

City of Joy

Waking up with the hot, Southern Indian sun, Jaffer and I hop on the backs of our rusty cycles. We pedal hard, weaving between cows and cars that bombard the bustling streets. As we corner a sugarcane stand, I holler with joy. Despite the ocean of chaos, I am one with hundreds, doing everything at once yet seemingly nothing at all. Jaffer looks back, riding hands free, with a devilishly playful grin: 'race me'. I skillfully cut him off, swerving onto a side road. He follows, fully determined to pass me. His will power evokes that previous evening, during our third chess match: "Focus Jaffer, hone in on what you're doing and don't be scatterbrained." He beat me. Neck and neck, we reach the gates of *Aarti School*, just in time to teach my last wellness workshop, with thirty orphaned, yet smiling, fifth graders.

Creating a home, school, village, and renewed life for hundreds of orphaned girls over three decades, *Aarti's* vibrant founder, Sandhya Puchapalli, shares her love fully with those in need, despite depleting her personal energy reserves to do so. With tears flowing, wearing traditional *sarees* and sandals, a mother and daughter arrive at the gates of Aarti. Unable to provide her daughter with food, clothes, shelter, education, and dowry, she seeks a secure a future for her daughter. I observe from the sidelines - witnessing the unfathomable - a long and emotional interaction giving way to *Sandhyamma* embracing this impoverished ten year old girl as one of her own.

Sandhyamma's creased forehead and slumped back indicate that she is bearing the weight of the world. This reminds me of my second week at Aarti, when I noticed how exhausted she really was, despite creating a caring and thriving environment for so many. "Amma (Mother), are you feeling okay?" I ask. "I feel tired Bodhi," she says. Immediately, I bring her a green smoothie I made and play a calm meditation to help her relax. By accepting

another girl-child she absorbs society's failure to truly love its' girls. She will only accomplish her mission by taking care of herself.

Entering the classroom, my students break formation and lean in for a hug. I embrace each one, wrapping my sturdy arms around their thin bodies. With a deep seeded hurt visible in her midnight black eyes, Keertena steps forward. She radiates leadership, despite her treacherous path to Aarti. She gently whispers, "*Anna* (Big Brother), don't leave to America." Scarred by being orphaned as a toddler, Keertena and her younger sister Lalita are hyper aware of the horrors of abandonment. Although my circumstances are very different, I too struggled to fill a deep void of pain and insecurity, anxiousness, depression, and even wanting to end my life. Despite our respective pasts and with hope for our futures, I whisper back, "even though I'm gone, I will always be in your heart, and you in mine." With a look that penetrates my soul, she says, "don't ever forget me."

From dying of heartbreak to finding joy in unexpected places, rural India was an experience of extremes and its people my greatest teachers. Jaffer pushed me to find happiness in routine and amongst chaos and I challenged him to fully apply his mind to the task at hand. Sandhyamma taught me how to unconditionally love and accept others as they are and I taught her how to love herself by caring for her body, mind, and spirit, something I too had to cultivate to transform my life from fear to self-love. Keertena taught me to have unwavering hope that life improves despite treacherous pasts; I will *always* remember her.

Aarti means light and its physical manifestation, Aarti home, school, and village has an inner light embodied in each girl, all staff, and its founder. In India, and without knowing, I found my City of Joy at Aarti.

