

VISIT TO MANVI NOVEMBER 2019

I first came out to Loyola School, Manvi in October 2008, as a volunteer sent by Jesuit Missions, to teach English. At that time the classes had not long moved into the school building and the priests' house had just been built. There was also a hostel where boarding pupils and their teachers lived together, a single storey building which housed two nuns and the school offices and a porter's lodge; that was it!

In November 2019 I made my fifth visit to the mission. Each time I come I notice improvements and developments. There are now two hostels for the boy boarders, a separate hostel for the teachers and one for the senior girls. The cooking facilities at the original hostel have been enlarged (partly because there are now so many more pupils) as have the sports grounds and the whole compound has been greatly enhanced by more trees, gardens and outside sitting areas. It is genuinely a transformation.

The other big change for me is having a college and university on the site. Pupils can now carry on their education to degree level and part of the reason for my visit is that pupils whom I have sponsored since I taught them when they were 9 or 10, are now in their last year of the degree course and will be leaving. I feel extremely proud of their achievements as many, when I knew them, had recently been "rescued" from the fields where they were looking after sheep and could barely speak (let alone write) a word of English, and I know just how much work they have needed to do to reach this far in the medium of English. It is also a tribute to the Jesuits who believed that such a transformation could take place.

I responded to Dinah's invitation to accompany her for a ten-day trip (I had been with her twice before) but sadly at the last minute she could not come. This changed the nature of my visit as I was expecting to teach some lessons and generally wander around Manvi and Pannur, but I found myself thrust into the limelight as many celebrations and "programmes" had been prepared and without Dinah there, I was expected to take the role of Guest of Honour. Those of you who have not been to India may not realise how hospitable and welcoming Indians are. One is greeted with lighted candles, marked with a red dot on the brow, garlanded with flowers, draped with a shawl and sometimes even crowned with a turban! Of course the downside to all this special treatment is that one has to respond and I calculate that I had to make at least five public speeches, several times without any advance warning. However I took this as a tribute to Dinah and all that she and her co-helpers have done to support the children and teachers of Pannur and Manvi.

Father Arun Luis is now the director of the whole mission and he was very diligent in showing me what had been done with some money that I had raised through my golf club. I was delighted to see that the boys' eating area is now roofed, enlarged and generally improved, that 60 stone benches had been erected in shady areas around the grounds where pupils can eat their packed lunches or study, and that improvements have been made to some of the classrooms, including equipping them with LCD screens. I did an extensive tour of the grounds, even inspecting the farm where buffalo, pigs, chickens and ducks are kept. The paddy fields provide rice and other crops such as a type of maize are also grown. I was interested to see that the central courtyard of the college has been transformed into a basketball court where I witnessed a very lively match between our pupils and a visiting team from a Capuchin school nearby. After the boys' match, what was even more entertaining, was a match between the Jesuit fathers and brothers and the Capuchin monks. I am happy to report that both games were won by the home side.

One of the main changes that I was aware of is the greatly enlarged community of Jesuits. There are now twelve in Manvi and another three at Pannur. This made for some very lively and enjoyable evening meals, (followed by keen games of dominoes) and even though all seem to work very hard, the atmosphere of mutual respect and support was palpable.

As well as walking round the Manvi site, Father Arun was keen to take me out to Pannur. This is the village where the Jesuits first started their work in this area of Karnataka. The school in Manvi was established a couple of years later. Pannur now has a large church, replacing the tiny chapel that was there originally, and of course the beautiful Kapepaladi primary school. I was taken there to witness the school assembly (and of course was asked to say a few words!) and see the improvements to the hostel and the tailoring school. There I had a most welcome surprise, as one of the pupils that I taught during my time at Manvi is now the tailoring teacher. Mariamma, who came from Pannur herself, is now conducting a class of about a dozen young ladies, teaching them machine sewing, embroidery, pattern cutting, knitting and crochet. These skills will enable them to earn their own living, even when they are married, as well as being able to clothe their own families. Mariamma produced a birthday card which I had sent her six years ago and showed me an embroidery sampler that she had done with me in our sewing club, pointing out one row of red chain stitch which she said I had stitched. I felt humbled at how much she had treasured these things, which I had completely forgotten about.

We went back to Pannur again on the Saturday evening for their "School Day" celebrations. This was very much like an English end-of term Speech Day and concert, where each class performed a dance, sang a song or put on a short play. The standard of performance was excellent and reflected a lot of dedication from the teachers and students. This all took place outside with a velvety dark star-studded sky above us and was followed by a delicious Biryani for all. On my trips out to Pannur in the Jeep, I noticed how green the fields were either side of the road. Father Arun told me that there should be good harvests this year as the rains had been good – but unfortunately because of the heavy rainfall, three bridges between Manvi and Pannur were washed away and the road was precarious in several places. We may complain of pot-holes here, but at least the bridges are replaced, out there we had to negotiate steep banks down to the river bed and up the other side, quite unnerving for this nervous passenger and probably completely impossible for an ox and cart.

I spent some time interviewing sponsored children to provide information about them and their family situation. It was difficult with the younger children, most of whom were too shy to give more than an assent or denial, but Sister Philomena was usually able to fill in the details. With the older pupils it was interesting how often they wanted to express their thanks for the help they are receiving, and it is good to know that they appreciate the chances they are being given. Several times the older student whom I saw in Manvi said that they longed to see their sponsors and missed seeing the ones whom they had met. Again this was touching and humbling too, to realise how much our contact with these pupils is appreciated.

On the Sunday that I was in Manvi, the school hosted a Children's Day celebration. This event was for children from other schools who were provided with breakfast and lunch and invited to take part in games and sports. It was a very lively and noisy day, which seemed to be enjoyed by all. I had taken out some used tennis balls from our local tennis club, and was delighted to see these used in several of the games. The whole atmosphere was very like an old-fashioned village fete, each child was entitled to take part in four contests and they were quite serious in choosing the ones in which they could best compete.

My last full day happened to be Indian Constitution Day and there was a special programme for the Sixth Form students. The Indian Constitution, I learned, was drawn up 70 years ago by a Dalit, B. R. Ambedkar, who very unusually, rose to have a high position in the Indian establishment. He studied the written constitutions of 60 other countries before writing his own version and we were asked to swear allegiance to it. I was most impressed by how liberal and all-encompassing the oath of allegiance was and gladly swore to uphold it too. It was very good for these students, 90% of whom are Dalits themselves, to realise that their lowly social status is not enshrined in law, however much

custom still discriminates against them, and that one of their number is so respected and well remembered. And you can see that I learned a lot that day too.

My time was now coming to an end. I was sorry not to have been able to take more lessons; I had only taught three times, a 10th Standard class, on a poem by Ogden Nash. As I had brought some pens with me I went to see Father John, whose class it was, to ask him to give the pens to the pupils. He suggested that I went up to their classroom as it was just before registration, to give them out myself, which I did. As I was leaving the classroom, having explained that I was leaving that day, one of the girls came forward and gave a little speech, thanking me for teaching them, and then, to my great surprise, the whole class burst into song. If only pupils in England would be so grateful for a little bit of instruction!

Dinah and I had planned our journey to be by way of Hyderabad for a particular reason. Thirteen past pupils are now living in Hyderabad and working at Tata in that city. Father Eric, whom they all knew so well when he was running the show at Manvi, had agreed to come with us to meet them all at the end of our trip. And so it came to pass. Father Royston kindly drove us all the way, dodging lorries, motorbikes, ox carts, and bicycles, and managed to negotiate the terrible rush-hour traffic in Hyderabad to meet our students at a hotel. There we found that they had prepared yet another programme for us, with speeches, garlands, turbans and a meal. It was wonderful to meet so many pupils I had known and taught and spent time with and to see how grown up and confident they now are. We had a very happy evening together and then I was escorted to the airport.

I am so pleased to be able honestly to say how satisfactory I found virtually everything on this visit. It was rather hot, my shower did not work, and I still do not like having curry for breakfast, but I could not have been treated more kindly, nor felt more welcomed and included in the life of the community. The operation of the schools, college, hostels and compounds seems to me efficient and fair. I discovered, which I had not realised before, that the Jesuits are not allowed to convert anyone to Christianity, so in effect what they are doing here in this very poor part of India, is working for the sake of humanity, working to make life better and to improve the opportunities for an oppressed and neglected portion of society, and what they have achieved in a relatively short time, is well worth our support.

Catharine Vincent

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