiaries have so often proved to be only difference that exists between destitution and prosperity, ignominy and dignity, darkness and light... desolation and hope.

Whilst much great work has been done, we have seen with our own eyes that there is still much work to be done. All we urge is that the supporters of both charities continue to offer the boards of Assist RR and IMHO the means to transform the lives of people who have a very real risk of being entirely forgotten.

Our associations with both charities have been a blessing for our family and so too have the friendships we have formed along the way. We look forward to offering our support going forwards.

Yours in solidarity,

Mark and Donna Penney