

Six Weeks at Manvi – January to February 2015



I never had a “gap year” – these were unheard of in my youth – so in true baby boomer style I seem to be making up for that now and fulfilling my travel ambitions in middle age. I feel very lucky that I can make these trips and that my family are so accommodating and happy for me to undertake these adventures! Discussions about going back to Manvi for a longer spell began around Christmas 2013 – six weeks at Manvi would enable me to spend more time with Ashok and Vijayalakshmi, my sponsor children, help at the school and learn more about the Dalit struggle. It would also coincide with the time of year when Easter cards are prepared. Around May last year Dinah finalised plans for a group visit and I arranged to begin my long stay with our party of travellers arriving from all over the world. I was to accompany Jane, Maddie and Sara, and after meeting at Heathrow and squeezing the last of our vacuum-packed blankets destined for the ladies of Ramathnal into our suitcases, we checked in for our flight. We finally reached Bangalore after twelve hours of eating, sleeping and film-watching.

We were met at the airport by Daz – the friendly reliable driver from Ashirvad, where we had a day’s rest plus a bit of exploring the local area, finding cafés for breakfast and lunch. That evening we were taken to the bus station. The overnight bus was a new adventure for us all – hurtling through the dead of night, over numerous speed bumps, with our curtains closed – a kind of moveable camping – wondering whether to brave the comfort stops of which one was a patchy piece of land in a remote village with only one other lady venturing out – we waited for each other and then hurried back to the bus which to our relief hadn’t driven off without us! We headed off again to Manvi. After stopping at the Bus Station there we saw Loyola College from afar –it is now the largest building in Raichur District. We alighted, glad to be reunited with our precious cargo of blankets, crossed the road to the college and met Father Maxim on his way to early morning mass.

We were shown to the same room I had stayed in on my first trip – this time it was full with many metal beds and mattresses. As we plumped for one each we discovered Lali fast asleep under a few blankets recovering from her overnight journey from Goa! After a short rest we had a coffee and breakfast and met the rest of our group totalling eleven in all – a truly multi-national bunch of travellers! We were piped and drummed over to Xavier School for an assembly where we were introduced to the pupils.



Maddie, Jane and Sara at the entrance to Ashirvad

There followed a hectic week of interaction with the children, visits to villages, meeting the sponsor children of our visitors, and also participating in school events such as the hostel sports and the youth cricket tournament. We visited the local tailoring group at Amaranthi Colony many times – the women ordering salwar kameez and the men waiting patiently outside learning the intricacies of rope-making from the family group nearby. As Dinah has written in her January Newsletter, we met local women’s groups and had a most memorable evening distributing the blankets to Ramathnal.



Father Francis, Dinah and Lali with children from Rajolli

The rest of the party departed in twos and threes –at the end of the week I said goodbye to Sara, Jane and Maddie who were escorted to their bus for the journey back to Bangalore. Then there was just Dinah, Peter, Lali and myself. On Saturday we felt privileged to celebrate the inauguration of Loyola College with many dignitaries. We stayed in Pannur for two nights – Lali and I sleeping in an empty hospital ward. From there we visited Rajolli and Rajal Banda where centres for children’s and women’s groups have been built – simple rooms but a real focus of progress for the villages. On Sunday we caught the overnight bus to Mangalore. I had been invited at the last minute by Father Eric who just said “why not come?” Having never travelled far from Manvi I jumped at the chance. I travelled alongside Lenka who runs the Slovakian Charity also helping the school - we were very lucky to have “luxury” seats – those reserved for Government officials who may be travelling which are sold off just before departure - whereas the others at the back of the bus were heated up and frozen simultaneously!

Father Eric met us off the bus and we spent the next two days visiting the Technical College, St. Aloysius College, and the Father Muller Hospital. Here it was very moving to visit the Leprosy ward, where some men had spent the greater part of their lives. We also visited the Rehabilitation workshop, where patients learn skills including silk printing and Batik work, with their products sold online to raise funds.



Batik work in the Rehabilitation Workshop, Father Muller Hospital, Mangalore



Snack Stalls at a Bus Station, near Mangalore

But probably the most intense experience was a visit to the slums. Dinah has already written about this moving place, where without running water or electricity the people earn a meagre living picking recyclable rubbish from the nearby tip. Father Eric is doing a wonderful job to raise local awareness of their predicament. I asked why the ground around the makeshift dwellings was damp – it was newly applied dung that had been wetted and was drying to form a hard floor. We witnessed a dying man lying in the open on an old bed asking his small child to fetch him some alcohol, and tiny children dressed in dirty rags. And yet, a group of children were happy to meet us and show us their singing and dancing.

The next day Dinah, Peter and Lali departed for the station for the train to Goa and then there were two – Lenka just about caught the overnight bus to Bijapur and I was taken to the “old” bus station by a driver from the college who waited with me. I was very grateful that he saw me onto the right bus. I had a single upper bunk, and wondered how I would sleep in that tiny precarious space, shared with my rucksack and a carrier bag full of bread taken back for Hombelaku (the Father’s residence), without tipping out over the edge! In the end my travel pillow fell out twice but I managed to stay put. It was marvellous to just look out of the window – firstly at the night-time sights of Mangalore and the outskirts, and on nearing Manvi in the early morning light mile after mile of paddy fields. We passed through many towns – this time I felt very aware of the piles of plastic rubbish clogging up the drains producing filthy black water. Without looking too closely – I saw that early morning was the time for villagers, including small children, to wander from their toilet-less homes to the fields. Such an indignity and so sad to see.

Back safely to Manvi after my adventure I was taken to my home for the next five weeks. I was in the Teacher’s Hostel, with a 3-bedded room that I had all to myself. It felt very comfortable – and I enjoyed making a private space where I could work and rest. The bathroom had a shower and I soon learnt that the best time to freshen-up was when the water had warmed up at about five in the afternoon and just to use the mixer tap below! It was about a ten minute walk to Hombelaku for meals – prepared by the marvellous cook Maryamma. I enjoyed the diet of rice and vegetables plus chapatis or dhosas and fruit. A good healthy detox diet! On the odd occasion I was given a lift to the hostel on the back of the motorbike by Brother Don or Brother Vishwal – never normally one for this mode of transport I actually enjoyed it!



The view to Xavier School from my room at the Teacher’s Hostel

I was given the use of Brother Don’s office in the administration block in Loyola College. The wi-fi worked perfectly (most of the

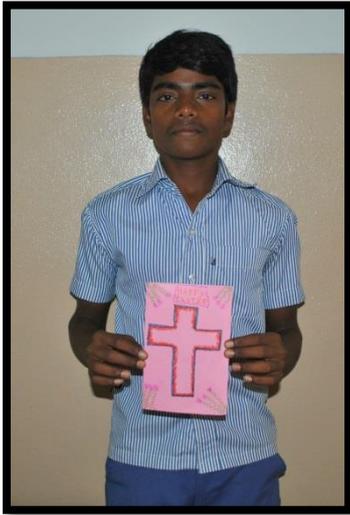


Elton making his Easter Card

time!) and I had lots of space to work. I had the assistance of a young girl called Swetha – who by a lovely co-incidence was my sponsor boy Ashok’s next door neighbour in Chimblapur! I was also given invaluable help by the school secretary Reishma and Savitha from Yedalladoddi – who was to accompany me to Loyola Kapepaladi School to act as a translator.

My task was to complete over 400 Easter cards – using Dinah’s spreadsheets as my guide. All the children on the list made cards – even if they were not currently sponsored they could still join in and wrote “Dear Friend” as it is hoped that they too may find sponsors one day.

I soon had a routine of daily work – having prepared the card, I would go to the classroom – it’s not easy for a newcomer to find each class so I enlisted the help of any students walking by. I called out the names of five to six pupils on the list – to great hilarity at the start as my pronunciation of the names was quite bad but did get better. The small group would then walk like chicks after their mother hen behind me through the school and over to the office – a very hot and



My sponsor child Ashok holding my Easter Card

dusty walk – and I had to keep an eye on any stragglers who would stop for a drink of water, chat to their friends passing by, or even on one occasion a boy completely disappeared as he spotted his parents in the school office and went home with them!

Once in the spare meeting room where I had card, pens and pencils ready I explained what to do. I told the children that this was for their sponsor parents who cared about them very much, wanted to hear their news and would be delighted to receive the card. I also recounted the Easter story. They drew their picture first – maybe an egg, cross, flowers, or their village. Depending on their age and ability in English they would write their own words or copy their message that I had written out for them. Children who had met their sponsor parents in India were so happy to write a personal message. When I looked later at the cards their words reaffirmed to me how Supporting Dalit Children is making such a difference.

For PUC (sixth-form) and College students, I took a different approach as I felt they would like more freedom. Students were given a sheet of paper and a slip explaining the task. They took great pleasure in putting pen to paper and telling their sponsor parents of their hopes and aspirations. They were quite open and frank. I enlisted the help of Noble Raj and Akshatha in PUC to give out the papers and encourage their fellow students and gave them a long time-frame as it was exam time and I didn't want to put any unnecessary pressure on them.

I planned to take a photo of every pupil, holding their cards up so I could match the designs later. In rural India it seems that a photo cannot be taken without the photographer displaying it on the viewing screen, turning it round and the subject having a good look at themselves – then the subject either gives approval or asks for it to be retaken! And with a group of children they all have to have a look! So it was quite a lengthy process but great fun to do and I hope that you all enjoy receiving your photos.

The sessions lasted at least half an hour and sometimes towards the end of my stay when I had nearly completed the cards I could spend more time finding out about their lives. The children enjoyed taking a break from their studies and having the chance to do something creative – taking great pains over their artwork. Those whose cards have every word written in a different colour “sketch” or as we say “felt-tip” will understand what I mean! It was a great opportunity to chat with them all and get to know them better. I will particularly remember some personalities – including the charming boy who was so interested in and distracted by every movement in the open plan offices that he made a funny comment about it – I thought he would never finish his card. I remember the girl whose excellent English enabled her to be an interpreter for the rest of the group, and those incredible and talented artists and technical drawers.



Savitha helping the children colour in their cards at Loyola Kapepaladi

For the children of Loyola Kapepaladi at Pannur, I had three days to complete all the cards! I was accompanied by the very capable Savitha. Due to time pressure, we worked class by class, starting with Third Standard and working down to the Baby Class. We explained the task to the pupils with the help of Sister Ida and the teachers who were so supportive. I wrote a message on the board for them to copy, and then we drew simple chalk pictures – some stylised flowers, chicks, rabbits etc.! My contribution was a rather simple tulip. Savita’s help was invaluable as she patiently sat with each child ensuring they got the names and spelling correct. I had the easier task of photographer – I quickly learnt the local word for smile – *nagu* – although for some smiling for the camera came quite naturally! The first day we had to make our own way back on the Government bus. We waited for nearly an hour at the bus stop as we were told it could arrive early! I was expecting to be crammed into a hot sweaty vehicle but we had it all to ourselves. It was a long ride back, but it was pleasant to watch the sun go down over the ubiquitous paddy fields. The bus may not have been in great condition but it coped well with the potholes and rough roads. We then hailed a tuk-tuk from Manvi “roundabout” – really the convergence of three main roads where it’s every man for himself – and shared one with two men and a rather large cupboard. I managed to wedge myself between the metal rail and the driver. We were lucky to have a lift with Father Francis for the next two days as he was holding meetings with many women’s groups in the old church near Pannur Hostel. My lunchtime was lengthened somewhat when I was asked to give an impromptu speech on educating girls in England!



Making Easter Cards, Loyola Kapepaladi

As we moved on to Lower and Baby Kindergarten classes we drew sketches ourselves for them to colour in. With limited supplies it was lovely to bring along some of the colouring pencils that had been donated from England. The children sat in circles on the floor and took great delight in making their best attempts at colouring. Every day was full of surprises and on the last day in Pannur I went into the room where we had been keeping our bags, camera and stationery. I was followed by lots of children who I asked to play outside. When I went to leave I discovered I was locked in! I had always thought that as few doors have keys but are instead locked from the outside by a bolt and padlock that it would be easy to lock someone in – well I was right! “Don’t panic” I heard myself say – and opened the window which had railings so no chance of climbing out. I could see children playing football a few feet away and not wishing to seem too undignified shouted for their help. After about five minutes one of the children spotted me

and ran to get Sister Ida – she unlocked the door and we both fell about laughing – she asked “who did this?” But I didn’t know and wasn’t really bothered either – just another tale to tell!

Well now it is almost Easter and the cards and photos are on their way. It was a long job but a lot of fun. I really got to know the children very well. I was especially touched by how proud they are of their school, and very aware of the opportunity they have been given. They take pride in their achievements and are grateful to the Fathers, teachers and sponsor parents for the chance to take advantage of the huge opportunities opening up in Modern India.

Happy Easter!

Chris Carter

March 2015