

January 2015 Newsletter

Dear friends,

The 13 hour bus journey from Manvi to Father Eric's 'paradise on earth' i.e. Mangalore, was different to Peter's donkey-kicking bus experience last year as the suspension was good this time. However our seats on the back row were directly above the engine so our feet and legs were roasted slowly by the heat it politely gave out over the duration of the journey - an interesting sensation to say the least!



As always we have learnt so much despite this being our 10th trip to the Mission. We were taken to slums in both Manvi and Mangalore; a new experience that was very distressing, but also uplifting as the Fathers are now coming alongside these communities so they now don't feel totally alone. Slum dwellers look for rags and plastic on the rubbish dump to sell for profit, children are not meant to do this work but the majority of them do.

For decades entire families have been living under plastic sheeting and whatever else they can use for shelter. I dread to think of the conditions during monsoon. It surprised us that despite the terrible deprivation, these people remain optimistic and positive despite having been promised support from the local authority and then being let down. One lady has given up her entire home to make way for a tailoring centre so that young women can learn a new skill, her generosity of heart was humbling. One basic need which is greatly lacking is the water supply, however the Mayor recently visited this slum and agreed to look at this problem, which is very good news as there is currently one tap for 40 families that only works for 2 hours a day. When the Fathers visit the slum it is the women who come forward. We asked them their views on education and they told us they are very keen for their children to go to school, but the necessity of working and the distance to the nearest school, makes it impossible. One man who was slightly drunk told us that he is very supportive of education but the rest of the men are not. Every day they work for 12 hours and their wages buy alcohol first and food second; education isn't even a consideration. As we walked through the slum we saw a young boy sitting next to his emaciated father who was lying on the ground, unable to get up. He is an alcoholic and tells his son to get alcohol for him. In all reality this man won't live much longer and his son will no doubt also turn to alcohol. It was so painful to see this helpless young boy alongside his pathetic father.

Social outreach in the villages

During our week in Manvi we were taken to many outreach projects in the villages. New projects have been set up by Fr Francis since he joined the mission seven months ago. Five social workers now assist him in this work including Wassant Kumar, pictured here with Fr Francis. Wassant has a Master's Degree in Commerce and years ago he was promised a government job but this never materialised, so he turned his efforts to social work. He is a responsible man and works very diligently for the Fathers looking after the 15 villages he has been allocated. He visits every village twice a month, supervising the savings passports for the women's groups and taking an active interest in the youth groups and tuition centres. He liaises regularly with Fr Francis and keeps him



informed of each group's progress and ongoing needs. Wassant doesn't have his own transport so he walks, hitches a lift or goes by bus to the villages. To save money on bus fares he stays overnight in the second village of the day. Fr Francis can't afford to pay high salaries to his social workers so saving money where he can is necessary for Wassant.



Wassant helped Fr Francis organise an event for women's empowerment and training. Sanghats (groups of women) from five villages were invited to listen to various speakers about relevant issues to them. The leader of each Sanghat was also asked to share their group's experiences. One of the outside speakers is well known as a great women's leader; all the women present were certainly inspired by her speech. Despite not being able to read or write, this lady has fought hard for women's rights over many years, her efforts being recognised by the local authorities. A delicious meal of chicken biryani provided a nourishing and sociable end to the day.

Fr Francis also took us to two villages where we have provided sewing machines for their tailoring centres. Up until recently, the large treadle sewing machines and fabric store took up half of each tailoring teacher's home – typically one room. Without sacrificing this amount of space the tailoring school could not have started. However, thanks to some funding we received from a Charitable Trust in 2014, both villages now have their own new building that can double up as a meeting hall and tailoring centre for the women's groups and a tuition centre for the children. Children meet after school for two hours every day for extra lessons, and pre-school children come for their first experience of education. We went to both these new buildings and met with the Sanghat of local women. They later cooked us a delicious meal of chicken curry and chapatis, which was so generous as they eat meat very infrequently, yet as soon as they were informed of Fr Francis' visit they rallied round to make a lovely meal. During our discussions, the women asked Fr Francis for help to buy some buffalos. He told them that nothing could be given freely but instead he would help them to save money by loaning each of them a pair of sheep. Young sheep can be bought relatively cheaply at market, but after twelve months of fattening up they can be sold for a decent profit at market which could then help to buy a buffalo. In time, and after selling a few fattened sheep at market, the women will be in a position to pay Fr Francis back. It is wonderful that this practical help and support is being so lovingly given to these women.



In a nearby slum to Manvi, Fr Francis has recently set up a new tailoring school. Instead of spending money on a new building in this village, he has paid for the materials to create an extra shelter-type room adjoining the tailoring teacher's home. The quality of the tailoring students' work in Amaranti Colony after learning this skill for just three months was impressive, and we asked them if they would make us some garments. They were very happy with their first official order and by the end of the following day they had made Marta and I our salwar chameez.

Next to the tailoring school a husband and his wife were spinning rope with coconut hair whilst a small boy with a disfigured eye turned the spinning wheel. Whatever time of day we visited this slum, the couple and this young boy were doing the same work. Just watching this boy I felt very sad for him. He was expressionless, robotic. Usually the children are so excited when the Fathers visit - when they see Fr Francis' jeep they stop whatever they are doing and run to meet him. Children love their photos being taken by visitors and they are usually so engaging and joyful, but not this young boy. He wasn't the rope-makers' child as when I asked about him they just shook



their head, but they did proudly tell me that one of their daughters attends Loyola School in Manvi and stays in the hostel there. What will become of this young fellow I wondered?

In contrast with the great joy we feel when we see the progress of the students we are sponsoring, I was struck this time by the lack of opportunity and eventual hopelessness for the village and slum children we met. All of them are so happy, inquisitive and joyful! But at the same time they are blissfully unaware of the inadequacy of the government schools that some but not all, are attending, and the education in Manvi and Pannur they are missing that is not only English-medium but comes with a whole school community, pastoral care and love from the Fathers and teachers.

The Pannur hostel children



It was great to spend time with the Pannur hostel children as well as the students in Manvi. We stayed in Pannur for two days and enjoyed chatting to the children who were much more communicative as their English had greatly improved since last year. I was impressed by them doing all their own daily chores including hand-washing their clothes and hanging them out to dry, sweeping their rooms and washing their plates at the end of every meal. It made me see the importance of their daily routines which incorporate the essential balance of work, rest and play.

The stark realities of life for these young students became more apparent when we talked to some of the hostel girls one Sunday morning. One told me that two of her brothers had gone to heaven and her younger sister is in the 2nd Std at the Government school. Her father had had a road accident so only her mother was working. Her father's accident means that her younger sister who was meant to come to Kapepaladi school this year, couldn't, as there wasn't enough money with only one income now. Another told me her father had died, as had her sister, but she had a mother who worked in the fields. Her younger brother comes by bus to school every day so that he can also help out at home. The third girl said that her sister has a fever so had gone home, and her father was a drunkard and regularly hit her mother so she was very worried for her mother. These three girls are only 8 and 9 years old and yet already they have experienced so much sadness and worry. Many students' fathers are alcoholics and regularly beat their wives. Violence at home is a constant worry for the children and they are often withdrawn and distracted from their studies. The security, routine and love they are given in the hostel are great comforts and are life-changing for some children. Many don't want to go home in the holidays.

Loyola College, Manvi



The highlight of our week in Manvi was Loyola College's inauguration - the official opening of this incredible building that provides 6th form and degree education for the Manvi and Pannur students, some of whom we are sponsoring. It stands out majestically on the landscape; the first University built primarily for Dalit and other marginalised students. I remember interviewing Fr Eric and Fr Maxim in 2009 and asking Fr Eric his ambitions for the Mission, and he said that his dream was to provide a university for Dalits within 25 years. His ambition was realised within just five years when the dream became a reality and the first classrooms were occupied in 2012. The building work was only completed last year. This incredible building to me represents a culmination of the Fathers' vision

for elevating the Dalits and their belief in their abilities, and the students' and teachers' hard work over many years. Our support has been in the background but has also encouraged the students to maximise their one-off opportunity. The inauguration ceremony and programme of dance was a great occasion that the Fathers, teachers and students worked very hard towards. Many dignitaries were invited including the Diocesan Bishop, an MP and former Home Minister and several other politicians from all parties. Over 3000 people travelled from all around to be present for this special day.



Father Vinod has been leading the College for almost three years; he has worked tirelessly as he has also been the Finance Director for the Mission. He can be seen here addressing the dignitaries on stage, at which time he was worried about losing his voice as he was suffering with a fever - this was later diagnosed as typhoid fever!

All students must pass their 10th Standard exams in order to qualify for 6th form so their focus is very much on their studies in this crucial year. In India 6th form is called PU (Pre-University). Once admitted into 6th form the students work hard to pass their exams at the end of each year in order to be accepted onto a degree course followed by a Master's Degree. The potential salaries are so much greater with a Master's Degree so students are encouraged to aim for this qualification if it is financially possible. Some seats at university are given freely for Dalits if they are able to pass a Government exam that requires special tuition. Several Manvi students have sat this particular exam and got their free seat at other universities in the State so then they just have to find their hostel fees and living expenses. We found out that the fees for both 6th form and degree courses are much higher than students in BKG to 10th Std, because the teachers' salaries increase dramatically at this stage. All students in the College are still required to contribute whatever they can afford, but this depends on the financial situation of their parents that can change every year depending on the success of the harvest, or not. The College needs to accept students from neighbouring high schools who are richer and can afford the full fees, in order to partially subsidise the poorer students whose contributions are limited. I will be writing another time to those of you supporting high school students to find out your views on continuing the sponsorship to sixth form and degree level, just to find out your thoughts on this.

We spoke to two sisters, Divya and Navya, who are both degree students. Navya is at Loyola College in Manvi and will graduate at the end of this year. She then hopes to do a Master's Degree. Divya is in her 2nd year reading Engineering at a different University. These girls were amongst the first enrolment of children in Manvi back in 1994. We were invited to their village to meet Divya and Navya's mother and grandparents. I noticed a photograph on the wall and enquired about it to be told it was of their father who committed suicide in 2003. He rented two acres of land and that year was cheated by his landlord and lost everything. Suicide amongst Dalit tenant farmers and coolie workers is very high in this part of North Karnataka. His death transferred the financial strain of contributing to the school and university fees to the girls' grandparents who are also tenant farmers, but they find the work much more difficult now as they are both elderly. This family is one of an infinite number of Dalit families who are endlessly struggling so that their children can have a better life. We are currently helping Navya towards a third of the cost of her college fees but this still leaves the family struggling to find the other two thirds of the fees which is impossible for them and I know that the Fathers too have helped this family. Both Navya and Divya are academically gifted; Navya scored 98% in one of her PU exams, the highest mark in the State.

Looking ahead to 2015, we will be continuing with sponsorships for Kapepaladi school children as less than half of them are currently sponsored. We will also be supporting projects that have been successful in the past such as the tailoring and driving schools, and the library project. There is one other project that the Fathers have requested our support which is a boarding hostel for the girls in Manvi. The current hostel is very over-crowded and girls of all ages are sharing rooms of up to 50 students per room. This is a large capital project, but one that I believe we can support even if it is only the funding of one wing or one floor. What I would also like to find out is whether there are any British universities that have overseas outreach programmes that could support degree students such as Navya and Divya, as there are hundreds of other students like them who we are sponsoring and who will be in the same situation in a few years' time. Please do let me know if you have any contacts with universities who might like to discuss this idea further.

There is so much more news to tell you but I will sign off now and share more of our findings and experiences in our next newsletter.

With love and grateful thanks as always for all your support,

Dinah and Peter