Ms Boland and Ms Cashman in Dublin Airport with 15 TY students who are all set to leave for Kolkata today for a week. The group are travelling with the Hope Foundation, where they will take part in a school Immersion Programme.

Let the adventure begin.

The group are all wearing beautiful half zip tops, which have both Our Lady’s school crest and the HOPE logo in them. A huge thank you to local business man Martin Grey for his help in designing the tops.

**Day 1 in Kolkata.**

After settling into our hotel and getting a little rest the group visited Kasba, one of the HOPE projects for girls age 4 - 12.

Our students brought lots of lovely gifts to the girls and entertained them with Irish music and dance after we were treated to a display of Indian dance and song!! They also received a lovely card from the little girls in the Kasba home.

Afterwards the group visited Birla, a Hindu temple in Kolkata which is a shrine dedicated to Lord Krishna and Goddess Radha.

**Day 2 in Kolkata.**

It was another action packed day for our group, it started with a visit to Mother House (The home & burial place of Mother Teresa), a place of prayer and tranquillity in the middle of one of the worlds most populated cities. The group had the chance to visit Mother/ Saint Teresa's tomb at Mother House, Kolkata.

This was followed by two of the many intervention projects funded & run by HOPE. One of the homes visited is ‘Be Kind' which is a HOPE founded home for boys aged 4-10 yrs old. We played many games with the boys, who were also delighted to receive toys and jerseys from the Irish.

Our group even found time to do a spot of shopping along the way! We have a group of very tired students who are ready to put the feet up to rest in preparation for day 3! Today, 26th January is Republic Day in 🇮🇳 India!

**Day 3**

We had a very early start with 6am mass in Mother House. A special experience for sure! The rest of our day comprised of a city tour -by foot and on bus. The students got to see some of the magnificent buildings in Kolkata and to witness some significant Hindu rituals along banks the river Hooghly.

In the afternoon our group visited the Ashar Alo Girls home ( catering for 12-18 year old girls). We were treated to some beautiful Classical Indian dance and an exhibition of their art work. Our students reciprocated with their own performances ( cup - song, 'brush- dance' and a few tunes on the tin whistle!!) All had great chats and great fun!

After dinner the students had an 'Indian Dance' class.

**Day 4 in Kolkata:**

We began the day with a visit to another one of Hope's wonderful intervention projects- a Creche in the slum area of the city. At present there are 46 children between the ages of 2-5 attending this (tiny!!) Creche every day. They were so excited to have us as their visitors and we joined them in singing a few nursery rhymes which they were eager to show us to us! It wasn't easy saying goodbye as we all had a lovely time together with the children and their teachers!

After this we paid a visit to the magnificent Jain temple - a most beautiful, peaceful and impressive building.

We lunched in Hope's own 'Life-skills' cafe before heading to a boys home (4-12yr olds). Here we met an enthusiastic group of dancers who also love football!! Our crew 'attempted' to perform some of the Indian dance they had learned the previous night (let's just say we were glad we had Jack and Anna's brush - dance to fall back on!!). Our group enjoyed lots of fun and games with the boys before it was time to leave again.

Last on our agenda on this busy day was a visit to a Special Needs Centre for children - another one of Hope's amazing projects. Our students totally immersed themselves in painting , singing and playing with balloons with the children here - and it was great to watch them interact with such ease and kindness. Following dinner back at the hotel our group got the chance to 'get artistic' and have their arms adorned with traditional Mehindi / henna designs!!

Ms Boland had the opportunity to accompany Hope's medical team on their ambulance night- time run. This service provide much needed health care to families living on the streets of Kolkata.

Another full day planned for tomorrow- everyone is very tired but very enthusiastic.

**Day 5 in Kolkata** began with quite a different experience than previous days as the group travelled almost an hour to one of Kolkata's private schools - Future Campus School. Here, students were immersed further into the Indian culture as the school welcomed them with song and dance. Our own students returned the favour and sang the Irish Anthem followed by a number of traditional Irish dances. The group were then invited to participate in lots of fun games in addition to sampling a vast array of local cuisine! The Director and Principal gave the students a warm welcome and emphasised the importance of establishing international links in addition to supporting the work of HOPE in Kolkata.

In the afternoon the group returned their focus to the work of HOPE with a visit to the HOPE hospital. This moving and at times upsetting experience allowed the group to witness once again the amazing work done by HOPE's team of professionals. The 36 bed hospital was full of patients who otherwise would not be able to access healthcare. Amongst the patients were young children who were rescued by HOPE & will receive a place in one of their projects in the near future.

The CEO of the hospital, Dr. Samiran Mullick took time to give the group a tour of the hospital and highlight the fantastic work that is ongoing but dependent on the generosity of others. He expressed sincere gratitude to the group, their families and communities for their fundraising and the huge assistance given through the money raised. The hospital is in the process of building an extension which will enable them to create more jobs and care for more people who otherwise would be left without much needed medical attention.

After the emotional experience of this visit, moods were lifted once again with a trip to a market to allow the group to buy a Saree, the traditional Indian dress. Once again, the HOPE team guided and advised students as they explored the endless array of colours & fabrics on the display! As the week draws near its end, there is no doubt our students are looking forward to getting home to their own comforts, however the care and efforts shown by the HOPE team has been exceptional & has ensured the week has been a fantastic one for all involved! With one day left, students look forward to experiencing more of the charity's great work tomorrow!

**Day 6 in Kolkata**

The final day of this memorable week was a busy one yet again! Our group began the day with the journey across the Hooghly bridge to the neighbouring district of Howrah, a shanty town/bustee.

The first stop was a creche where we got to meet and interact with 87 2-4 year olds.

HOPE provides this service to allow parents to go out to work, many in this community work recycling rubbish in the nearby dump and if it wasn't for this creche, many of the children would also spend their days rag picking.

The group also visited a school in this area. Once again HOPE play an essential role in providing education to these first generational learners. The children were aged 7 - 9 & just like home, they were eager and happy to welcome their visitors.

Lunch was enjoyed in HOPE's Lifeskills cafe. Here, HOPE provides training to young men & women who can use this training as a pathway to employment. They offer training in Computers, Beauty & Hair, Catering & Tailoring.

The focus for the afternoon was a visit to one of HOPE's 5 Drop in Centres for the local street children. These centres provide educational & emotional support to the children. The teachers working here help them with their studies, allowing their parents to work. This also motivates the children to remain in education as oppose to engaging in employment at a very young age. Once again there were smiles all around as our students enjoyed singing and playing with them! The evening was exceptionally busy as students took time to perfect their hair & makeup in preparation for an Indian Culture night where the girls wore Sarees & our two Jacks donned the traditional Punjambis! It'll be an early start tomorrow but this time the journey will bring us back home to more familiar comforts.

Home Sweet Home!

**Day 7**

Though we were glad to be returning home , we were all sad to have to leave this fascinating city! Another 5am start followed by two lengthy flights saw us touching down in Dublin at approx 7pm local time. The final leg of our journey home to Templemore was by coach ( and a big 'thank you' to Aidan Johnston for the lovely sandwiches and cup cakes which we enjoyed en route!)

Tired and exhausted, our spirits were lifted by the enthusiastic 'welcoming committee' waiting for us ( in the freezing cold!) outside the co-op!

This week has been such an eye-opener in many ways - to how fortunate we are in this part of the world but also - to the tremendous work being done by the Hope Foundation on a daily basis in Kolkata!

The projects we visited were merely a sample of the many fantastic projects run by Hope throughout the city. As a group, we were humbled and so impressed to witness the good work and intervention programmes made possible by all the fundraising done in Ireland and of course by the exceptional team of Hope staff and volunteers. The Hope foundation doesn't only seek to provide the basic human needs of many in Kolkata such as food , medical care and shelter - but also by providing a home , education , recreation , protection , counselling , life skills and employment etc a huge number of children living on the streets and in the slums are also given a future and much- needed Hope! ( Further information/ video clips on Hope's many projects / intervention programmes can be found on the website www.hopefoundation.ie -as well as information re sponsoring a child in Kolkata -€250/annum or €21/ month)

A huge thank you to all the families and friends who supported and helped out with the fundraising campaign over the past year. From all we saw and heard about on our visit , we can assure you that this money is being used to do so much good!

Thank you to and Higgins and Mr Fogarty and all the staff and students of Our Lady's for your support and encouragement through this worthwhile venture.

Last but not least- to the fifteen students who shared this special 'Kolkata Experience' - well done! Thank you for your excellent behaviour , attitude, co-operation and good humour at all times! Well done to you all for throwing yourselves into each opportunity and experience wholeheartedly as required! Well done for supporting each other during some of the more difficult moments we encountered!

During the past week , you have been wonderful ambassadors for your families , for Our Lady's and for The Hope Foundation!!

' God still loves the world today - through you and through me'

Mother Teresa.