

# To India With Love



JANE MUNDY

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Writer and sponsor Jane Mundy meets her foster child Kavya.

The tiny village in southern India wouldn't be on the wish list of most travellers. It's hot, dry and poor, and its best known for its factories that produce matches and fireworks.

But I had a particular reason for making the two-hour drive there from Madurai airport. I was going to meet Kavya, the thirteen-year-old girl I have sponsored for four years through the Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC). I was both excited and nervous.

Reading about how my donations are helping communities is heartwarming, but I always wondered how much good I was actually doing. I wanted to see for myself.

I was met at the airport by Subha, a representative of the charity, and we spent the next two days together. She told me about the work the CCFC is doing here and in other Indian villages.

On our way to the village near Sivakasi in the state of Tamil Nadu, we passed many match factories, huge concrete blocks with narrow slats that were the only source of light and ventilation. This is where children and women worked before organizations like CCFC came along.

Just 20 years ago, Sivakasi was like 19<sup>th</sup> century England — child labor was rampant. I tried to get the images of children inside these hellish buildings out of my mind and replace them with children dressed in their school uniforms sitting in classrooms.



Discussing her new gifts with her sister. Jane Mundy

When I arrived, Kavya was wearing her school uniform. I could tell that she was nervous too. But what left me teary-eyed was the fact that the entire village, which included 58 CCFC-sponsored children, came out to greet me. They put fresh flower garlands and scarves around my neck, shook my hand and a few people took selfies before drummers and dancers performed for me.

After the performance, the entire community took us on a tour of their village, where any lingering fears I had about what percentage of my monthly donation actually reached Kavya and her community were put to rest.

One family proudly showed me the bio-intensive garden — getting adequate nutrition is a big issue here. I was shown the community toilets built by the CCFC (only one house has its own toilet because a family member is disabled), the recent addition of taps for drinking water, and a little box that contains villagers' anonymous written grievances.

We walked to Kavya's home, which comprises a small outdoor "patio" filled with plastic water jugs and one room with a bed where Kavya and her sister sleep. Their grandmother sleeps on the floor and their father sleeps outside—their mother died giving birth to Kavya. They have a tiny black-and-white TV donated by the Indian government and floor-to-ceiling shelves heaving with their belongings.

I sat on the one plastic chair and Kavya gave me a poster she made that included a drawing of ice cream (she had asked my favourite food in a previous letter). I thought my heart was going to leap out of my throat.

I gave Kavya a few bags filled with gifts, things a young girl might like, such as art supplies, toys and cosmetics, and she was obviously overwhelmed. As Kavya, her sister and a friend tried out the lipsticks, a young boy squeezed into the room and asked Kavya if he could play with her new football. Kavya told him that she got to play with it first, after she sorted out all her gifts.



The village children come out to welcome Jane.

Subha explained that the hair conditioner would make them look like film stars and the girls blushed. Her father was inquisitive and wondered if he too could use it. But Kavya was clearly not ready to give away anything.

The neighbour girls seemed genuinely happy for Kavya — I was a bit concerned that they might be jealous or resentful, but I couldn't have fit presents for the entire village in my luggage. They chatted about how to wear cosmetics, particularly the glittery eyeshadow. Kavya opened the bag with notebooks and crayons. They looked at the colour chart and thought the crayons were for making bindis. They had never seen so many different shades.

I know there is a lot of disagreement about child sponsorship, particularly in India where critics say movies like *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Lion* have made it trendy. Some aid experts argue that sponsored children have effectively won the lottery, and that this approach is unfair and divisive. They say it's high on the feel-good factor and lucrative for charities as a source of long-term funding.

I couldn't agree more about the feel-good factor. It's humbling to be welcomed by total strangers, to be invited into their lives. I never would have

guessed that coming all this way to sit in a room with my sponsored child, her family and friends would be so overwhelming.

More than eight million children around the world, sponsored by western benefactors, have won the lottery. And I got to see first-hand how sponsors are making a difference in a child's life and in the entire community.

I met Karthigai Lakshmi, a young woman who is also from Kavya's village. In perfect English, Karthigai proudly told me that she was supported by the CCFC's Higher Education Fund to complete her Bachelor of Education degree — she will soon be a teacher.

After I came home I got a letter from Kavya, by way of CCFC. "All your gift materials are very beautiful. I shared these gifts with my sister. I shared my joy with my friend. I was indeed very shy on that day to talking to you. I was very upset that I did not speak with you properly. I never forget your love and affection showed on me."

Kavya also asked Subha if I will come back. Definitely. I don't know who got more out of this visit, me or Kavya. I do know that, of all the traveling I have done over the years, this was the one that warmed my heart the most.

If You Go: Air Canada has a long history of charitable work, from disaster relief to community involvement. When I asked Air Canada if they could help with my extra baggage charges (I had two suitcases full of presents), they generously waived the fees.

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