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Easter 2015 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

We are enclosing your Easter card(s) that one of our sponsor parents, Chris Carter, prepared with the children during her 6 week stay in Manvi earlier this year. She also took their photos so this is an added bonus! It was her third trip to Manvi, and Chris will be writing an account of her stay in the very near future, so we look forward to that - her two previous accounts you may remember were so interesting.

Before we recount the story of one of the Manvi school teachers, which shows his great strength of character and love for the poor, we would like to invite you all to our **Coffee Morning on Thursday 14th May, here at Fillets Farm in Hunsdon from 9 a.m. onwards.** Please let me know for numbers if you can come - dfindlay1@btconnect.com or 01279 843248. Do invite a friend or two as all are welcome.

On our last evening in Manvi in December, one of the teachers called Basavaraj came up to me and said how much he admired the work we were doing to help the Dalit children. He was visibly moved when I told him that there are hundreds of people back home and all over the world who have joined us in supporting the work of the Mission. Basavaraj explained that he himself is a Dalit and he has suffered great discrimination in his life, both in his village and at school. As it was late, and knowing we were coming back in a few weeks with a group who I knew would also be interested in listening to him, I asked if he would tell us his story when we came back. Here is a précis of what he said:



“It is a good story but a sad story. I was a child labourer in the fields, a bonded labourer. One of the teachers from the Government school came and chased all the students to school. At that time I was also taken to school just to avoid nasty things happening at home. I was four I think, but after two years I came back and didn't go to the school again because I was sent to graze the cows.

When I came to 6th Standard (11 years old) there was a lot of discrimination in the school. The first row of students was higher caste. We had to sit at the back, not allowed to mingle in the study activities, we were just left out. There was a teacher called Lafisa, she was a Muslim. First she recognized that we were good singers and we

sang some traditional songs, even in churches we used to sing them. She had a big fight with the College to allow us to take part in the College activities like singing and drama.

At that time we came to know what discrimination we and our parents were going through. That day I decided that if I have to become a person in society, it should be a teacher surely – and I should gather all the students that belong to my category, my caste, and give them this awareness that discrimination is going on all over India. The root is from religion. Even today people belonging to a particular category – the lowest category, even if they are in a good position, people are treated very badly.

Up until 6th standard we did not know the alphabet because nobody checked us, because always there was discrimination, beating and bad treatment. There was food given by the Government but we were not given it, we just had to go out of the class. We found out later that it was also there for us but they were not sharing it. We knew later that books were given by the Government, but we weren't given them. In the 6th Standard the teacher explained all these things and we became *aware*, and then I thought of becoming a teacher. Then I studied well but I had to go in the morning to the Landowner's fields, cut the grass, take the cows to drink, and in the evening clean the dung, give them food, and then come back and study.

We got our friends together and said we should study very well and make a difference. We were nine from our caste in the school which was not a tolerable thing for the teachers in the school, because we nine were dominating everything. We were good at singing, narrating stories, good at acting and good at drawing. Suddenly in 7th Standard we got first class in the board exams and people started appreciating us. Even our colony people were happy to send their children to school. These teachers did not like so many students coming to their school, and they made a request to our local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), and requested a school for our colony. They did not want us to mingle in the mainstream. They made a separate school for us. I became troubled because teachers – those that were very bad and arrogant - they were sent to our school as a punishment! We did not know it (at the time) but we came to know it later.

Then in 10th Standard (15 years old), I was studying but could not do very well because I had to go for tailoring training, and for assisting the postman. I had to go around the whole village and deliver the letters. I had to go late to college and then go back to the Landlord's house and take the cows to the fields and bring the grass for them.

We were 109 students in 10th Standard and I was number 109. In PUC (sixth form) I got the spirit of studying, and I had some kind of poetic knowledge. I began to write poems. At that time my poems were published in newspapers and I was very happy because of those appreciations. I really wanted to become a teacher then. In PUC I turned the number 109 into first. I became top of the class and was very happy to go forward.

Then, I went for teacher training. I finished my 3 years of teacher training then I was searching for a job. Because of my background I was sent for some other work to Bangalore. I came to know that there was a place in Loyola School because many of my relatives were sending their children to Loyola school. I knew Father Maxim, he had come to our village. That day one of my sisters called me and said why can't you go to Loyola School? I came here and I met Father Eric. Father Eric said no, I want only lady teachers! I went back. I was very sad because I had spent many rupees to come from Bangalore and now I had to go back. It was one week's earnings. The next week Father Eric called me, he said "who is this?" I said "Basavaraj". He said "you have left your notebook on my table?" I said "yes, it was mine". He said, "the poems you have written, are those yours or someone else's?" I said "mine." He said "you have to come back" and I was very happy to come. He said "you are a poet because you have good Kannada literature knowledge", and that is why I am now teaching Kannada in our school. (Kannada is one of the local languages in Karnataka State).

I began as a hostel warden. I was very happy to be with the children and I came to know their struggle. I was thinking only of my colony boys and how they were struggling. I saw the whole world in that same pit. I would go with Father Eric to the villages and everywhere it was same situation, same kind of discrimination, same kind of superstitions. I wanted to become a teacher but I wanted to become a teacher for the Government school. But I changed that. I wanted to be a teacher (at Loyola) as I can see my own community children here and I can teach them. If it is possible I can inspire them a bit to come up in their lives. That is why I started changing myself. From warden I became 1st Standard teacher, then I was given High School teacher, then I taught even for the College and I won a state level award for one of my

poems. Then I participated in the International Poetry Festival 2011 and 2013. It was a very happy thing and it was all because of the inspiration I got from this school.”

Basavaraj’s story is common with every Dalit child’s story, both 20 years ago and today. The discrimination and bullying that Dalit children face in the Government schools is hard to comprehend but still goes on. Basavaraj is dedicating his life to teaching and helping Dalit children to rise up out of the discrimination, which we know is only possible for these children through being given a good education. One last point which made us gasp was when we asked him how old he was when he learnt English. He said, “I was 23. Father Maxim used to teach me from 10:30 to 12:30 at night even though I was drowsy and sleepy. Whatever I am speaking today it is not from my school - I learnt from this school.”

It is easy to forget that for all the children and teachers at both Loyola Xavier school in Manvi and Loyola Kapepaladi school in Pannur, English is their second if not third language. Years ago I remember being impressed hearing about a school in Hertfordshire that teaches several subjects in French and German, and thinking how quick the students’ minds would need to be to learn History or Geography in a foreign language. And yet this is what our Manvi and Pannur students, as young as three years old, are doing every day!

With the first 3 months of 2015 flying by so fast, we would like to wish you a very happy Easter before it has been and gone (!), and would like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for all your valuable support.

With very best wishes
Dinah and Peter

Slum children in Mangalore on a normal day, how can this be normal?

