

INDIA REPORT - JANUARY 2026

In January 2026, I returned to Kolkata, India, for my sixth visit and my second time travelling solo. This was also my longest visit to date, spending four weeks in Kolkata rather than the usual two. The additional time allowed me to become more involved in the projects I was supporting, gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the local community, and build upon relationships that have developed over several years.

The primary objectives of this visit were to continue my relationship with the children at Arunima Hospice/Snehakunja Children's Home, strengthen my partnership with the Cathedral Relief Service (CRS), and support Nari Dana, the women's empowerment project run by CRS, with a particular focus on identifying practical ways to increase sales and contribute towards its long-term sustainability.

Arunima Hospice

Background

The Arunima Hospice was originally established to care for women living with HIV and AIDS who had nowhere else to go. Over time, many of these women gave birth whilst living at the hospice and they had also arrived with their young children. As circumstances changed, the hospice also evolved into a children's home. Today it provides care for over 40 children of varying ages. Some of the children are HIV positive themselves, whilst others have lost one or both parents to the disease or have been affected by it in other ways.

I first visited the Arunima Hospice and Snehakunja Children's Home on my very first trip to India and immediately formed a strong connection with the children. I was struck not only by how welcoming they were, but also by their resilience, creativity and talent despite the difficult circumstances many had experienced. Since then, visiting the hospice has become one of the most meaningful parts of each trip to India.

Historically, the children were not accepted into mainstream education because of the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. During those early visits, much of our time was spent delivering educational activities alongside games and creative workshops. The hospice was also keen for the children to spend time with a native English speaker. As English forms part of their education, hearing the language spoken naturally through games, stories and conversation helps develop their listening skills and confidence. Thankfully, attitudes have changed significantly over the years, and the majority of the children now

attend school. As a result, our role has naturally evolved. Rather than replacing education, our visits now provide an opportunity for fun, creativity, encouragement and, perhaps most importantly, the consistency of ongoing relationships.

The hospice also operates with clear safeguarding boundaries. Boys and girls spend much of their time separately and visitors are carefully managed due to the vulnerability and backgrounds of the young people, with male visitors generally not permitted to spend time with the children. Over several years of returning visits, the hospice director has built a significant level of trust with my family. This has allowed us to run activities independently with the children, something that would not ordinarily be possible and which reflects the relationships that have developed over time.

Objectives

For this visit, my primary objectives were:

- To continue building long-term relationships with the children rather than simply making a one-off visit.
- To independently plan and deliver a structured programme of activities suitable for children aged between one and eighteen.
- To create opportunities for fun, creativity and encouragement during out of school hours.
- To spend quality time with the older children, providing a trusted adult they could talk to openly.

Activities Undertaken

This visit was particularly significant because it was the first time I had designed and delivered the programme entirely on my own. Although I had previously helped lead activities with my family, planning sessions independently was both exciting and daunting. The age range of the children presented its own challenge, with activities needing to engage toddlers, teenagers and everyone in between.

To make the programme more structured, each day followed a different theme. For example, one session centred around *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, where the story became the basis for a range of creative, educational and interactive activities. Building each day around a theme helped create variety whilst allowing the children to engage through storytelling, crafts, games and discussion.

The programme was organised with the girls attending in the morning and the boys in the afternoon, allowing each group to participate fully within the hospice's existing routines.

Alongside the organised activities, one of the most valuable parts of my visit came through the unplanned moments. I regularly ate lunch with some of the older girls, giving us the opportunity to talk informally without the structure of organised activities or the presence of other adults. These conversations felt less like speaking to children in a programme and more like talking with friends of a similar age back home. It created space for honest conversations, laughter and relationship-building that simply cannot be replicated in a classroom or organised session.

Outcomes and Impact

Delivering the programme independently demonstrated how relationships built over six visits have developed into genuine trust and familiarity. Rather than being viewed as a visitor, I was welcomed back by children who already knew me and were excited to continue relationships that had been maintained between visits through social media and ongoing contact.

The themed activities provided opportunities for creativity, teamwork and enjoyment whilst offering consistency during the school holiday period. Perhaps more importantly, the time spent together strengthened relationships that have now developed over several years.

The informal conversations with the older girls were particularly valuable. They provided an opportunity to better understand their aspirations, personalities and day-to-day lives while allowing them to spend time with someone outside their usual environment in a relaxed and supportive setting.

Reflections and Insights

One of the biggest changes I have witnessed across my six visits has been the reduction in stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. Seeing children who were once unable to attend school now being accepted into education is an encouraging reminder that lasting social change is possible, although progress takes time.

This visit also reinforced that the greatest contribution is not always through providing resources or activities. Simply returning year after year matters. Relationships cannot be built in a fortnight; they are built through consistency, trust and showing up repeatedly. Some of the most meaningful moments of the month were not during organised sessions, but during ordinary conversations over lunch, where genuine friendships continued to develop.

The experience also highlighted how much responsibility comes with trust. Being given the opportunity to independently lead activities with the children is a privilege that has been earned over several years, and one that I do not take for granted.



Cathedral Relief Service (CRS)

Background

Cathedral Relief Service (CRS) works alongside communities across Kolkata and the surrounding districts, focusing on education, healthcare and women's empowerment. Rather than creating dependency, their approach is to equip communities with the skills, resources and support they need to become self-sustaining.

I have partnered with CRS on each of my six visits to India, allowing me to see projects develop over time and build strong relationships with both the staff and the communities they serve. This visit gave me the opportunity not only to support existing projects but also to observe where practical improvements could be made and continue strengthening those relationships.

Objectives

My objectives during this visit were to:

- Continue building relationships with the CRS team.

- Support the development of the Nari Dana women's empowerment project.
- Observe teaching methods within CRS schools and identify opportunities to create practical classroom resources.
- Gain a deeper understanding of the different communities CRS serves and the unique challenges each project faces.

Projects Visited

Hastings

Hastings has been part of every visit I have made to India, which has allowed me to see the programme develop over several years. During this trip, I spent two days observing how the children learn and how lessons are delivered.

Whilst watching the classroom sessions, I noticed that many of the children could confidently repeat information, such as the days of the week and months of the year, but didn't necessarily understand what those words meant or how they related to everyday life. With this in mind, I created classroom resources displaying the days of the week, months and numbers that can be placed on the whiteboard each morning. The intention is for one of the children to update them each day, encouraging greater participation whilst helping the concepts become more meaningful through repetition and routine.

I also purchased pegs so that children's work could be displayed around the classroom. It was a small addition, but one that creates a more engaging learning environment and allows the children to take pride in their work.

Geonkhali

This visit to Geonkhali was primarily about maintaining relationships and showing our continued support for the community. We were welcomed with performances from both the children attending the education programme and women involved in the local Nari Dana project before sharing lunch together.

Personally, I enjoyed visiting Geonkhali because it provided a reminder that much of India is rural. Spending most of my time in Kolkata, it is easy to forget that around 80% of India lives outside large cities. Visiting the countryside gave valuable context to the very different challenges faced by rural communities compared to those living within the city.

Dum Dum

At Dum Dum I joined one of the Derby teachers in delivering activities for some of the youngest children attending the programme, many of whom were attending for the very first time.

The session included songs, storytelling and simple maths activities designed to help children settle into a learning environment whilst making education enjoyable. It was encouraging to see how quickly the children engaged despite many of them being completely new to the programme.

Annual Sports Day

One of the highlights of the visit was attending the annual sports day, where hundreds of children from CRS education projects across Kolkata came together for a day of activities at La Martiniere for Girls School.

I helped run one of the activities by resetting the skittles between each game, whilst also having the opportunity to catch up with many children I recognised from previous visits. It was wonderful that many of them remembered me too.

Although it may appear to be simply a fun day out, events like this provide much more than entertainment. For many children, it is an opportunity to leave their immediate surroundings, experience something new, spend time with children from other communities and enjoy a nutritious meal. The excitement throughout the day demonstrated just how important these experiences are. It was touching to see some of the children save their food to take home to share with their families.

Sonagachi Night School

One of the most challenging projects I visited was the night school in Sonagachi, which exists to provide children of sex workers with a safe place to learn during the evening. The aim is not only to educate the children but also to reduce the likelihood of them being drawn into the same cycle of exploitation as they grow older.

Sonagachi remains the only area of Kolkata where I genuinely feel uncomfortable. The atmosphere is very different from anywhere else I visit, and there is a constant awareness of the environment around you. Witnessing the determination of the teachers to continue despite these challenges gave me an even greater appreciation for the work being carried out there.

Reflections

One of the things I admire most about CRS is their willingness to learn and continually improve. They make remarkable use of limited resources and are always open to new ideas that are practical and sustainable.

This visit also reinforced that meaningful support is about understanding culture before offering solutions. It can be tempting to assume that successful ideas from the UK can simply be replicated in India, but that is rarely the case. Every community has its own challenges, traditions and priorities that need to be understood first.

For example, at Hastings, Friday prayers can significantly affect school attendance, something that requires flexibility in lesson planning. Likewise, although education is free, some families depend on their children's income to survive. The immediate need to earn money often outweighs the long-term benefits of education, making attendance far more complex than simply providing a school.

These experiences continue to remind me that lasting change comes not from imposing solutions, but from listening, building relationships and working alongside the communities themselves.



Nari Dana Women's Empowerment Project

Background

Nari Dana, meaning “Women’s Wings” in Bengali, is a social enterprise run by Cathedral Relief Service (CRS). It provides women from Kolkata’s slums and surrounding villages with training, employment and a secure income through the creation of handmade products.

The project exists to give women a route out of poverty, exploitation and dependence by helping them earn through their own skills. The women produce a range of handmade textiles, gifts, household items and bespoke orders, with designs inspired by the colours and heritage of West Bengal.

For me, Nari Dana is one of the clearest examples of sustainable support because it is not just about giving help in the moment, but creating opportunity, dignity and long-term independence.

Objective

My main objective during this visit was to look at practical ways to increase sales in the Nari Dana shop. I wanted to understand the customer journey, improve how the products were presented, and identify simple changes that could make the shop more inviting and easier to buy from.

What I Observed

When I arrived, the shop had metal shelving with most products folded, wrapped individually and stored to protect them from dust. Although this was practical, it meant much of the stock was hidden and customers could not easily see what was available.

There was also too much stock on display, which made the shop feel cluttered, and the signage was not strong enough to attract people in. This felt like a missed opportunity because the shop is located within the Cathedral grounds, where there is already a massive natural footfall from visitors.

What I Did

I began by observing the shop and looking at it from the perspective of a customer. I then created a plan with practical suggestions and presented this to Rig, before also meeting with the shop coordinator to discuss how the ideas could be implemented.

The first step was to reduce the amount of stock on the shelves by around half so the space felt clearer and less overwhelming. I also suggested that outfits should be displayed on rails rather than folded away, so customers could immediately see the clothing, colours and styles available.

I made sure that at least one of each product type was visible, rather than everything being stored away. I also changed the outdoor hangers so they matched, which immediately made the display look more professional and intentional.

To support the improvements, I invested around £100 into practical display items, including hooks, hangers, acrylic jewellery stands, bag holders, paper sign holders, clean tablecloths for the till and outdoor tables, and other small items to improve the presentation of the shop.

I also created new signage, one of which has since been printed and displayed on the shop front. Alongside this, I designed new leaflet ideas, packaging suggestions and product ideas, including Cathedral-themed items, as many visitors would likely want to purchase something connected to the Cathedral as a keepsake.

Another important part of the work was discussing how staff interact with customers. We spoke about the full customer journey, from attracting someone into the shop, to helping them understand the products, to encouraging a purchase. I was able to demonstrate this in practice and successfully sold the first item immediately after the shop improvements began!

On my final day, I started physically implementing the new shop layout myself using the items that had arrived. After I left, Rig arranged for the rail to be installed and continued setting up the remaining display items.

Challenges

One of the main challenges is stock. Although the women are skilled and the products are strong, getting enough stock into the shop consistently is difficult. Many women are based across different areas of Kolkata and surrounding communities, and transporting products can cause items to become dirty or damaged before they reach the shop.

This is something that needs further thought because the success of Nari Dana depends on having enough products available to sell. If the shop has strong displays, good signage and interested customers, there also needs to be enough stock to meet that demand.

Impact and Reflections

The changes made to the shop were simple but important. By making the space clearer, more professional and easier to shop in, the products were given a better chance to sell.

Nari Dana matters because it has the potential to be self-sustaining. The women make the products, they are paid for their work, and the money generated through the shop can help keep the project running. It is not just a charity model; it is a business model that can create dignity, independence and long-term opportunity.

I have seen Nari Dana on every visit I have made to Kolkata, and it has always stood out to me. I love seeing women given the opportunity to earn, create and build something for themselves, rather than remaining trapped by their circumstances.



Experiencing Everyday Life in Kolkata

One aspect of this visit that I value greatly is the opportunity to experience everyday life in Kolkata beyond the projects themselves. Over six visits, I have built close friendships with local people who now welcome me into their daily lives. This allows me to experience the city not simply as a visitor, but as a young woman in her twenties living alongside friends.

During my time there, we spent time eating out together, visiting each other's homes, exploring the city and enjoying activities such as escape rooms and other social events. These experiences may seem separate from the project work, but they have given me a much deeper understanding of life in Kolkata, the culture, the values and the realities faced by people my own age.

Experiencing both the charitable projects and everyday life has helped me appreciate the city as a whole. It has allowed me to see not only the challenges people face, but also the joy, hospitality, ambition and strong sense of community that make Kolkata such a special place. These friendships have become an important part of every visit and continue to shape my understanding far beyond what I could learn through project work alone.



Overall Reflections

Looking back on this visit, I realised how much my perspective has changed since coming to Kolkata for the first time. My earlier visits were about seeing and experiencing

the projects, whereas this visit was about understanding them on a much deeper level. Spending four weeks in Kolkata, rather than my usual two, gave me the time to build stronger relationships, observe day-to-day challenges and contribute in ways that simply aren't possible during a shorter visit.

One of the biggest lessons I continue to learn is that meaningful change rarely happens through one person or one visit. It comes from listening, building trust and working alongside local communities over time. Having now visited six times, I have seen projects grow, children develop, and relationships become genuine friendships. That continuity has been one of the most rewarding parts of my journey.

This visit also reinforced that sustainable solutions are often the most powerful. Whether through education, supporting women into employment, or making practical improvements to existing projects, the aim is not to create dependence but to create opportunity. Seeing this approach in action has strengthened my belief that lasting change comes when people are given the tools and confidence to build a better future for themselves.

I leave Kolkata feeling incredibly grateful - for the welcome I received, for the friendships that continue to grow, and for the opportunity to contribute, however small that contribution may be. Every visit teaches me something new, and I am already looking forward to continuing these relationships and supporting the work of Cathedral Relief Service in the future.

Kolkata has become far more than a place I visit; it has become a place that continues to shape who I am, challenge my perspective and remind me why this work matters.