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December 2020 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Whoever would have thought that the classrooms in both Manvi and Pannur schools would still be empty 6 months after their academic year started. The good news is that the College students, i.e. the Sixth Form and Degree students, have recently been allowed to return to College. It is currently their choice whether or not to come back so the classes are not full by any means, but slowly these student numbers are increasing. It seems that each State in India is responsible for setting the date that students can return to school. Neighbouring states have allowed their schools to re-open, but the local government in Karnataka is still insisting that schools remain closed with online teaching only. Fr Leo, the teachers and no doubt all the students, are very keen for classes to be allowed to resume as soon as possible. Fr Leo was interested in what was happening in the UK, so I told him that our schools had been operational since September, a decision taken by the national Government. He thought this was an excellent decision.

Christmas Appeal

This annual Appeal has been launched and has been met with tremendous success so far. A thousand thanks to all who have already given so generously. If you would like to donate



towards these items of rice, dahl, oil and a blanket, it's not too late! We are hoping to provide all 390 of the Kapepaladi school children with a food and blanket parcel, that costs £8 per parcel. Also, we are hoping to give the same parcel to last year's 8th Std students who have progressed to Manvi school this year – more about these students a little later.

How has the Covid 19 outbreak in India affected the schools we support?

India's first lock down started on 25th March, which coincided with the end of their academic year. The children were then on Summer holidays for 2 months and returned to their villages - the safest place for them to be. The first priority for the Fathers was therefore to provide food aid to the migrant workers, who had been sent home after their construction sites in the cities had closed overnight. With the sheer numbers of workers suddenly trying to make



their way home, there simply wasn't enough public transport laid on for them. Many people including whole families, had to camp each night by the roadside. With no wages, they were at the mercy of others. It was no surprise to me to hear that the Fathers

were immediately organising food parcels and other supplies for them.

I still find photos like this so hard to comprehend. India is such a wealthy country; it is even planning its first Space Mission for the year after next, and yet abject poverty still exists in 2020.

Since the Covid outbreak, we are now communicating in many more ways. Listening to UK friends who are teachers, I have huge admiration for how our schools have adapted and conformed to the Covid 19 regulations placed upon them from March this year. These teacher friends were also pleased to see how eagerly their pupils returned to school in September after 3 months of online learning using Zoom or an equivalent software. The social contact with friends and face to face interaction with their teacher is so important to students.

The new academic year in India started on 1st June, and from then on, the challenge was set for the teachers to reach all their students online, including those living in the remotest of villages. When I say online, this is not with a lap top as none of the High School students, (up to 10th Std), would be able to afford a lap top. The teachers therefore set up Whatsapp class groups on their mobiles, and initially contacted students through the family phone that belongs to the parents. In contrast with the UK, the Manvi and Pannur students do not own their own mobile phone either. The lockdown meant that parents then had to allow their children to use this phone for online classes.

Blessing in disguise?

A blessing this year for our sponsored students' parents is that there has been an excellent rainy season for all those working on the land. It couldn't have come at a better time with all the Covid restrictions in place, and as a result there has been plenty of work in the fields. However, with this blessing comes a negative, and the flip side is that some parents have capitalised on their child's earning power (children can potentially earn up to 200 Rupees per day), and they have sent their children to work in the fields. It is illegal of course, but it goes on. There are concerns that some children have already become casualties of this work opportunity and won't be allowed to return to their classes in the New Year, which is when we hope more classes will be resumed. Another repercussion of the online learning is that Fr Leo and Sr Reena haven't been able to collect the fee instalments from the parents as there hasn't been the normal parental contact whereby parents come to the finance office

at the beginning of each term to pay their fee instalment. Also some parents have taken advantage of the Covid situation and withheld fees for no good reason. The teachers' salaries still need to be paid and the shortfall in parents' fees has made the overall financial situation difficult for the Mission. However, it is an unprecedented situation that has to end hopefully sooner rather than later, and when classes resume there will be no excuse for parents not paying their child's school fees.

Fatal accident



With a heavy heart, Sister Reena informed me that one of her members of staff at Kapepaladi school – Shankamma, a cleaner and general help, recently died in a motorbike accident. In February, we saw Shankamma many times at the school, and also at her home in Pannur. In fact I got to know her granddaughter on this latest visit very well, she is a student at the school and one of our sponsored children.

We visited this girl's home as well as many other students' homes with Sister Philomena, whilst several children tagged along and came with us to each house as they always do. This particular girl, Shankamma's granddaughter, laughed so much and so often whilst we walked round the village holding hands. It struck me how much happiness she had in her young heart and at times I thought she would burst with joy! It pains me to think of how sad she must be now at the loss of her dear grandmother.

Children's Day

Children's Day is an annual celebration held in every school in India, to highlight children's rights and the importance of education. The date of 14th November for Children's Day was set in 1964, in honour of the birthday of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Children's Day is typically a day of celebration with games and activities organised by the teachers for the children, and a special meal is provided at lunchtime. The highlight of the day is when the teachers do skits and dances for the children and it won't surprise you to hear that the children *love* watching their teachers and the Fathers perform songs and skits on stage. I remember one year being in Manvi for Children's Day and the laughter was literally deafening for one particular sketch. Manvi's very senior priest, Father Maxim who is now 88, dressed up from head to toe in black with black sunglasses. As a gangster he stole the show and actually didn't need to say anything at all!

In Pannur, Sister Reena was determined to hold some sort of celebration of Children's Day for as



many children as possible. 112 students came for the gathering, mostly from Pannur but some from other villages if they could get there (the bus network is still not working). In the school hostel campus, Sr Reena and the teachers organised many games and fun activities for the children, finishing off with a delicious lunch and gifts. A memorable day indeed as so many children came together once again for the first time in six months.

8th Std Kapepaladi students' move to Manvi

Following on from my Easter Newsletter, thank you to those sponsor parents who have increased their sponsorships for last year's 8th Std Kapepaladi students who are now officially at Manvi school, although they have yet to set foot in one of its classrooms!



A month into the online classes beginning at Manvi, I was a bit worried about these students not being on Fr Leo's radar as he was new to the Mission in May, as was Sr Reena to Kapepaladi school. None of the teachers at Manvi would have met them either, so I contacted Fr Leo in early October to find out how they were getting on. It was wonderful to see how instantly Fr Leo made it his business to visit every one of these students at

home, to meet them in person and find out how they were adjusting to 9th Std and being part of the online teaching system.

His findings were that some children were out working in the fields due to their parents' poverty but were doing their homework when they returned to the house in the evening. Fr Leo empathised with their situation and gave these students' families a large sack of rice to alleviate the necessity for the children to work. Some of the students didn't have access to a mobile phone and therefore couldn't be involved in any classes. Fr Leo then asked us if we could help with buying 9 mobile phones, which, with your help we gladly did so that these students could immediately begin their online learning. The photograph above shows Fr Leo giving out one of the mobiles. He requested for one of the students in this 9th Std group to become a co-ordinator of the group and keep their teacher informed if there are any absentees.



This story displays one of the beauties of a sponsorship – we enquire and follow up on these students much more than those who aren't sponsored (sadly), as we have got to know them over the years through the sponsorship interaction that we have with our sponsor parents. The letters and cards you write for Christmas, this year being an exception, means so much, not only to the students, but to their teachers and the Fathers. It shows how much there is a much wider support network for these children and to be honest, they need all the help they can get.



To conclude this Newsletter, I would like to share a lovely story of two Manvi College students, both of whom hail from extremely poor families. They achieved 91.5% and 92.5% respectively in their end of year PUC public exams, (our equivalent to A Levels), and are now studying for an entrance exam called the NEET exam, which is a preliminary for Medical School. The higher they score in their NEET exam, the greater government scholarship they will be given for their 5-year medical Degree. If they don't score highly enough in their NEET exam, they are put forward for BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery). This opportunity for these 2 students to take the NEET exam has only been made possible thanks to the support of one of our sponsor parents who is paying for their coaching and

hostel fees. Here is one of the students with her extremely proud parents! I will endeavour to keep you posted on their progress.

We thank you so much for your continued support for the Dalit children in these very strange times, and we wish you all a very happy and healthy Christmas and New Year.

With best wishes, Dinah and Peter

p.s. at the time of going to print, there are some (but not all) Christmas cards in the post from India. The teachers at Kapepaladi school asked the students living in Pannur if they could help them with this project, as one third of all Kapepaladi students live in Pannur. If you haven't received a Christmas card with this letter, please bear with both your sponsored child, and with us this year, as to be honest I wasn't expecting any cards to be sent, and hadn't asked for any either.