

My Trip to India as a Sponsor Parent



Three years ago we received a Christmas card from a friend illustrated with a beautiful lino-print of two sheep. Looking at the back of the card I saw it was produced for the charity "Supporting Dalit Children". My husband and I had been supporting a charity rather than buying Christmas presents for a few years, but were looking for something rather more immediate than a large multi-national concern. Looking at the website, this seemed to be the answer.

I was sent details of a boy, Ashok, by Dinah. He was eleven, living in Chimblapur, with a sister and brother. We started receiving letters and cards, replying with news from our life, and reading Dinah's newsletters with interest.

Last March Dinah sent her usual email inviting sponsor parents to join them on their annual trip to Manvi, and so discussions began with my husband who was very encouraging. A few reasons why I decided to go - by then I would be an empty-nester, with our three daughters away at university. I needed an experience for myself after all those years of bringing up three children born within 20 months of each other! I had never been to India before but always dreamed of visiting - and this was a way of experiencing real life rather than the tourist trail. I also recalled Ashok writing "I am 100% sure that you will come and visit me" - why not make his belief come true?

Plans started to be made, flights booked, and the excitement began. By November all was in full swing - ticking off the very detailed kit list from Dinah, I was taking tips from the well-travelled - eating marmite each day for three months and decanting original Listerine to ward off mosquitos. The memoir "Untouchables" by Narendra Jadhav, was recommended for giving an insight into the Dalit's struggle for equality. I had all the jabs, and mustered all the items including a travel pillow, cotton sleeping bag, earplugs and eyeshades which are absolutely essential!

After trying to concentrate on Christmas and New Year, the day came when John dropped me off at Heathrow - rather tearful but all was ok once on the Emirates Airbus - a great experience and interesting fellow passengers.

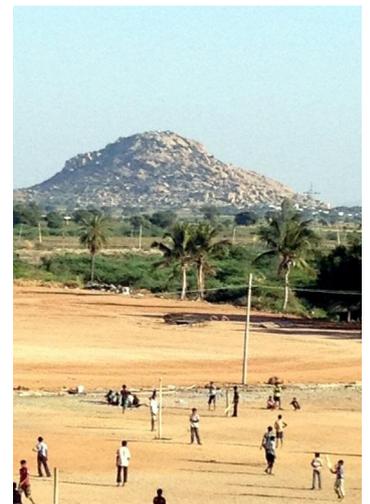


Annabel relaxing in the garden at Ashirvad

Dinah had put me in touch with Annabel - her daughter Lali's friend flying from Glasgow and we met in Starbucks - well in the third Starbucks I found in Dubai airport at 2 in the morning! The adventure started in the taxi - nothing can prepare you for the traffic and noise of Bangalore. We rested and prepared for the train at Ashirvad - the Jesuit conference centre. This was a real sanctuary after a short walk in the city - an assault on the senses.

We were seen onto the right train by a helper called Chandru - the platform was a lesson in humanity - Tibetan monks, pilgrimaging families, boys jumping head first through the train's emergency exits to catch a free ride. We were anxious for Dinah and her family to meet us at the next station - luckily we saw them waiting on the platform and gave them a very relieved welcome. After a delicious meal of spicy vegetable biriyani washed down with sweet chai we hunkered down for the night - I loved the gentle rocking motion of the train, and with the help of my eyeshades got a decent sleep - then off the train at 5:30 a.m. to be met on the platform by Father Eric. We piled in the jeep, and with the luggage strapped to the roof we set off from Raichur to Manvi. This was the India I had expected to see - animals in the road, villagers in traditional dress, dusty bumpy roads, and the most beautiful peach sunrise.

A rest of 5 hours sleep after a breakfast of dhosa and hard-boiled eggs set us up for meeting the children - it sounds like an exaggeration but I was completely overwhelmed - the sheer joy, love and enthusiasm of the children was something I will never forget. After meeting some of the boys and admiring their cricket skills, I was given a tour of the hostel by the girls, constantly holding hands, answering and asking questions - my name "Chris" was quite a novelty - the children were much happier with names of at least three syllables! We talked about the plants, saw where they did their washing, and toured the rooms with their painted aluminium trunks containing all their belongings.



Playing cricket at St Xavier's

At 6:30 p.m. we went to mass at the hostel. The sound of the children accompanied by drums was amazing - they sing at the tops of their voices. Father Maxim's reading of Jesus and the poor was so appropriate. I experienced lots of occasions when I wanted to cry with emotion, however I tried to keep it back - the times when you couldn't sleep for

all the thoughts going around your head were the times to have a little weep and let the emotion out. Then pack it away and get on with the next day.

The following morning we watched the whole school gathered for assembly - orderly lines of children gradually growing in height - and a mix of prayers, singing the school anthem, world news and facts of the day ending with the celebration of a pupil's birthday. We toured the classrooms where we were treated to songs and poems recited by the younger ones, and demonstrations of some complicated geometry and maths in the higher classes. I was wondering all the time where Ashok was and if I would meet him that day - however Father Rohan told me that he had been absent from school since the Christmas holidays and had been helping his family on the land. I wanted to understand how this situation arises. As it is not compulsory to send children to school and the families depend on harvesting their crops for a living it is a real pull on their time and loyalty. Later on, a boy of about 12 would tell me that when he attends school his grandparents have to take his place with his parents herding their buffalo to the fields every morning and evening. When the grandparents are too old and infirm will he be needed again?



The courtyard garden at St Xavier's

That afternoon we were led into a "programme" by the school involving traditional dancing by the girls, and Bollywood style dancing by the boys. Most moving was the recital of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The words were so appropriate to the situation of the Dalits and their persecution by the higher castes. We were garlanded with beautiful jasmine, roses and marigolds - which we gave to the girls after for putting in their hair. We then chatted to and photographed the children - the sight of a camera brings cries of - "Miss - photo!"



Ashok's house, with his brother and mother

On Saturday morning we went into Ashok's village with Father Rohan to find him - accompanied in the jeep by children staying at the hostel from Chimblapur. It was my first sight of the villages - we went into the heart of the settlement to be greeted by two handsome bullocks. I was led towards Ashok's house where we met the family and many other children who always gather when the Fathers visit the villages. However despite Father Rohan's best efforts Ashok could not be enticed out of the fields. We toured the other Christian houses and met whole families who asked for prayers to be said. Each house has pictures of Christ by the clock on the

wall - some with Hindu gods as well. Prayers were said in Kanada - the local language - for food, health, good harvests, and for the sick. In such intimate living spaces, with little material possessions around and a real need for faith, this was an extremely powerful experience.



Bullocks tethered at Chimblapur

A much needed rest in the afternoon was followed by donning our new outfits given by the Fathers (some letting out of seams required!) and a trip to Pannur to witness their Annual School Day Celebrations. There was prize-giving, garlanding, much dancing and singing by the children in their delightful costumes, followed by a meal on the roof of the hospital with Sister Ida who leads Loyola Kapepaladi school and the nuns who run the Health Centre.



Vijayalaxmi (left) and friends

The next morning, we made the journey back to Pannur where I was given a tour of the hostel by a delightful girl called "Milk" who wore my hat and back-pack! We drove on the school bus with Father Eric to Hulligunchi - sitting on the back seat with the younger girls all laughing and joking. At Hulligunchi I found myself with eleven year old Vijaylaxmi - a very bright girl who not only insisted on showing me every plant and its fruits but describing how to cook and eat it. She told me the whole life-cycle of the cotton plant, and sitting on the bus back described the whole journey including showing me a fort built on the top of a mountain - "By the King and Queen" - which we had passed many times but

never spotted. In the village Father Eric had congratulated her on her command of English, shook her hand and told her to carry on talking to me! She held him at his word! I wasn't surprised when she told me her favourite subject is science.

Monday was a public holiday so we had a day of rest - quite welcome as I was feeling rather weak from dehydration - foolishly being in the sun too much and not drinking enough. By the evening, weaning myself back to eating on boiled rice and natural yoghurt, we visited Ramathnal for mass and a meal with a family. It was like stepping back in time - sitting under the stars, cross legged on the floor, next to the tethered oxen. The girls treated us to some spontaneous singing and dancing. During the mass we had a power cut but the candle-light was more evocative and brought the stars out even brighter. We were joined by some older women



The meal at Hulligunchi

who I learned were the Devadasi or former Temple Prostitutes. They have a real strength in their fellowship. Father Melvin asked them what they needed to pray for - they prayed for strength to work in the fields. They also gave thanks for our visit and sang to us - I felt so humble in their presence. They have been given the materials to build the houses by the Fathers, but refused to move in until every house was finished and they could settle in as a group. Father Melvin explained that far from asking in their prayers, the children want to give thanks for their family, friends, and the school. We ate a simple meal of chapatti (used as a plate), boiled rice and dhal. It tasted marvellous - I tried to avoid a second helping as the family needed the rice more than me but almost ended up with three helpings - they are so willing to share all they have.



Chillies for sale in Manvi Town

On Tuesday I went into Manvi Town with Catharine and Roger - fellow sponsor parents - on a mission to buy sweets and chocolate and see a bit of the town. Among the sights were the Leyland bus decorated in tinsel, bags and bags of chillies, and shoe-menders using rubber tyres to resole shoes. A tuk-tuk or auto-rickshaw took us back into town past the paddy and cotton fields.

That evening Father Eric took us back to Chimblapur in the hope of finding Ashok at home, and to find out more about why he had not been attending school. As we walked to the house the boys came running to tell us - "he is there"! He was sitting on the floor - we said hello and I sat down next to him - his mother passed round chapattis but I noticed he had his head down, just crumbling his piece onto the floor. We were in a small room with about 40 adults and children - it seemed like all eyes were on us. Father Eric explained that his mother thought he had a fever and needed to go to the Hindu temple - the custom is to tie a yellow thread round the neck and allow it to wear off. Also she felt he had been distracted when trying to look at his school work. It did seem that there was more in Ashok's life that I could possibly have been aware of - not just the practical needs of harvesting but also the pull of old, deep-rooted Hindu customs. These are hard to change in the older generations. Father Eric and Father Maxim agreed that to help Ashok we would have a service, and a family we met previously offered to hold it in their house. A nice touch was Ashok's mother insisting he change into his best shirt. We gathered together in the main room, with more villagers standing in the doorway and looking in. We said prayers for Ashok who was invited to sit in front of the makeshift altar. Again, another powerful experience as we collectively concentrated our thoughts on asking Christ to help Ashok and let him return to school. As we returned to the bus, Ashok walked

alongside me, chatting and laughing, and unbelievably seeming to have come out of his introverted manner.

The next day I joined the others in a trip to Loyola Kapepaladi school in Pannur, only three years old but thriving. As we watched assembly, I was entranced by the tiny children singing, and performing "physical jerks" to the strict beat of a drum. They waved as they went into the hall, where once again we were treated to a programme of singing and dancing. It was at this moment that my camera's memory card became absolutely full! I was intrigued by the sight



Counting to 100 in Loyola Kapepaladi

of a man coming into the hall and taking a little girl out of the school - apparently children regularly sneak in to school as they are so keen to join and have to be retrieved by their parents. Hopefully she will attend officially soon. We toured the classrooms - no tables and chairs, just very basic, with much-sharpened pencils and every scrap of paper treasured. We joined in reciting the English alphabet and counting to 100.

On returning to Manvi Dinah gave me the good news that Ashok had been in to school for a few hours, and then his mother took him to go into town; we felt that he probably had been taken to the temple for a blessing but that at least he had been to school. Would he be there for our last day?



With Ashok making an Easter Card

We went to the school on the last morning to help the children make Easter cards for their sponsor parents - an opportunity to write some news and thank the parents for sponsoring them, My group was in 8th state - Ashok's class! Father Rohan had said he was in school so with some trepidation I went up to the classroom. He was there and came running out to see me - I explained that I needed his help to find the others on my list - so we went over to the university building to find the last two

boys - and then sat down to make our cards - I am the first sponsor parent to receive their card this year! We chatted with his friends about their lives and found out that they love the cinema - they were looking forward to a trip to see Spiderman that night - and after a time guessing who the comedian could be - "he is from a long time ago" - realised they are fans of Charlie Chaplin and that Mr Bean is another huge favourite. Slapstick seems to know no language or time boundaries. I also found out that Ashok is

one of the few boys who prefer football to cricket. He then went back to the classroom saying to meet him when the school bell rang that afternoon.

As the bell rang I waited by the buses - some of the boys came rushing to tell me Ashok was coming - by then I think our story had got round the school! When he arrived to say goodbye I made sure to tell him how proud I was of him and so happy that he had returned to school - would he promise me to keep attending and learning? He promised me he would. I gave him a couple of cards of our church and village. As I watched him walking towards the bus he was showing the cards to his friends - and seemed really happy. I kept watching - and finally he turned round and gave me a huge smile and a wave - I responded with the biggest wave I could manage!

Our day and time at Manvi ended with a mass at the hostel and then a tearful goodbye whilst getting on the jeep for the trip to Raichur. One of the girls at the hostel - Milk's little sister - had made me a card - "thankyou for sharing with us and have a happy journey". It stayed in my purse all the way home.



Women washing in Pannur

Would Ashok have come back to school if I had not visited? I feel sure that the Fathers would have found him and ensured that through their love and care every effort would be made to help him return, as they do for all children who may be absent for a number of days. But maybe I was an instrument in helping him to return - and by keeping in touch and encouraging him over the next few years I can help him to one day fulfil his dream of becoming a teacher.

My experience was a week free of cynicism, materialism, and selfishness, but full of fun, love, joy and enriching experiences. Father Eric is an inspiration to all, rarely pausing in his work of improving the lives of the children and the villagers, and moving the schools on to higher achievements. If you sponsor a child have a think about visiting and experiencing the work of the school at first hand. For me it was a truly inspirational visit - I think of the children every day and hope to return some time to watch them grow, mature and achieve their dreams



Woman walking to collect water, Pannur

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