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## Christmas 2015 Newsletter

Dear Friends,



Thank you to all who responded so quickly to our Rice Appeal, your generosity was astonishing! Already more than £2780 has been given and we have just sent these funds to India for **278** x 25kg sacks of rice. Here are the women from Ramathnal, the ladies we made blankets for last year, with a 25kg sack of rice. They had travelled for 2 hours by bus and rickshaw to ask Father Francis for help.

It's good to know that in a quite hopeless situation 278 families will have a safety net for the coming weeks. More sacks of rice will be bought with the Gift Aid we can reclaim on some of your donations, and these monies will be sent at the end of December. We will therefore

continue the Rice Appeal until Christmas so if you haven't contributed and would like to.

Our 5 days in Manvi were a whirlwind of emotions. We visited many villages, some up to 1.5 hours' drive away by jeep on very bumpy roads. Along the way we saw boys and girls herding cattle and goats, this is common work for Dalit children and what the majority of our sponsored children were doing before they started school in Manvi in 2004. Whilst driving past a herd of goats being shepherded by a man and a boy, Father Francis asked the man if the boy (in the photo) was his boy, to which he proudly said yes. Then, when Fr Francis asked why this boy wasn't at school, the man promptly said 'he's not my child', getting away from the awkwardness of being asked why his boy wasn't at school. For me this scene was a stark reminder of how brilliant it is that hundreds of students in Pannur or Manvi are now receiving an education rather than looking after herds of goats. It also made me feel very sad as this boy is representative of all children who are working instead of going to school. I know that it's impossible to educate every single child, but when you see a child like this it is plain to see that education would give him a better future *and* a normal childhood rather than hard work, day in day out.



There is currently a drought in this part of India and it is causing great concern amongst the Dalit people. In every village we visited the women's fears about their lack of work due to the shrivelled state of the crops, was heart-breaking to listen to. Over half the men from each village have already migrated to Bangalore to find work on construction sites, leaving the women and children with even less support than usual. There are Government schemes to help families with BPL (Below the Poverty Line) ration cards, but in practice these schemes are not straight forward at all. Form-filling is one of the areas Father Francis' social workers help the Dalit women who need to register for the scheme and provide bank account details. This is difficult as many women are illiterate and don't have bank accounts. It is a sad fact that invariably their claims to Government schemes are fiddled in different ways.



This photo shows Anna, a friend who came to India with me in November, being welcomed by the women from Umlihosur. After being welcomed, we went to the village hall with 4 groups of women who explained in more detail the difficulties they are facing. The 'Right to Work' scheme entitles Dalits to work 150 days for 204 rupees a day (approximately £2 a day). 204 rupees is double the wages a coolie (field labourer) can earn in a day so in theory it is a

good scheme. The women have all registered for the Right to Work Scheme and several have already worked many days but they are still waiting to be paid. One woman recounted how she had worked 27 days but somebody else had filled in her claim form with a bogus name and claimed the money themselves, no doubt with a bribe to the person who sanctioned this payment. Fr Francis' social workers are in constant touch with the local government office about the women's claims; if they weren't then I suspect they would have even less chance of receiving what is rightly theirs. We were told about so many cases of corruption, even at a local level. The social workers intervene often and Fr Francis himself regularly talks to the local politicians about the corruption. I feel so bad for these women as they struggle financially even in the best of times, leave alone in times of drought.

The encouraging news is that the number of women's groups are increasing month by month, offering each member of the group both support and a listening ear, as well as education in practical matters such as savings schemes and any Government aid available to them. Women's groups are called sanghats and one of the basic requisites of the sanghat is to create a savings scheme. How this works is that each member gives 100 Rs per month that is saved in their sanghat's bank account. The bank's deposit book is kept by the sanghat leader and overseen by the social workers. In good times, the funds within each sanghat's bank account steadily grows so that if bad times fall such as now with the drought, the saved funds can be given as loans to buy food. The problem is that most of the sanghats are very newly formed, encouraged by Father Francis since he joined the Mission 18 months ago, but there isn't yet a large enough pool of funds to draw from. It was shocking to see one example of a sanghat savings book with thumb prints instead of signatures as the women are unable to sign their names. Fr Francis has encouraged all the villages he visits to form groups of up to 15 women; some villages have formed 4 sanghats so that each one remains small and manageable. Already each group is providing support and encouragement during these difficult times. After hearing so many women share their fears about the lack of work and failing crops, this was when the idea came to launch a Rice Appeal.



The children from both Manvi and Pannur schools are all doing well. We didn't get to spend much time in either school this time as we were visiting villages mainly, but in January when we next visit we will enjoy spending more time with the students from both schools. However, we were lucky that our visit coincided with Children's Day, a first for me as I haven't been to Manvi in November before. Children's Day is celebrated throughout India in every school on November 14<sup>th</sup> which is Pandit Nehru's birthday - Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India after Independence in 1947. He loved children and wished that his birthday should be a celebration of childhood. In Manvi, Children's day is traditionally celebrated by reversing the entertainment roles, as teachers and Fathers take to the stage to perform songs, dance and comedy sketches for the children. You can imagine how much the children loved watching their teachers on stage! The Head Mistress in Manvi is exceptionally good at her job but very strict, so when the children saw her dancing with her hair down and wearing a funny costume, they roared with laughter! Even elderly Father Maxim entertained the children with a love song, and Father Francis dressed up as a Maharaja laughing like mad whilst singing about sad times and crying hysterically when singing about joyful times. It was hilarious!



Another great experience was a spontaneous fireworks night in Pannur to celebrate the end of Diwali, the Hindu festival of light. After 7 p.m. Mass in Pannur where I watched a scorpion trying to disappear under a piece of carpet (!), Fr Francis bought some small fireworks at the local store. We then surprised the hostel children who had settled down on the steps outside to do their homework for the last hour of their day which is between 8.30 and 9.30 p.m. When they saw the jeep pull in they all came running and when they heard there were fireworks they literally jumped for joy! To begin



the celebrations, all 70 children, the wardens, Fathers, Anna and I held hands and stood in a huge circle in the yard. We were each given a small sparkler and then the teachers lit them so that we could all write our names in the air. After that some small Fountain fireworks were laid out in a

line. The children huddled round Fr Francis who lit them all whilst the children shrieked in delight as they burst out their light. The children stood so close and without any shoes on but it didn't seem to matter! Anna and I were overwhelmed with joy watching the children! Then came the Catherine Wheels - tiny little fireworks that whizzed around madly on the ground. And lastly there were Bangers that Fr Francis lit and then just threw across the yard! The children loved this finale. As for Anna and I, well we just couldn't stop grinning!



The following day we were taken to 3 villages to meet the 31 students who had all completed their 8 month tailoring apprenticeship. The girls were handed out certificates and sewing machines and needless to say they were all extremely pleased to receive these. The Tailoring Scheme has been a great success and all these students who have completed their apprenticeship now have the opportunity to work from home and create another source of income as well as their field work. We learnt that already the students have started to make school clothes, actually for no payment at this stage as they want to gain some hands-on experience before charging for their work.

Alongside the Tailoring Scheme, Father Francis has reinstated a slightly different version of the Sheep Scheme that we participated in a few years ago. In the last year he has spoken to many women's sanghats about the long term financial benefits of owning a pair of sheep. Through this new Scheme the sheep will be given via a loan to the sanghat, i.e. 10 pairs of sheep will be loaned to 10 sanghat members. Each member has to repay the cost of their sheep back to the sangat once their sheep have bred and one or two lambs have been sold at market. Once the total loan has been repaid all subsequent lambs are sold for 100% profit. The social workers regularly visit the 15 villages they have been allocated by Father Francis, and during their weekly or bi-weekly visit, they observe how the sheep are being looked after and listen to any problems being encountered, such as if a female sheep is barren. They will also help to organise transport to take the first group of lambs to market. I like the idea of supporting this project once again as it is a very practical way of helping a family to have their own small business, and not have to rely totally on working in the fields.

What will happen to the sponsored children once they have completed their High School and PU education i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> Standard and 6<sup>th</sup> form?

This is a question I am frequently asked and one we discussed in more detail with Father Francis whilst we were there. Manvi's University is next to the school and is known as the PUC which stands for Pre-University College. This photo shows the youngest students in Manvi with the PUC in the background - hopefully one day they will all be College students themselves!



Out of 344 students ranging across 5 year groups from Lower Sixth to 3<sup>rd</sup> year Degree, only 11 of these are private full-fee paying students, all the rest are of very limited income and not all these students have sponsor parents. For this reason I feel that the College needs a safety net to safeguard the poorer students' further education prospects. Ideas for this safety net I will talk about a bit later. It is hoped that every student in both Manvi school and eventually Pannur school, will complete their PU1 and PU2 i.e. Lower and Upper Sixth. After that, it depends very much on their academic ability as to whether they continue to Degree level. In general the students need to achieve between 80 and 85% in their final PU2 exams to be considered for Degree. If they achieve less than 80% they will be put forward for other courses that aren't so academically demanding.

For those students who aren't academic enough to do a Degree, there are placement Colleges in Mangalore, Bijapur and Bangalore offering vocational courses of between 8 months and a year that guarantee a job at the end of each course. Courses include Retail Management, Hotel Management, Photography, Fashion Technology and I.T. Before sharing these further education costs with you I want to make it very clear that I will not be requesting any increase in sponsorship fees. The cost of a 1-year vocational course such as those mentioned above is typically

£150 for tuition fees and £25 per month for food and accommodation, so approximately £400 for the year. Nursing is another option but it is a 3-year Degree course as it is here, and the costs are typically £250-£300 tuition fees/year and the same hostel/food costs of £25 per month, so approximately £500 per year.

With regards to supporting the University in Manvi and safeguarding the poorer students' further education prospects, I mentioned earlier some ideas that can be developed further during 2016. I would like to find one or more universities in the UK, or other English speaking countries, to 'twin' with Manvi University. A partnership could benefit each university and their students in many ways, combining aspects of learning as well as thinking more about projects such as a research and development, cultural differences in particular the oppression of the Dalits, helping younger students in the classrooms and contributing to village projects. My thinking is along the lines of GAP year organizations that organise overseas placements and raise funds for a charitable project at the same time. Hopefully if we can arrange this in-house, it will cost less than a GAP organization as it will be more direct and therefore Manvi University stands to gain more financially. A British university group could stay at the College in Manvi for a month in July or August, gaining a wealth of different experiences and at the same time contributing their own talents and creativity. I would imagine that like me, the British students would leave after a month feeling that they have received far more in an unexplainable way, than they have been able to give. At the moment the canvas for this idea is completely blank. It is one we will be thinking about more in 2016 and if you have any ideas or university contacts, I would be very grateful if you could share these with me. The main aim is to create a pool of funds solely for the Sixth Form College and University that will subsidise both the sponsored and unsponsored students who simply cannot afford the increased fees of further education.



In my last Newsletter I mentioned how young Father Prakash had been killed in August whilst riding his motorbike. He was just 32 years old and the Fathers and the local community are still trying to come to terms with this tragedy.

In April of this year, Father Prakash asked all the women's sanghats in Pannur and the surrounding villages to help to lay a new concrete path up to Kapepaladi school. It was quite a feat as the distance from the school gate to the school entrance is around 70 metres. The women all agreed to give their time to help with this project, as a thank you to Father Prakash and Father Francis for all the help they have given them over the years.

We arrived at the school to find the school band waiting for us at the gates, and the pupils had lined the path to welcome us as we arrived. It was wonderful to see the children once again and this walk along the new path that had been organised by Father Prakash was very moving. The new Headmistress, Sister Philomena welcomed us and we were privileged to be there for their celebration of Children's Day which was slightly different to Manvi in that the children all wanted to perform rather than let their teachers take to the stage! Each dance had been meticulously rehearsed and we really enjoyed sitting back



and watching the children dancing and at the same time having so much fun. Kapepaladi School now has 327 pupils with 70 of them staying at the boarding hostel. Since June of this year, the school has had its first PE Teacher who has been busy teaching various games and sports. Needless to say the children have really enjoyed this new addition to their school day.

I left Manvi feeling lots of different emotions having visited many villages during our short 5 day visit, as well as both schools and the University. It was fantastic to meet the tailoring students who had completed their tailoring apprenticeships at the same time as holding down their daily jobs. Even though these teenage girls haven't had much education, they now have a new income possibility with their own sewing machines to work with from home.

On the other hand I felt so helpless when we were also introduced to women and children who were visibly distressed by their lack of work and inevitable famine. It was inspiring to watch Father Francis working so incredibly hard to do all he can to help individuals and families, as well as overseeing the management of both schools and all the village projects he has established since joining the Mission 18 months ago.

At the end of the day we are part of a team, co-workers perhaps and doing our bit in the only way we can to support the most vulnerable and oppressed within the vast Indian society.

Education will always be the great hope for the current students in Manvi and Pannur, and for future generations. Eventually the students will get good jobs and be able to support their parents financially. This is already happening and each year there will be more and more families who will see the bigger picture in brighter colours. I was recently asked if ever I felt overwhelmed by the many problems and how much suffering there is? I don't feel overwhelmed because the Mission is offering so much hope, and supporting so many children and their families. Every student in both Manvi and Pannur is a living testimony of hope with each of them now having a brighter future. There are a thousand ways to support the Fathers' work, just as they are supporting thousands of children and their families. All the Fathers I have met over the years who serve the Mission in different ways are giving to every Dalit child and their parents the same love as we give to our own children and parents.

To conclude this Newsletter, let me share a recent example of Fr Francis' overwhelming love.



An 8 year old Pannur hostel girl was taken to hospital last week with breathing difficulties, high fever and sickness. In this photo taken just a few days earlier of all the hostel children, Radhika can be seen in the second row from the back with the green dress, standing in front of Anna who in the back row on the right. Radhika is a very loving little girl with the biggest smile. At the fireworks evening she held on to one of my arms whilst her friend held on to the other, pretending to be scared by all the bangs but actually loving all the excitement! Over the course of last week Radhika's condition deteriorated suddenly, her vital organs began to fail and Father Francis spent an agonizing week worrying that her weakened body wouldn't be able to withstand the trauma it was going through. He arranged and paid for her

care and transportation from one hospital to another, and then to another.

There is no NHS in India and her parents couldn't afford any of the medical fees. After a considerable number of tests Pneumonia was diagnosed with other complications that resulted in her needing 5 days in Intensive Care. This girl's life was in serious danger. Was she going to be another casualty of infant mortality we were so frightened to ask ourselves? I am very happy to tell you that this morning, the 28<sup>th</sup> November, Radhika was taken out of ICU and put on a ward where she is still recovering. Without Father Francis' tireless efforts, this little girl would have died and yet this is all in a day's work for him, and all the Fathers I have met actually. They all serve the poor cheerfully and with great love.

With thanks once again for all your loving support in so many different ways, and we wish you a very happy Christmas and a great year ahead!

Best wishes

Dinah and Peter