

Pune is a city with a population of 5.9 million situated, 150km East of Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra, on the Deccan plateau. This, although 3 states North of Kerala, still comes under the umbrella of South India. Similar to the UK there is a definite North South divide. The city lies 560m above sea level meaning it usually has a very pleasant temperature. Of course though, May is the hottest month, so since arriving the temperature has barely been below 40C. It is a very dry heat, so no humidity does help to reduce the sweating but instead my skin, hair, eyes and mouth are constantly being completely dried out. Maharashtra has been suffering from a severe drought and this is clear to see. There is very little vegetation; definitely none of the palm trees, banana trees or papaya trees that I was so used to seeing everywhere in Kerala! When you start having to count how many buckets



of water you use daily, you suddenly realise it's no small amount! Filling buckets for flushing the toilet every time you go, washing your clothes by hand daily, washing yourself, not to mention how much you're required to drink in this heat; with 20 people living in one house you can imagine that this is a huge amount.

*Nijora, one of the novices from Assam, washing her clothes*

I am staying about 15km from the city centre, in a village called Malwadi. Although rural, Pune is visible on the skyline and the gap is ever

decreasing as the city expands to meet the ever growing population. The best way to make the journey to the city is by 2 shared autos (tuk tuks); one to Wagholi a suburb of Pune that sells everything you need and has an amazing market every Tuesday, then one to the centre. Each passenger pays 10RS (10p) so the driver will insist on getting as many people as possible into the vehicle. The most I've had is 4 adults in the back plus 3 children plus 3 adults in the front, then another time I was sharing with a goat among the passengers!

*Wagholi Market*



Malwadi is a very peaceful and noticeably clean local community with people clearly taking pride over their land no matter the size. Once again, I have been enjoying my early morning walks that have become a part of my daily routine. At this time, before the sun gets too hot, the village is a hive of activity and there is a lot to observe. People are collecting their daily water from the central village tank,



cows are being milked, cow patties are being made for fuel, the delicious smells of cooking is emerging from the houses, the man on his bicycle delivering fresh bread to families, and this is all pre 7am. The style of housing varies from huge 3 storey mansions to tin shacks or tents, erected by migrants who've arrived to the area in search of work and water nearer to the city. These have increased even in the short time I've lived here, along with the ongoing building of more and more houses.

*Cow patties drying in the sun*

*The diverse array of housing right next to each other*

I'm living with 13 young novice girls who're living with 4 sisters to see whether the religious life is the path they are ready to take. Part of their training is to learn English, as they come from various different states in India so each speak a different language or even dialect within the same state. I have been teaching half the girls for 3 hours each morning, concentrating on their conversation skills. It is very different from a class of 30 5-year-olds!



After lunch most people take what we would call a siesta, it is too hot to do anything outside and the heat makes you so lethargic you find yourself needing to rest at this time. I have struggled sleeping some nights feeling that the fan is just moving around hot air. So along with some of the other girls, we have spent a few nights sleeping on the floor of the classroom. This is a corner room which seems to be on the right side of the building to have a lovely breeze all night long, which my room definitely doesn't have! My morning walks have told me we're not the only people struggling to sleep at night. I've noticed that many people have dragged blankets, mattresses and even beds in front of their house so that they can sleep outside. I even saw one person had been using a mosquito net which I was very impressed to see.



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*Maheer's symbol of unity*

Around 4pm each day, myself and Ruth head to one of the local **Maheer** houses.. There are two within a ten minute walk - Vatsalyadam and Karunalaya. Maheer, meaning mother, was began 20 years ago by a Sr. Lucy as a women's refuge for women seeking shelter or support for many reasons that come from some of the tragic stories you will only hear in India, often relating to the dowry that technically is illegal but still is very much part of the culture. Many arrive bringing along their children also. It has grown into 27 houses including places for men. Nobody is turned away, it does not matter where they've come from or why they've come, everyone will be made equally welcome and



loved and provided with all their needs for as long as is required.



*Me and Angele*

Vatsalyadam mainly houses women with learning disabilities. There are also a few children and a house for elderly women. All the children go to school but May has been their holidays. I've been doing everything from singing, dancing, mehendi (henna),

nail polish, foot massaging, drawing, listening and trying to practice Marathi (local language) and Hindi with the women here. One evening there was a wedding between two of the staff members there. There was so much Bollywood dancing involved which I absolutely loved! It was so lovely to see all the women and children having so much fun dancing and really enjoying themselves.

Once a week we go to Karunalaya. This is a house for elderly men. Nursing homes are rare in India as the majority of people stay living with their families their whole life, but some may have no family or no one who is able to look after them. This is increasing as the Indian culture is becoming more and more westernised. Here I have somehow become known as the massage expert, with people coming to me with all sorts of aches and pains. Many cannot leave their beds so it's important to keep massaging their pressure points. Although I've had little previous experience in this and only ever done back massages before, I'm really enjoying this new role.

Amongst all this, I've had the chance to go on a few nights out in the city which I've really enjoyed. This is a novelty in itself after 8 months without! The couple I stayed with in Kalyan have 2 sons living in Pune, so I've been able to stay with them and meet some of their friends. I've found Pune to have a very western culture, often finding myself to be the most Indian dressed girl in the bar, however this doesn't stop you from sticking out a mile away wherever you go!

*Myself, Pearl and Abhi*



One weekend we took a day trip to Panchgani, a hill station a few hours' drive away in the Western Ghats. Being over 1000m above sea level, it can be quite cold but at this time of year it was a pleasant temperature of 30C. The drive provided some stunning views. We visited [Bel Air hospital](#); over 100 years old originally run by the Red Cross for TB patients. It had begun to go into decline and 20 years ago a priest took it over and has developed it into a hospice for HIV/AIDs patients. It is a very peaceful place in a beautiful setting. It also has a famous nursing college on campus and has many UK students coming to do their medical elective placement here.



Panchgani is also famous for its tableland. Another name for a plateau, this is a large elevated flat piece of land unusual because it is so high. As a geographer I found this fascinating and have never seen anything like it before, it felt like a desert on top of a mountain!

On the 1<sup>st</sup> June I move into Vadhou, the very first Maher house, where I'll be living and volunteering for my final two months in India. I've heard great things about this place so I'm very much looking forward to throwing myself in.