

THREE PROJECTS IN INDIA

Mangamanuthu
and
Tiruchirappali

BACKGROUND

When the Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell, announced that all Scottish schools should take up the challenge of *Global Citizenship* and integrate it into schools more explicitly, we took up the challenge.

Mrs Leck had come back from the CHAS conference to tell us of the work being done by St Michael's Academy, Kilwinning, in linking with a school in Malawi. Curiously St Michael's is in a similar position to Lawside in that it is merging with St Andrew's Academy into a new school, called St Matthew's, in Saltcoats.

I took up the challenge to find a community with which Lawside could link, and by chance came across a series of projects run by the Marist Brothers under the umbrella of an organisation called BIS. (Le Bureau International de Solidarité).

One project in Southern India caught my attention almost immediately. It was a Primary and Secondary school community which was under the guidance of the Marist Brothers community in Tiruchirappali in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. I spoke to Brother Douglas who started to use his extensive network of contacts within the Marist Brothers, and he tracked down the co-ordinator of the BIS projects in Rome, Brother Dominick Pugia. He immediately gave us all the information we needed to start and access to a set of photographs from his last trip to the project, in January 2006. After a series of consultations within Lawside Academy, the school complex was officially taken up as our *Global Citizenship* project.

I had not expected the speed with which the initiative accelerated. After a conversation with our Education manager, within 3 months unexpected funding was put in place to allow Mrs Leck and I to travel to India to see for ourselves what could be done. We decided to bring Br Douglas along with us and in a rash moment he agreed.

Mrs Leck was unable to make the actual journey through ill health so Br Douglas and I travelled out to Southern India in January 2007 naively anticipating that we would only be initiating the links between our own School and that of the Marist Brothers in Mangamanuthu, a small village near the town of Dindigul in Tamil Nadu state.

MANGAMANUTHU

When we arrived we found that we had to rethink everything that we had planned to do. The Marist Brothers based in Tiruchirappali, run a number of projects one of which is the school complex in Mangamanuthu.

The Secondary School, which is two years old, was well run, and is thriving. There is also a Primary school which had been opened in 1908 by the Diocese but which had been given over to Marist Brothers in the 1980's. On the opposite side of the playground the Marists built a temporary complex of huts to house the post primary children. The children were a mixture of Hindus and Christians who all belonged to the lowest caste in India, called Dalits (formerly called untouchables).

Some time ago the Marist Brothers from Australia, through the BIS project, had secured funding from the province of Castile in Spain to build a replacement secondary school.

The Marists recruited a number of local people to teach in the school. Some of the brothers also teach in the school, but the head teacher was a local man, whose father still lived in the village.

By Indian rural standards it was well appointed and was already very successful in getting all of its students through the state exam system, having achieved a 100% in the previous session. What it lacks is basic resources such as stationery, books, and some technical equipment. The children and young staff were very enthusiastic and very welcoming.

What we had not expected was the extreme poverty in which most of the pupils and staff had to live in the villages next to the school. The good work which was being done in the school was being undermined by the lack of even the basic amenities in the area. The following is from a paper prepared by Br Santhosh Changath, the Bursar for the Marist brothers in India, and who manages the projects.

Mangamanuthu is a small hamlet having 125 households with 750 people. It is located around 17 kms. away from Dindigul, the district and diocesan headquarters.

The entire population belongs to two sub castes namely Parayan and Pallars, part of what is called a Scheduled Caste: known as Dalits (formerly called untouchables). Culturally people from other castes do not easily mix with these people. The interaction with the others is only during the work. They even cannot associate socially with higher caste people and their very presence higher castes believe would pollute the environment. In some extreme cases they are sometimes not even considered to be human beings. Dalits are supposed to have been given protected (scheduled) status by the Government of India, thus guaranteeing some privileges for welfare schemes, but this has been modified to include only Hindu Dalits, but, since these people are mostly Christians, they are excluded from the definition of being members of the Scheduled Castes

Most of the people are agricultural labourers, small landholders and casual labourers who depend on rain for the cultivation. But most of the years the monsoon fails and they are unable to cultivate even one crop, where three is the norm for the rest of India. Thus 75% of the people live in extreme poverty and misery. For the last three years there was acute water scarcity due to the failure of the monsoon. They cannot maintain even the basic necessities of life. They certainly cannot afford to send children to school since they are needed to earn money.

Many people are driven to migrate to urban and town areas. With a low level of education, no special skills, most young people take low-paying jobs or work for those who do not respect their human rights. Many young unemployed boys and men drift in anti social activities. Adolescent girls and young women are usually anaemic and are often very weak. On moving to the urban environment they cannot compete in the job market and are forced into prostitution.

Almost all the families have had to take loans from the local moneylenders on a very high interest rate. The awareness level of both men and women are poor on various aspects of their living. Most of the people live in poor thatched huts that cannot protect them from rain & sun.

So the overall picture shows that the people in this area lead a very poor quality life from the point of health, social development and employment.

When we saw these conditions for ourselves we realised that the real key to helping the children in the schools in Mangamanuthu was to help to rebuild their homes. The standard village house is 15feet by 10 feet in area. Most have mud walls and banana palm roofs. Some do not have even the mud walls, only rattan matting. They are not wind and water tight. There is one standpipe in the village drawing from a deep borehole, which supplies just enough water for cooking and very

basic washing. The well was previously contaminated and cannot be used safely. Apart from the one or two families who have been able to acquire homes with solid walls and a rigid roof, the rest cannot have electricity in their homes, for fear of fire.

Poverty also manifests itself in other ways. Since nightfall is around 6.30 every day, lack of lighting means that children are unable to study at home. We noticed that the school was running a program where it would leave the lights on in the external assembly area in front of its building so that the pupils could meet and study there from 6.30 until midnight. Most of the girls in the area came to these evening study sessions in the week we were there, and it was planned to alternate this arrangement for the boys.

All the pupils wore a basic school uniform. This is the norm throughout India. They are proud to wear it because it shows that they have managed to get a place in a school. However we found out that they can only wear it on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. It gets so hot and sticky that after two days the uniform needs to be washed, and since they can only afford one school outfit they are allowed to attend school on Wednesday in what ever clothes they have. The uniforms get washed on Tuesday and Friday evening.

It is estimated that it would cost £750 to rebuild one house completely with a decent foundation, solid floors and walls, a rigid roof, and supplied with electricity thus allowing a range of activities to be carried out from home. Children would be able to study at home. With power, small cottage industries could be encouraged, such as machine sewing and wet-milling rice. This would give additional income to the families

The people themselves do not want charity. They simply need the means to raise themselves up in a society which is treating them unfairly. Women are still treated poorly in Indian society and lack empowerment. Over a six year period a great deal could be done to raise the living standards locally, perhaps by providing enough money to start credit unions that could award loans to rebuild the houses and retrain people in small projects.

With a little extra income parents would be able to free children to go to school. With education the Dalit communities, especially the

women, would be able to organise themselves socially and legally to be able fight against their exploitation.

The Marist Brothers have drawn up the outlines of a project to rebuild the village physically and socially and this document will be presented to the groups who want to become involved in this kind of project.

TIRUCHIRAPPALI

OPERATION RAINBOW

While we were staying with the Marist brothers in Tiruchirappali, we witnessed two other projects where we could see the opportunity to offer some help to the Dalit communities in the area..

The Brothers run a project called Operation Rainbow which provides community-based care and support specifically for children and mothers affected by and suffering from HIV/AIDS around the Trichy area of Tamil Nadu.

This is an extract from a document prepared by the Marist Brothers who set up the project:

Our project concentrates on the wider Trichy area. This city is in the very heart of the state and thus is an important crossroads for people and commerce. It is also a major centre for institutions of higher education.

Tamil Nadu has been identified as an 'at risk' area in terms of HIV / AIDS. A base-line figure of 1% of the population is often quoted but hard statistical data is impossible to come by. The main source of information is blood-testing done in hospitals when people present themselves for chronic respiratory problems or gastric fevers as well as precautionary testing done on pregnant women.

Broadly speaking, the main source of transmission of the virus is heterosexual activity between male travellers, particularly truck drivers, and commercial sex workers. The men pass the virus on to their wives. Unaware that they are HIV-infected, the wives do not seek special medical help during pregnancy and some of their children are born carrying the virus.

Our own experience over four years of active involvement in the field highlights that infected persons are reluctant for their condition to become public for fear of discrimination and rejection. This leaves them isolated

and in a precarious position financially, particularly when the male wage-earner is unable to hold down his work through ill-health. Many are clinically depressed besides being physically ill. They are also extremely anxious about providing for the well-being and education of their children now and their future as they risk being orphaned. This anxiety and even guilt is compounded when the children are HIV positive.

Since mid-2004, the government has been providing free anti-retroviral drugs to 'patients' whose CD4 count falls below 200. This initiative promises a healthier and extended life for many. It is not a cure, however, and health crises and anxieties continue; discrimination persists. In the case of infected children, the provision of an adequate diet remains essential.

The brothers estimate that within 5 years every household in the area in which they are working will have someone who is HIV positive or who has moved on to full AIDS. Once the community identifies someone as being HIV they are ostracised in the villages, and the children lose access to the schools. The ordinary people react to HIV and AIDS in much the same way as they used to react to Leprosy, and the public information from Central government, delivered by TV, Radio and newsprint largely passes them by, and they remain ignorant of the realities of its transmission.

The Brothers train social workers from the local universities to work with the HIV/AIDS victims and assess their future needs. The families are visited twice a month or come to the offices for counselling. Long term support structures are set up for the children in those families where the health of the parents is severely challenged. Material and nutritional help is provided daily for the children.

The brothers fund the local drug treatment for affected children, and have undertaken extensive educational initiatives to bring schooling to the children.

They are hoping to fund an initiative to give these families the means to make a living from home, since their illness means that they cannot hold down a regular job. They are trying to provide them with domestic machinery such as sewing machines and irons which would allow them to be trained to make clothes and do repairs for a living. They would also like to provide small electrically driven rice mills to let some families earn some money by producing rice flour for the local economy

STREET CHILDREN

We were witnesses to a project where children who cannot attend school through extreme poverty or family illness are gathered together around street lamps in the villages and alleyways and the brothers conduct classes for the children. We saw local churches leaving their external lights on at night, in the same way as the school in Mangamanuthu, so that children could gather to study.

These children need all the basics for an education that we take for granted since they have nothing.

The Brothers are planning to take 100 of these children into their own Marist House over the summer holidays for an intensive schooling and social project giving lessons and meals. This will cost the equivalent of £1200 for the whole project and includes the cost of a teacher for the duration.