

December Newsletter 2013, from Sindagi, about 6 hours drive from Manvi

Huligamma, the leader of the Devadasi women from Ramathnal, is a really strong woman. Devadasi are temple prostitutes. Huligamma was offered to the temple at the age of 12; the priest told her mother that if she offered one of her daughters to the temple then her youngest son's illness would be cured. Once the initiation ceremony has taken place there is no going back for a Devadasi. The great sadness is that both the girl and her family are tricked into believing that the Gods will look upon her very favourably as this physical commitment has been made. They have no idea about the realities of life for a young Devadasi; being used and abused by the temple priest and other men, both inside and out of the temple. The inevitable happens. Once the pregnancy is confirmed, the girl is sent out of the temple. She can't go back to her parents, and she now cannot marry.

This practice is against the law in India, but it still goes on, just in a quieter, hidden way. Devadasi women and their children are the most ill-treated of all. Their children are the most in need of education to give them self-esteem, empowerment and a chance in life.

Father Eric told me a lovely story about Huligamma today. When he was in Europe a couple of months ago, he visited a dear friend in Germany for a few days. This man always sends some money to Eric at Christmas time to distribute amongst the poorest families so that at least they can afford to have a good Christmas meal. Last year, with the money his friend had sent, Father Eric went to Ramathnal, and gave some of this money to Huligamma. She was very touched and accepted the money, but instead of keeping it all to herself she handed it out equally to the other 25 Devadasi families in her village.

Huligamma's companion for many years now, is very ill. He has some sort of paralysis and makes no sense now when he talks. He is in the house and lies all day on a canvas bed. We saw him yesterday when we visited Ramathnal. This strong woman, who I have met several times now and who has had the most difficult of lives, had tears in her eyes as both Father Eric and Father Maxim prayed for him. My heart went out to her. Father Eric asked her if she would like her husband to be cared for in a hospice in Mangalore where his sister is a nurse. She said no - even if she was offered all the money in the world, she wouldn't take it as she wanted to look after him herself, at home. But it's a vicious circle for her as she can't work *and* look after him, and this is why things are so difficult.

Ramathnal has 28 children who are hoping to start school next June at Kapepaladi school. We met these children recently and I can truthfully say that they were the most joyful and loving children I have ever met! Father Eric would be very happy if we could, between us, help these children by telling others about the Devadasi and their plight. If we do, perhaps we might be able to find people who would be happy to



sponsor their education at Kapepaladi school and give them that immensely important chance in life that their dear mothers never had.

Tomorrow we are visiting the slum children in Father Eric's new Mission where he has recently been transferred to. We are here until the 3rd when we return to Manvi and Pannur. More news soon.

With love, Dinah