

July 12, 2016

## Live, Laugh, Love

Maher is a place like no other; full of life, laughter and love. You instantly become part of the family and it's impossible not to always have a smile on your face. There are children of all ages living together in houses with one housemother, who has also come to Maher previously to seek shelter and support. Women who come here are also involved in the production of bags, candles, gift cards and jewellery which are then sold for a small profit.

Maher certainly know how to party. We have had many a cultural celebratory evening full of traditional dance to Bollywood to Zumba. Dance is an important part of the Maher timetable, as is prayer. Every morning and evening each house has a group prayer and meditation, a time to come together as a family and be thankful for the day. Maher welcomes and celebrates all religions without focusing on any specific one. Recently we



Our welcome to Ratnagiri Maher house

I am staying at Vadhou, the central Maher house, with a group of other foreign volunteers from Germany, Austria, US and Canada. Many come for internships as part of their social work studies. I've really enjoyed getting to know a new group of people and working alongside them.



Maria, Clara, Julia and myself at a ground breaking-the blessing of new land

For a few days, myself and Ruth travelled to South Maharashtra to visit two more Maher houses, Miraj and Ratnatgiri. Two families were being relocated from Vadhou so that the women could become housemothers. Off we set on an 8 hour drive in one jeep with 5 women, 5 children, 2 babies and 1 driver in true Indian style. I was so impressed at how well the children travelled, they were so excited to be going on a journey and were content looking out the window as we crossed the Western ghats towards the west coast.



While in Ratnagiri we visited the beach which was full of people paddling in the sea in their full clothes, including saris of course. I enjoyed spending the evening chatting and playing games with the teenage girls who were the majority at this Maher house.

I have had many opportunities while at Maher to go on visits with the social workers. Currently Maher are working on a sari bag project. Old saris are being made into fold away shopping bags that neatly fit in your handbag, this is being taught to women in a local slum as a form of employment and income. There was a

group of social work interns staying for a month from elsewhere in Maharashtra. They went to several local villages to do a street drama, which I went to watch. Although in Marathi, I was able to get the general messages. It is a good way of educating people, for example about keeping villages clean. Despite people being very good at keeping houses or places of worship spotless, India has a long way to go with keeping public places free from rubbish!

One weekend, Maher had a very successful double wedding. It was my first Hindu wedding and involved lots of colour, mehendi, dancing, 3 outfit changes and many traditional rituals. The most intriguing and my favourite was to see everyone being covered in turmeric which is then cleaned off to signify the end of single life. The brides were both girls who have lived at Maher for a number of years and were marrying local men which a great way of creating partnerships with the local communities.



The two newly wed couples with Sr Lucy, the lady who started Maher 20 years ago



Myself, Mona and Maria taking part in the turmeric ritual

I have recently got back from two weeks in Jharkhand staying at one of Maher's more recent houses. This was a mere 40 hour journey door to door by train. I had a wonderful time and was welcomed by the stunning singing and dancing that's described as being in the soul of the tribal people who live here. The food was amazing as always. Life is very difficult for people in

the villages here though and it was clear there was a real need for Maher. As well as having three homes for children, they have been able to build wells and water pumps in some villages including teaching about the importance of cleanliness, and set up self help groups for women and try to encourage families to send their children to school where possible.

A new water pump built by Maher to serve three villages



Some of the girls from Jharkhand Maher house

It's certainly been a busy six weeks. I only have three weeks left at Maher before I do a little bit more travelling; the more my days are numbered the more I want to stay!