

My Return to Manvi –

Reflections on a Dalit Woman's Life in Rural Karnataka



Once back from my trip to Manvi as a sponsor parent, it didn't take long to realise that I wanted to return - something about the place and the spirit of the people gets under your skin. It is true that travel changes your psyche - a slight shift in your perception of the world, and a better understanding of your place in it. The horizon had broadened – and there was a place in deepest rural India that I felt I wanted to get to know better.

I now wrote to my sponsor children Vijayalaxmi and Ashok as friends and knew something of their daily routine and way of life. Vijay was the bright sparkly girl who had captivated me in January, and Ashok my sponsor child of three years who had been working for the family in the fields and eluded my initial attempts to meet him - but eventually was brought back to the school through the compassion of the Fathers. There was so much about the complex pattern of life for these children to understand, and I had just scraped the surface.

Dinah was planning to return in November, and I was to accompany her together with my eldest daughter. Katharine had just turned 21, and I wanted to show her the schools and experience life in the villages. We flew in to Hyderabad where we were met by Father Rohan and Father Vinod, and also met Father Maxim, the new principal of the mission who was to be our main guide around the villages over the next fortnight. We set off in two jeeps, and as I had the unsettling experience of sitting in the front seat next to a very tired driver, hurtling through patches of thick fog, I didn't get much sleep on the five-hour journey! After a rest we were welcomed by a short programme of dances, singing and comedy sketches at the hostel, then a very good and much needed night's sleep under our mosquito nets.

The next morning we visited Xavier School, and began our two weeks of interaction with the classes, and visits to the villages. When in the school it is quite literally a different world for the children. But they were so proud to accompany us to their homes and introduce us to their families, where we saw the reality of daily life for the Dalit people. There were two distinct elements to the trip; visiting the schools, full of life, noise and fun, and visits to the villages, where we, as three independent women, had a unique chance to converse with the villagers and find out first-hand what life is really like, their hopes, fears and expectations. I hope to share with you here my reflections of life for Dalit women, taken from my experience of visiting their homes, sitting and talking with them, sharing their food, meeting their children, and listening to their songs.

We were always accompanied by children from the hostel, giving them a chance to visit parents who they may only see once every few months. There are various and complex reasons why children may live

away from home; to illustrate I remember a young girl called Shirvala. She had taken my hand all round Chimblapur last time, and was one of the first to come up to me after we arrived. On this visit I learnt that her mother is a former Devadasi (Temple Prostitute) who lives in Chimblapur, but has to work in the fields in the harvest season or go to Bangalore working in the construction industry. As her mother is away from home so much, Shirvala lives at the hostel where she is thriving.



Cotton stored in a spare room in Hulligunchi

The Fathers knew that Katharine was particularly interested in the cotton industry. Studying for a degree in Retail Management, it was a rare opportunity for her to understand the “grass-roots” production of raw materials for the clothes we take for granted and expect to buy so cheaply. They kindly arranged for us to visit Hulligunchi, where most families are involved in cotton. It was harvest time and had been a bumper season; however abundant crops lower prices, so the farmers store it until the market price improves. On the road, we saw workers waiting to be picked up with their huge bales of cotton wrapped in blankets, some workers walking with the bales on their heads, others sitting on top of the cotton that had been packed onto lorries. We also saw weighing machines in the field, the workers waiting their turn to be paid by the Landlords for the weight they had picked. Some Dalit families own their own land, passed down through the generations, and sell the cotton at market

in Raichur directly. In Hulligunchi we met such a family who work in their cotton fields until after the crop is sold, and then travel to Bangalore to find work. The whole family go to the city leaving behind only the grandmother and great-grandmother to look after their house. The women work on the construction sites as well and leave their children in an area of the site behind sheets erected in the hope of keeping them safe. Finding work word-of-mouth, they send their earnings back to the village. We saw cotton piled high in spare rooms; in other places it was left outside the house under blankets to protect it from the dew or unexpected rain which can render it unsaleable.



Women workers being transported to the cotton fields



Women working at the new school building, Pannur

I was initially shocked at the thought of women working on building sites, but found that this is common. On our visit to the new school being built in Pannur we also met women labourers, one carrying a mix of stones and grit on her head to another, who then sifted it using a brush-like tool. We also met women construction workers in Sindigi, Father Eric’s new parish, who had their children at the site. Playing at the almost completed building, with so many dangers to our eyes, it was hard to look. The children seemed to have an inbuilt sense of danger, with the older children taking care of the babies and toddlers.



Pradesh's family, Hulligunchi

We were shown around Hulligunchi by some of the older students – Pradesh took us to meet his family which includes three sisters-in-law who all work in the fields, each with a very young baby of under four months, from nine to seven, stopping at two o'clock for a half-hour lunch. They leave their young babies with their great-grandmother. Every time we set out in the jeep we would see groups waiting by the road side, and passed lorries packed full of women, legs dangling off the back or standing holding on to the sides, being taken as coolie labourers to the fields. It is cheaper to employ women as they only need to be paid R150 compared to a man's daily wage of R300.

We also went to Father Eric's new parish for a short stay. It took the best part of a day to get to Sindigi, via the historical city of Bijapur and a stop at a convent for refreshments. Despite the unscheduled stop, we were made so welcome by the nuns. The convent was incredibly tranquil after the restless traffic on the road. Distances were immense – but we loved the travelling as the journeys at harvest-time were an education in themselves. Katharine became expert at taking photos through the window! We were able to see all stages of the rice cycle, from flooding the field to the young lime-green shoots emerging, to the rice being harvested, then dried and sifted as young men and boys waded through it using their feet to turn it over in the sun. We could barely pass the over-loaded hay lorries, having to close the windows to prevent being covered in the stray stalks! All along the roads we passed men and women carrying immense piles of sticks, straw, and also weeds from the fields used for animal feed. Many young children were herding goats and buffalo, or encouraging the oxen to walk languidly with their loads. The crops of the Manvi area, rice and cotton, changed gradually to sugar-cane, maize and surprisingly, sunflowers, with huge fields reminiscent of the south of France.



Boy herding goats



Villagers in Asangihalla

We visited two of the villages under Father Eric's care, along with social workers helping the Dalits to improve their lives. In the village of Asangihalla, we listened to the woman's group's plaintive singing of songs they had composed about the hardships they face in life. One song was about a woman who was cheated by a landlord, promised one rent price and then charged another. The singing is spontaneous and heart-felt. These groups or Sengats are an important source of strength and companionship and a hope of a better life. We sat alongside the group and through Father Eric's

interpretation, discussed their problems, including the merits of educating girls. As another woman passed by, she asked the Dalit women “why are you telling them your troubles – ask them what their problems are!” At that moment I didn’t think I had any problems to speak of.

The atmosphere in the second village, Shirashgi, was heart-rending. There was a power-cut, not unusual as electricity in the villages is so unreliable, and we sat and talked in the dark. The boys bought us raw sugar cane which we chewed – a sweet watery taste, very refreshing. We had seen boys chasing lorries along the road trying to snatch some of the sticks! After listening to some songs from the children, the Sengat group told us of their lives. There were two particular illustrations of their problems I recall as they were so in contrast with our expectations in life – one that they had opened a bank account with the help of the social worker – and had chosen a leader to learn how to make a signature. They had had enough of being made to sign with a thumb print – a symbol of their illiteracy and a way to remain downtrodden. Although they barely own enough to feed their families, they hoped to save a little and it would be used in times of extreme hardship to help those most unfortunate. Although so poor themselves, they wanted to be able to help others. I realised that I had rarely seen pens and paper and books in the houses unless bought home from school by the children – such is the extent of illiteracy in the villages. The other point came to light when one woman opened up to us about her married life. Each night, as is common for many women, after working and preparing a meal, she would be beaten. She finally decided she had taken enough and ran away. The only place to go was her brother’s house, however on arriving at his door-step he turned her away, such is the shame bought on a family by leaving your husband, no matter how he treats you. For her the Sengat is providing shelter and security.



Villagers in Shirashgi



Ajay and his grandmother, Sagar Camp

We visited many more villages during the next week, all with their own character and memories. At Sagar Camp, we had agreed to go to Majula’s mother for lunch; however every house we visited was adamant that we ate something! We had at least some sweet chai and biscuits in each of the seven houses so not much room left! We did try to encourage the families to feed themselves and not us. We met Ajay and his grandmother, who had brought him up since he was two following the death of his mother. She passed us photos of his parents, framed and treasured. It was hard to know what to say.

At Jagar Jawalladinni, we met Vijayalaxmi’s parents, together with her little brother who was recovering from chicken pox. He had just recently started at Xavier school and was a popular boy with lots of character. Vijay’s mother had prepared a delicious meal, including battered chillies! We found the best way to counteract the pungent spices in the cooking was by eating fresh buffalo curds. I was able to talk to Vijay’s parents about the importance of her education, and how she was getting excellent results and had the potential of attending Loyola College.

However her father explained that as they are so poor, he could not say whether he could pay for her education in the future – hopefully with their support and sacrifice and our continued help as sponsor parents we can enable this generation to fulfil their potential. This village had recently been treated to the construction of government toilets, and it was quite unusual to be asked to try the toilet facilities. A tiny finger curled round the rickety door holding it in place for us, and afterwards held out a pail of water and a towel for our hand-washing.



Vijayalaxmi and her family,
Jagar Jawalladinni



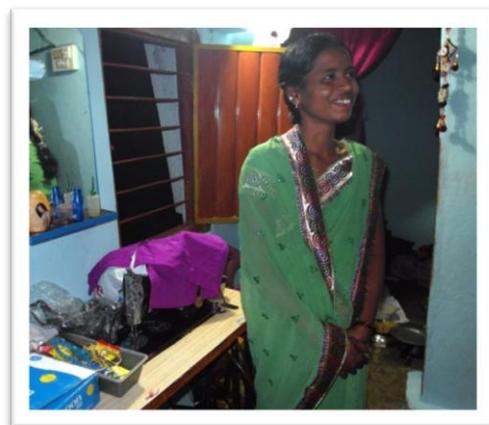
With Ashok, Loyola College

I was eager to return to Chimblapur. I knew that Ashok had been attending school regularly since my last visit and he greeted me after the first morning’s assembly. I had heard however that he had helped his family on the odd day with the cotton harvest – maybe that was why he wasn’t in the jeep to accompany us. We went to his house and I met his mother and grandmother – his mother recounting to me the events of our last visit in minute detail – I was glad that the attention given to him meant so much to her. As luck would have it, as we were returning to the school, at the corner of the road, the boys started shouting and there was Ashok with his father, empty sacks slung over their backs after a day in the fields. We stopped and chatted through the window. A

couple of days later we sat on the steps to the college and spent about an hour just chatting, about life in India and Britain, his progress at school, his grandmother’s health, and his hopes for the future. A couple of day’s wages in the fields could earn money to feed the family and I know he is studying hard as well, so there has to be some concession to the pressures of earning some extra wages.

At Rajal Bandi, we watched the shiny new sewing machines being stacked up on a tressle table close to collapse, and then gave them out to the girls who had completed their tailoring course and were ready to earn a living making new clothes and doing repairs as seamstresses for the village. The whole Dalit community was in attendance, and clapped each proud student as they collected their new machines.

In Rajolli, we were led through the village behind the beating drums to their welcome programme, where I had to give my first speech – rather terrifying! Here the dancers were solo or in couples, shyly entering the stage from a house but soon dancing enthusiastically, and, something we had not witnessed before, some of the audience ran up during the dancing to give them a few rupees for their efforts! Rajolli was the first village to benefit from the Tailoring Programme. We met the



The Sewing Teacher, Rajolli

sewing teacher in her house and one of the new tailors proudly showed us the dress she had made.



Former Devadasi singing in Ramathnal

and few men will accept them as partners. It is so hard for us to grasp the concept of allowing a daughter to enter into a life of prostitution and hardship, but a family may be persuaded that it is a great honour to give up a child to serve the temple. The Fathers are working to educate the families to prevent this happening.

There were many more memorable moments. We received beautiful garlands, lit candles for the pujas we received from the welcoming women in the villages, and were adorned with bindis on our foreheads, the red paste dropping on to our clothes. The hectic schedule of visiting the villages meant there was little time for reflection whilst in Manvi, and even the best of resolutions to keep up my diary and note the day's events each evening was broken. Once back in the UK and living our privileged life with all its trappings and diversions, the memories embedded and I gradually realised that I had had the most invaluable experience of seeing the reality of life in poverty and witnessing first-hand the plight of Dalit women. Without education, they will be forced to remain illiterate and live a downtrodden life. Simple things we take for granted they must do without – the lot of a Dalit woman without a toilet in the house is to go to the fields before sunrise and



Preparing the evening meal,
Hulligunchi



Parents and Grand-parents talking to us in
Ayannur

wait all day until after sunset to go to the fields again. Even when a woman is pregnant, her body must cope with all this. Then there is the washing to do, often in the river, and all the meals to prepare; before the children go to school she is cooking on an open fire over sticks collected from the roadside. And after work she cooks again for the family. During the day she will perform the same work as a man, even when she has a tiny baby, either as a coolie in the fields, or on a building site.

On our village visits we had many discussions with the menfolk about the overriding dilemma of whether it is even worth educating girls – despite it being a fundamental human right - as the cultural norm is that a woman's

destiny is early marriage and a family. Together with Father Maxim, we tried to persuade the men of the value of educating girls, and listened carefully to their arguments. We discussed with some women, parents of pupils at the school, how they wished their lives had been different if only they had been given the opportunity for education. There is the problem of the dowry – which can chain a family to debt for generations. Drink is a huge problem, with the men often alcoholics. The cheap spirit Arrak has been banned in Karnataka; however we saw an illegal outlet in Pannur. It is a sad fact that along with alcoholism the men are prone to commit suicide as a way out from the struggle of life, leaving their wives with the lonely burden of bringing up and feeding a family.



Washing at the River

I have incredible respect and admiration for the women I met. They have an immense sense of pride, overwhelming generosity, and an inner strength that I marvel at. They are expert cooks, always perfectly groomed, loyal to their children and their husbands. They have a great sense of community and value the family, sometimes four generations all supporting each other. With little access to transport, they will walk for hours - to the fields, to the river for water for boiling in the cooking pot, or to wash clothes, and when necessary to hospital. There is a real sense of pride in the home, even when the government-built floors and toilets are in real need of repair.

The Fathers, with boundless energy, enthusiasm and compassion, are undertaking a programme of education in the villages, helping to improve all aspects of life including health and hygiene, the environment, the importance of study, leadership, and overcoming the influence of superstition. As more girls are educated, they will have the facilities, wisdom and confidence to stand up to the inadequacies of life suffered by their mothers. We can help them in their struggle by supporting Xavier and Loyola Kapepaladi Schools, and now Loyola College, where the first generation of confident girls are achieving valuable qualifications that we hope will give Dalit women the promise of a different future.

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