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February 2016 Newsletter – Part 1

Dear Friends,

Our trip to Manvi and Pannur in January was fruitful, meaningful and most of the time extremely joyful. We spent a lot of time at Kapepaladi School and the boarding hostel with much laughter and excitement, but there were also some sad stories about the children's families and the drought that continues to strangle this region of north Karnataka. We came away with so much to think about and try to plan for, and I will now attempt to put some of these thoughts onto paper. We will be sending sponsored children's Easter cards to sponsor parents in about a month's time so I will make this a 2-Part Newsletter and enclose Part 2 with the cards, or send it by email to our general supporters.

Every day we were overwhelmed by the loving welcome from the Fathers, Sisters and the children wherever we went. They have become our second family and we feel very close to them all. It was humbling to come away feeling we have received in a way that is hard to put into words, but that feeling is still very much with me today as I type. During our short visit we were invited to special occasions such as Kapepaladi School's annual School Day, India's Republic Day, and Balemari which is a Children's Day held at Manvi School for 800 children from over 60 villages. We visited a new village where two weeks' previously Father Francis had set up a small Tailoring Centre with our funding, as well as Amaravati village's Tailoring Centre where we distributed sewing machines in November to girls who had recently completed their Tailoring Apprenticeship. We spent time with students from both schools and the College and talked to them more about their ambitions, their concerns and their thoughts about the future.

When we first arrived at Kapepaladi School the student band led us along the concrete road that the Sanghat women helped to build last year, to the school entrance and up to the first floor where we were asked to



officially open a new computer lab. Peter and I cut the ribbon and we were astonished as we stepped inside. The first phase of computers had been recently set up and the second phase will be installed as funding allows. As part of their curriculum, older students will be taught IT from the next school year, June 2016. As well as students benefitting, Father Francis is planning to also allow teenagers from local villages to use the computers out of school hours. It is fantastic to think that these computers will enable so many to learn the vital skill of IT. As well as being a practical addition to the school, the computer lab is a thoughtful outreach to the local teenagers who have not had much education. These days a basic knowledge of IT is now essential for most jobs.

The annual School Day at Kapepaladi school was a great celebration and had clearly taken weeks of organization and rehearsals. Students from each class were handed prizes on stage and each class had prepared a dance to perform to us and their parents. Their teachers who had been practicing with their classes for weeks were grinning from ear to ear as the children took to the stage, as were parents who look forward to this annual event enormously. The children love to dance and we had a great evening watching all class groups, from the youngest students, BKG (Baby Kinder Garten) for 3 year olds who performed Come on Barbie Let's go Party (!), to the eldest 4th Std students (9 year olds) whose dance moves were elegant and complicated.



Due to the terrible drought that continues in this part of India and the resulting lack of work, most of the student's parents have migrated to Bangalore or another city in search of construction work. Any children taken with them have to live in makeshift slums. There is no schooling and parents often leave their children in the care of Kapepaladi School's hostel or with a relative. They must miss their children enormously even if they don't miss the financial responsibility of having to feed them, and it was plain to see how much the students miss their parents. Some of the hostel children haven't seen their parents for 7 months. Whilst we were there many children sat close to an adult and held a hand or cuddled an arm

whether the adults were visitors like us, Fathers, Sisters, teachers or hostel wardens. I was even given my first manicure given by Sushma, a 9 year old girl seen in the photo above in the pink scarf. First my left hand nails were painted purple and she told me that was going to be it, nothing for the right hand. When I asked about the right hand she said that 'no, that is for eating!' However, after I said that I ate with a fork, some more colours came out and the right hand was painted black with sparkling green tips added later. Interesting colour choices but Sushma's attention to detail was very touching!

Each year the students' families are asked to contribute whatever they can afford to their child's education such as fees for the school bus, uniforms and books. This way education has a greater value to the whole family as parents are making a financial sacrifice for their child to attend such a good school. This helps to ensure that they retain their self-respect and feel more of a partnership with the school. The reality is that parents' contributions to fees are always woefully small. Sister Philomena, the new Headmistress explained that this year because of the drought, the parents haven't been able to pay any fees at all.

Meenaskshi aged 4 years old is shown here in pink, her cousin Gangamma also aged 4, in green. They were giving me a birthday card and some flowers for our son Patrick who was celebrating his 21st birthday the following day. Meenakshi has just been added to our sponsorship programme and her story is quite harrowing. She has 5 sisters which is actually unusually large for a Dalit family, but her father is insisting to keep trying for a boy as it is customary for a son to light the pyre at a parents' cremation. According to custom a daughter cannot perform this duty. It is hard to believe that such a custom is still so important to a Dalit family



in the 21st century, but they are not educated and they are simply following family tradition. Meenakshi's mother is exhausted. When her last daughter was born she couldn't even look at her.

Meenakshi's eldest sister was married at 14 years old, her second eldest sister left school at 11 to work with her parents on road construction. Her 3rd eldest sister had to leave school aged 9 to help her grandmother look after the 5th sister who is 3 years old sister and the newborn baby. Meenakshi is the 4th daughter, she is a very bright girl and thankfully now stays at the Pannur hostel. The 5th daughter, Shanthamma will hopefully start at Kapepaladi school in June this year. The 6th daughter, Savita is now 6 months' old. What will become of these girls I asked myself when I left – and will there be another unwanted daughter next year or the year after? Meenakshi's eldest 3 sisters are either married, working physically or working at home looking after younger siblings. Sadly for them there is very little chance of returning to education. The ray of hope in this story is to think there will be a happier outcome for Meenakshi and her 2 younger sisters.



I came away from my meeting with Sister Philomena full of even more admiration for her. She is the Headmistress of a school for the very poorest of children and, in times like this where drought has compounded the pain of poverty, she is doing an excellent job providing an oasis of education even though the circumstances for all her students are challenging to say the least. Her steadfastness and loving determination for each child to achieve their very best, together with her partnership with Father Francis and her teachers, reinforced yet again to me that the *only* answer to all the social problems and poverty amongst the Dalit people is education.

I am going to sign off now as this concludes my news from Kapepaladi School and the hostel, and continue in a month's time with news from Loyola Xavier School in Manvi and the village projects. In conclusion, Supporting Dalit Children's ongoing commitment (and challenge) is to continue to support the running costs of Kapepaladi School, including the school bus network and the boarding hostel through sponsorship fees, general donations and fundraising. In addition, we aim to fund more school places from June when the new school year starts. We will also be supporting Father Francis' social outreach projects in the villages such as the Tailoring schools and the Driving Project, and of course Manvi School and University which we will talk more about in our next Newsletter. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart for your support and generosity that makes such a tangible difference to so many children and women in Manvi, Pannur and surrounding villages.

With very best wishes
Dinah and Peter

p.s. I wanted to let you know about Radhika who I wrote about in the last Newsletter. She was extremely ill in December and almost died because her internal organs started to shut down. We are very happy to report she is now back at school and although a little thinner, is recovering well. It was a worrying time, and sobering to think that had she not been staying at the hostel, her outcome could have been very different. Here she is in pink with friends and also her brother who was always by her side.

