

# SUNANDA AND RATHNAMA

## HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE DALITS



Two young girls currently studying at Loyola College, Manvi are shining examples of the change that can be made in the lives of the oppressed through the determination of inspired leadership. Sunanda, left, from the village of Sagar Camp and Rathnama, right, from Ramathnal village are both 16, in their second year at PUC (Pre-University College), and live in the girl's hostel there. Both have been sponsored for 7 years by Supporting Dalit Children.

In 2004, two Indian Jesuit priests, Father Eric and Father Maxim, began working towards their vision of liberating Dalit people by educating their children. The harrowing experience of helping a woman in labour travel to hospital on the back of a cart only to die on the way gave them the resolve to do something. They planted their mission in the small village of Pannur. In the two schools they founded, Loyola Kapepaladi and Xavier, there are now over 1500 pupils from more than 90 rural villages, where Father Eric (right) and Father Maxim (below) gave support to the Dalit families, listening to their problems and needs.



The Dalits, or Untouchables, are excluded from the caste system, subject to massive discrimination and abuse which seems, in this day and age, totally unacceptable. Patrick French in his book "India" (2011) says: "Despite the genuine advances of recent years, Dalits remain undereducated and under-represented. If every sixth person on the planet is an Indian, every sixth Indian is a Dalit". This today represents over 200 million people in a population of nearing 1.3 billion.

Without schooling, the children would be herding goats, grazing oxen or helping with the cotton harvest, illiterate and likely to live a life of extreme poverty and hardship. The remarkable thing about the pupils at school is that, despite having so little, they are full of joy and laughter. The work of the schools has a far reaching impact as they return to their villages full of optimism for a better life, hoping to have vocational careers with social benefits such as teaching, medicine or engineering. Now that Loyola College has been completed, students can receive an education in Manvi on one campus under the loving care and watchful eye of the Fathers and teachers who understand their complex backgrounds, taking them from Baby Kindergarten at 3 years old to 21 and attaining a degree.

Life is not easy for these children and they have to overcome many barriers in order to achieve their dreams, not least the pressure of working from an early age in the fields just to put food in their families' mouths. This is particularly a struggle as in reaching their teenage years they can physically do the work of adults. They may regularly find work in the school holidays with their families harvesting the crops. For young girls reaching puberty there is also the prospect of an arranged marriage.

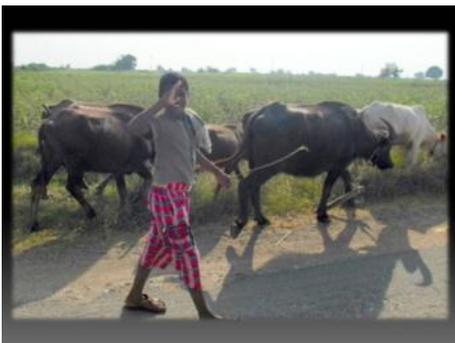


They can be caught up in the complexities of the Hindu religion and in deep-rooted village superstitions which can work against the achievement of an English-medium education (instruction in English, not the first language of the pupils), essential to progress in Indian society.

In desperate poverty, the family may take out a loan from the rural landlords, becoming trapped by debt, with their children working as bonded labourers to repay money owed down the generations. Being outcastes, literally outside the caste system for millennia, the Dalits traditionally inherited jobs performed by their ancestors; menial tasks such as toilet cleaners, road sweepers and tanners of animal hides. In some places they are still not allowed to enter public places or temples. They believe that only by death after a perfect life doing their duty can they reach a higher caste.

For other castes, any contact from a Dalit either by touch or even to come under their shadow meant ritual cleansing, changing clothes, and bathing. Even their coins had to be purified before they could be taken in payment.

This oppression included education – an extract from the novel “Untouchable” by Mulk Raj Anand written in 1939 reads: “He realised that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man’s sons.”



Understanding their downtrodden past, and that humiliating practices still exist, it is no surprise that the word, Dalit, that they chose for their people is Hindi for broken or crushed. How can this oppression still be occurring today in an upwardly mobile, modern India? The leader most revered by the Dalit people to this day is Dr Ambedkar, who was from the Mahar caste who were as outlawed and ill-treated as the untouchables. He held the position of law minister in the first government after

Independence in 1947 and negotiated many clauses in the constitution including the abolishment of untouchability. Studying at the London School of Economics, he found that in Europe he was treated as equal to other Indians as Westerners had no concept of caste, but of that of race. The discrimination, like a silent apartheid, is still in evidence in many ways as we have seen at first hand in the villages.

In his book “The Chamcha Age”, published in 1982, Kalit Ram, a Dalit leader, stated: “The sufferings and humiliations of the slaves, the Negroes and the Jews are nothing as compared to the untouchables of India – everywhere in the world democracy means rule of the

majority. But in India 85% of people are ruled by 10-15% Higher Castes. The long-term humiliations suffered by the Dalits exists on the attitude that mixing with them is polluting, and that they exist only to serve and perform their dharma or duty – without questioning – in the hope that they will be reborn into a better life.”

The Government school in Sagar Camp is pictured right. The children were playing outside – they said that day neither the teachers nor the cook had turned up so they were rather bored and hungry! Dalit children will typically be sat at the back of the class, and subject to bullying both mentally and physically. 65% of Dalit children in state school drop out by the age of eleven, either for boys to work as bonded labourers or for girls to carry out household chores and look after younger children, leading to high levels of illiteracy.



But visit Pannur and Manvi in the state of Karnataka, and you will be filled with hope. As you can see from the photos below, the children at Loyola Kapepaladi and Xavier Schools are joyful, exuberant and have a great sense of fun, and pride in their achievements. You will soon be surrounded by smiling waving children who can't wait to have their photo taken!



Sunanda and Rathnama are among the first generation of educated Dalits leaving sixth form having been educated right through the Pannur and Manvi Mission. It is to be hoped they will generate the lively, educated minds needed to press for change through the political spectrum.

Sitting outside the girl's hostel, in the early evening, with the frogs croaking and the crickets starting their night-time chorus, covered in a good layer of insect-repellent, I met with them so that we could talk about their experience in the school, and their plans. They took the opportunity to express pride in their and the school's achievements, and their hope for a future free from the oppression felt by their mothers. Their story illustrates the story of Dalit girls in general. They are now coming to the end of their education and having progressed so far, it is to be hoped that they can cut across old ways and achieve their dreams.

Both girls came to the school right at the beginning in 2004. There were 40 students, 33 girls and 7 boys, from five villages. Father Eric came to visit their villages and talked to the parents, encouraging them to send their children to school. They all went to Pannur hostel at first and attended the government school. After a while they were sent to Manvi where they lived, learnt and slept in the small buildings that still exist on the complex. Prakesh was their social worker, who encouraged them. He is still working in the villages. There were 15 children from Ramathnal and two from Sagar Camp. Before attending school Sunanda was grazing cows with her family, a typical occupation of Dalit children,



indeed one boy told me that if his grandparents did not step in and graze the buffalo instead of him, he would not be able to attend school.

Mariyamma cooked the food and still cooks now for the Fathers. They learnt English and Kannada, the local dialect. By the fourth standard they had better facilities, for example their own workbooks. Their families came to see them regularly but of course missed them. For Dalit families, a children's education means sacrifice and the parents taking on more work at home. In 2005 they had the ground floor only of what is now Xavier School. The small original school became their hostel. First the school was built, then Hombalaku, the Fathers' residence, and then the girl's hostel. There were 100 students including some day scholars. There are now plans for the original school to become a training venue for technical courses, and the students have good facilities in which to learn and play sports. Sunanda and Rathnama are both studying commerce in PUC – the equivalent of sixth form.

Rathnama wants to become a clerk. It is difficult because her parents may not be able to support her through college. They are currently asking Father Eric to help them resolve their dilemma. Sunanda wants to become a Bank Manager. Out of the original 40 children that they started school with, 10 have married and have babies. Many parents still think girls should marry young as is the tradition in the villages and not have careers. It is difficult for the parents as they have pressure from other families to conform to the norm of a girl taking her more conventional place in the home.

One morning as I passed by Rathnama and her group of friends they were talking intently. They were discussing a recent event in one of the villages that had shocked them - a young girl had a marriage arranged but ran away. In their shame, her parents committed suicide by drinking poison. It is so hard for us to understand the acceptance of arranged marriages, but



it is reality and in our discussion sessions with 10<sup>th</sup> CBSE (year eleven) we found that all the girls expected to have an arranged marriage. Rathnama explained that it is a frightening prospect as the suitor can behave wonderfully before marriage but after can beat his wife and just want the little money she does have.

The girls' villages are typical of the isolated, rural settlements in Karnataka, which have all castes but the Dalit community will be at the edge of the village. I have been privileged to visit both on a few occasions now. On my first trip with the charity we visited Ramathnal for an impromptu mass and a meal with Rathnama's family. Her mother, pictured with Rathnama, above, is a former Devadasi or Temple Prostitute who now lives with her partner and has three daughters.

We were joined by some older women who I later learned were Devadasi. They have a real strength in their fellowship. The woman pictured right is the leader of the women's group. I could see the hardship of her life etched into her face. In Ramathnal the former Devadasis have been given the materials to build houses by the Fathers. They refused to move in until every house was finished and they could settle in as a group.



They suffer each year with little money to feed themselves as work in the fields becomes scarce after the harvest season. Although it was outlawed in the 1980's, the Devadasi cult still exists. We have seen the temple where some girls are taken after puberty and ceremonially taken into prostitution. The temple priest takes their virginity, and then they sleep with the high-caste villagers for a price. When they become pregnant they are thrown out, and few men will accept them as partners.

There are estimated to be around a quarter of a million Devadasis in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and every year several thousand added. The well-known commentator on India William Dalrymple in his book "Nine Lives" (2009) states that "For the very poor, and the very pious, the Devadasi system is still seen as providing a way out of poverty while gaining access to the blessings of the gods, the two things the poor most desperately crave. Today, the dedication ceremony tends to happen at night, in small village temples, and the young Devadasi is presented with her badge of office as a sacred prostitute. They are wrenched from the lives they have led." One of the women he interviewed said "We are sorry we have to do this work. But what is the alternative? Who will give us jobs? We are all illiterate."



Jogan Shankar in his 1990 study of the Devadasi cult points out that the Devadasi system is a deliberately created custom to exploit lower caste people by the upper castes. 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 believe or be persuaded that it is a great honour to give up a child to serve the temple. The Fathers are working tirelessly to educate the families to prevent this happening.

Sagar Camp, about two hours drive out of Manvi, has a really strong Dalit community with a group of Dalit houses near the Government school. At Manjula's house (above left), we agreed to eat a meal prepared by her mother for lunch; however before this every house we visited was adamant that we ate something! We had at least some sweet chai and biscuits in each of seven houses. We did try to encourage the families to feed themselves and not us.

Sunanda showed us her house and we met her family. Here she is in front of a portrait of her mother, who had sadly died several years ago. Her father has taken a second wife. She has one older sister who is at college in Bangalore, but is struggling with the separation from her family. She was at home this last visit and Father Francis, the current Superior of the



mission, tried to persuade her to carry on with her education and complete it.



The smiles in the photo left belie a sad story. On the visit this year, there was an extra family living in Mangula's house. Her father had taken in his sister as she had had to flee her home after her unstable husband had burnt their clothes and possessions –leaving Mangula's father with extra mouths to feed. He was an admirable man to take in

another family – we had heard of women in desperation being turned away from their families' doorsteps as they brought shame on them. They were all living in two rooms. Renuka, about 12, on the left, was a very bright girl and we talked to her throughout the visit. She took great pride in holding my rucksack for me all across the paddyfields! Father Francis was hopeful that she may go to the school and could live in the hostel.



On this same trip Ramesh (in the yellow shirt) was most insistent that we visit his family house. It involved a jeep trip down the track between the paddyfields, some skilful nine-point turns from Father Francis, and a 10 minute walk in the dark slipping and sliding on the wet paddyfield rims and crossing the irrigation ditches to reach it. I managed to fall in getting covered in mud but at least I avoided the water snakes! The family bought the land 25 years ago, and have slowly built their house over the years, one of the most

isolated I have visited. The site is entirely without electricity and running water. Ramesh was so proud and pleased that we had visited. It is the only time I have ever been applauded for taking a photograph!

The family of Shiva Raj (wearing glasses) is pictured right. In November 2013 I thought we had met his mother and father, however I learnt on my last visit that his father sadly died young and his mother is trying hard to give him a good education. Shiva Raj is now sponsored and was so happy that one of the visitors he had met and bonded with was now sponsoring him.



A visit to the villages is to witness first-hand the reality of a life of extreme poverty. One cannot help but ponder as to the solution to the plight of the Dalit women. Without education, they will be forced to remain illiterate and live a downtrodden life. The conditions they have to cope with are unimaginable to us – visitors usually wonder how long they could tolerate the daily routine.

Take for example the lack of toilets. The lot of a Dalit woman without a toilet in the house is to go to the fields before sunrise and wait all day until after sunset to go again. We would often see lone women walking down the dark lanes with their little water pots. Without running water the washing is often done in the river. There are always women washing on the bridge over the large river that flows between Manvi and Pannur, with many taking their children along to help with the laundry.

The mother prepares all the meals and before the children go to school she is cooking to fill their tiffin tins for lunch. After work she cooks again for the family, on an open fire over sticks collected from the roadside.





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. Vijay, the girl I sponsor at the school, told me in January that I couldn't meet her parents again as they were both working on a construction site in Bangalore, and had left her and her young brother at the hostel. On our visit in November 2013, we saw two women working on the construction of Loyola Kapepaladi School (left). One would bring a mix of stones on her

head to the other who would sift it through the mesh. There are men who recruit labour from the villages, take them to the growing city, and they live on a camp with very basic facilities for the season when there are no crops to harvest and no opportunity to earn money locally.

At harvest time, however, there is plenty of work available. As we set out in the jeep on our November visit, in the mornings, we saw 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, mostly women as they only command half the wages of a man - about £1.50 a day. If working for a landlord, they may line up as seen below to have the day's crop weighed before payment. On our village visits we have had many discussions with the men folk 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 the Fathers, 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.



The women have to be incredibly strong, and as a result of the wish to escape from the brutal realities of Dalit life, drink is a huge problem, with the men often alcoholics.

The cheap spirit Arrak has been banned in Karnataka; but there is 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.

Maria, an incredibly strong woman I have enjoyed meeting on each visit, is pictured right. She lives in Pannur near the church with her three children. Father Eric, on hearing her plight after she became a widow a few years ago when her husband had a heart-attack, employed her as a cleaner and general assistant at Loyola Kapepaladi school. Her little boy at the front is now a pupil there.





The Dalit women have pulled together with the help of the social workers to form Sengats or support groups. The communal inner strength helps them to gain a sense of empowerment. Father Francis and the social workers run courses in the villages teaching the women how to run their self-help group. Here, pictured left, we joined the Self-Help meeting in the village of Welcome Dinni in January 2015. Social workers also help the women to open bank accounts and start savings schemes. They save only

50p a month, and the money is used as a group resource to help anyone fallen on hard times. The villagers have a sense of living in the moment with no concept of saving or planning for the future, sadly a reflection of a life lived with little hope for better times.

I feel that India is so complex and the oppression of the Dalits so disturbing that it is a challenge for us in our privileged world to understand the situation fully. If you visit Manvi the Fathers are on hand to answer patiently any questions and are willing to spend many mealtimes and jeep rides talking over the history and current examples of the Dalit plight.

However, Sunanda and Rathnama look to have a bright future. They have been lucky to have parents who were willing to make the sacrifice of sending them to school. They are great examples of how through girls' education there can be hope for Dalit women. 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. We should not forget the boys, who without education may continue to look upon women as unequal and bearing the brunt of family life. They need to learn a woman's worth, and to respect women and value girl children.

Through education the pupils of Pannur mission can make the lack of confidence, lack of empowerment and illiteracy so prevalent in the villages become a memory. The future will be forever changed as an education cannot be taken away. Even if the girls go back to marriage and raising children, they will be able to educate their own families. There may be at this moment a student at Loyola College who is to become an influential politician and will campaign to make a difference.

Narendra Jadhav in his book "Untouchables" (2007), the story of his family's struggle against their lot, discussing the gradual increase in education of the Dalits, states that "knowledge brought with it the desire to be recognised and respected; it strengthened the resolve to struggle against discrimination" In his introduction, he writes "Dalits are awakening. We are struggling against caste discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty; our weapons are education, self-empowerment, and democracy."

I feel that we cannot change a country that is not our own but we can help to change the life of an individual, and a real difference to the life of a child can be made through sponsorship. Sponsor parents feel the pride of a real parent and can follow the progress of their children and see them mature and achieve their dreams. Through the help of sponsor-parents the children feel motivated and accepted in the wider world in contrast to being shunned by

their higher-caste neighbours. I would urge any sponsor parents to seriously consider making the journey to Manvi – out of the way for sure, but definitely worth it and an extraordinary experience.



I have been privileged to meet my sponsor boy, Ashok on three visits. I started sponsoring him when he was eleven, and in January 2013 first visited Manvi. We travelled to meet him in his village of Chimblapur, however he was working in the fields picking cotton with his father. It took another trip before he eventually met me in the house, pictured left, but he seemed rather down and distracted. Father Eric grasped the situation, using his understanding of all the complex issues surrounding the pressures on a

young boy. Together with Father Maxim he held a service to ask for help for Ashok in a neighbour's house, and you could feel the electric atmosphere as so many villagers crowded in. It sounds hard to believe but after the service, Ashok seemed transformed as he chatted alongside me on the walk back to our jeep. Once I was back in England, Father Rohan, the school headmaster, kept me informed of his progress and even faxed me birthday greetings from Ashok.

On the next trip, although mainly at school, Ashok had had a few days working in the fields, helping with the excellent cotton-harvest. In fact we met him and his father returning from Raichur with their empty sacks on their backs. The lure for the family of using his labour was still evident, and we chatted at length about the benefits of education and how in the long run he would be able to earn more money in another job that he could send home to help his family.

On my last visit, Ashok was a boy transformed from a shy eleven year old with only the prospect of menial work and an insular view of life in the village. He is pictured right with his mother, sister and a young friend. He was confident enough to come and find me at lunch with our group and the Fathers. We visited his village one evening, and I found him doing the washing in a bucket for his mother!



We chatted for ages at the school just before I left when I found out that like Sunanda and Rathnama he was one of the early intake with Father Eric at the age of four. He asked whether I would send a letter to Father Eric and immediately wrote thanking him for his help over the years. I have since heard that he did very well in his exams, and has been accepted into PUC. Unlike his older brother and sister, he has been able to receive an education that gives him good prospects for the future, and I look forward to keeping in touch with him throughout his time at school and beyond.

In conclusion, although I admit we are bombarded with quotes nowadays, especially on Facebook and can become a bit immune to their messages, sometimes a few words from the wise can sum up our thoughts. This quote spoken by Mother Teresa illustrates a message of hope, evident at Manvi. I think it applies to all those interested enough to learn more about the Dalits through the charity, the sponsor parents, to Father Eric, Father Maxim and the rest of the inspirational workers at the Pannur mission, but especially to the young people currently receiving their education under their guidance.

To paraphrase slightly: “Sunanda and Rathnama alone cannot change the world, but they can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples”.



*Chris Carter*

*September 2015*