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January 2013 Newsletter

Dear friends,

I hope that some of the experiences we had in India can be told in a way that does justice to the incredible ongoing work of Father Eric, his fellow Jesuits and the teachers and helpers at both schools. Instead of one long newsletter, I am going to write to you monthly as there is so much to report back about. This month's letter will focus on Xavier School and the extremely valuable support you give to the children there.



The journey to Raichur was characteristically chaotic. Peter, Lali and I *very* nearly missed the overnight train but we got to the station in the nick of time and met our friends, Catharine, Roger, Annabel and Chris who had arrived from the UK that morning. It was so touch and go that Lali and I were shaking when we got on the train - our taxi driver having turned into Jason Bourne, then made it his mission to get us to the station on time which he thankfully did, just as the train was pulling in!

We reached Manvi early the following morning and were warmly welcomed; it was wonderful to be back for our precious annual visit, and at that point I hoped that time would stand still.

It's good to talk

Straight away I was struck by the improvement in the children's English and how conversations could travel deeper and wider. Two such conversations spring to mind; the first with a 13 year old boy called Sachin who took more than an hour drawing an Easter card for his sponsor parent. A ruler



A ruler

ensured complete precision in his 3D effect cross, and he coloured it in so carefully. I asked if he knew anything about architecture to which he replied he didn't, so we chatted about the basic principles and whether he would like to spend time with the architect Father Eric uses if this could be arranged. Coincidentally we had met this architect the previous day who explained in greater detail and sketch drawings, the design and materials needed for the proposed new school in Pannur.

Manjula's dream

A conversation one evening with 14 year old Manjula set me thinking. She told me of her desire to become a Doctor and to build a hospital in her village, as the Fathers have done in Pannur. She explained that there aren't any health care facilities where she lives for miles around. I wondered what her parents thought about her wanting to study Medicine. She explained that her father supports the principle but her mother wants her to leave after sixth form and get married. Interestingly, her father was educated up until 16 and he respects Manjula's ambition; perhaps he wishes he could have carried on to sixth form and beyond. Her mother hasn't been educated at all – instead she was married at a young age, had children and her whole life has been filled with the inevitable hardships that bringing up a family in grinding poverty brings.

Manjula was passionate about wanting to “stand on her two legs” and support herself financially. We talked about her being part of the first generation of Dalits at Xavier School who have the chance of a better future, and how exciting, as well as daunting, this prospect is. I asked Father Eric if he would talk to parents such as Manjula's and ask them to open their hearts to accept emancipation and change, and encourage their children to fulfill their dreams. I'm sure he will as he is so keen to support the aspirations of every single student, as we, and you are too. It's wonderful to see the excitement when students such as Manjula talk about their ambitions, and yet at the same time, the apprehension they feel about challenging the status quo and confronting their parents is quite strong as they have a great respect for them. Let's hope that all parents support their children's ambitions, especially as their children want to pursue careers that directly help their families and communities.

Loyola College

The secondary school and College building is almost finished, and soon many classes from the overcrowded primary school will transfer to this building. University courses have already begun in Science and Commerce which is very exciting. It makes so much financial sense to double up the secondary school building and use it as a university as well. Ironically, last year when we heard that Loyola College had been granted permission to begin, we heard of a secondary school in Hertfordshire offering a University of London degree course in Sociology for two evenings a week from 4 - 9 p.m. Perhaps this is the first of many UK schools to acquire university status. So Loyola College is where the children at Xavier School are aiming for, in

fact it is the first purpose built combined school/university for Dalits in India and this is something the students are very proud of. For those children not capable of reaching the grades for the university, there are many technical, nursing and other colleges that the Fathers are in touch with, and they have already sent students to these places to learn a particular vocation. I recently had a letter from a boy called Ayyappa who is in the middle of a mechanics course which is perfect for him.

Some sponsorship ideas



During the course of the week, our group spent a lot of time with the children whilst I spent several days updating records and requesting current photographs of all the sponsored children - I will send you these in due course. Annabel, who is on a gap year with our daughter Lali, asked about the children who aren't sponsored and whether they feel second class to those who are, especially as the sponsored children spend time out of the classroom with the Europeans, drawing cards, writing letters and chatting all the while. Annabel felt saddened after calling one boy out of lessons to do his card to discover he wasn't the right boy, he just happened to have the same name as the boy in his class who was sponsored. This poor little chap was rightfully upset as he wanted to do a card too. This incident, coupled with seeing firsthand the pleasure the sponsored children get from writing to their sponsor parents, set me thinking about a possible way forward to enable every child in the school to have a sponsor parent. And then I thought of you and would like to ask your opinion about this idea!

I was wondering whether you would consider becoming a 'surrogate' sponsor parent to one or more children who you don't sponsor financially, but who you would then consider as dear to you as the child(ren) you do sponsor, and who could then write to you and you could write back to? This would only be for a period of time up until they are officially sponsored by another sponsor parent. The new school year begins in June 2013 and I was hoping we might be able to implement this 'surrogate' system then, obviously depending on your views. Alternatively you may know somebody who would like to give this loving support to a child but without the financial commitment? Please let me know your views either way, I'd be glad to have your input on this.

I'm afraid it isn't all good news that I need to share with you, as life for the Dalit people is extremely tough in many ways as you know. This year we found that more children were absent through illness and other reasons; 8 of the children you sponsor have been off sick for more than 4 weeks now. When we visited the villages we noticed that several children had

fevers and were listless, largely down to the contaminated water supply. One of the sponsored boys has dengue fever which is really nasty, another has malaria. Also several children are no longer at school because their families have left the area to find construction work in the cities. Their coolie work in the fields earns less than £1 per day and lasts for only a few months of the year so they have no other choice than to shut up their home and travel to where the work is. You may remember the boy I wrote about in my January 2012 newsletter, Mahesh, whose father beat him and who ran away to Xavier School. I am sorry to tell you that he has been taken back to his village and made to work. Father Rohan did his level best to persuade his father to let him return to school and Mahesh was allowed to come back but not for long, and after a month his father took him away again and told Father Rohan that he wouldn't be coming back to school.

To conclude this letter, I must say that once again we were inspired by both the children and also their mothers who provide for their families under such difficult conditions and yet thank God for their children and for the small amount they do have. Father Eric, his fellow Fathers and the teaching staff work tirelessly for the sake of every child at their school, and your support has given hundreds of children the best chance they could possibly have to escape the poverty they were born into. I thank you most sincerely on behalf of all of them.

With very best wishes

Dinah



p.s. one of the games the girls enjoyed playing was jumping up and down some steps when 'A', 'B' or 'C' was shouted out by the leader. Whoever jumped onto the wrong step had to run away and be chased by the leading girl - it was great fun! I noticed several girls wearing shoes with bits cut out at the toes as their feet had become too big. When I told my hubby Peter about this later, he said "so what - that's what I did to the pass me downs from my brother!"