

English Vincentians Visit to North East India January 2008

From 28 December 2007 to 13 January 2008 I visited India on behalf of the International Relations Committee (Twinnage) and was accompanied by Bro Peter Salvatori and his wife Pamela. At the personal request of Bro Joseph Pandian, the Indian National President we included a 4-day visit to the north east of Indian and in particular the states of Assam and Meghalya. It came as a surprise to me that this area of India has the highest density of Catholics and even more of a surprise to discover that we were the first overseas Vincentians to visit the area. Arriving in Guwahati (Assam) on 2 January with Bro Joseph and his wife Mary we were met by Bro Rao the Regional Projects Officer and Bro Frances Xavier from Patna as well as other local Vincentians. We were accommodated at the Montfort Fathers Home near Guwahati surrounded by jungle. Soon after arriving we attended a lovely Mass in the basement of the school building celebrated by Fr Mathew, the spiritual advisor of Christ the King Conference, Dispur. Then we were given a cultural show



with a variety of outstanding dances. The area was tribal and facial features had changed into more Chinese/Burmese appearances. The North east is particularly tribal and the predominant local tribe locally appeared to be the Bodos. Other Conferences were present to meet us – St Joseph Panbazar (Bodo tribe), Snehalaya Conference (Assamese), and St Francis de Sales, Narangi (Adivasi). Pamela and I were given the honour of handing out student grants to a number of young people who had been adopted by the Conference. The SVP is embryonic in the north east and our visit was intended to raise the profile and enthusiasm of the members. Certainly the development of the Society here appeared to be taking off and I should like very much to return in a few years to see how far this development has progressed.

Thursday 3 January

It was up early for a 06.30 breakfast then on the road by 07.00. Only Joseph Pandian and myself travelled with Bro Rao to visit the site of a proposed Health Centre at Nagarjuli “somewhere” in Assam. It was not necessary to take the others so Pamela elected to stay with Peter and Mary with the two of them. Good choice! It was a long, long journey into remote Assam. The last 15-20km was along an earthen road the like of which I have never encountered before and hope never to do so again! It was built in a great hurry when the Chinese invaded India in 1962 and has never been repaired since – despite various promises from a number of politicians (obviously a global scenario!). It became a standing joke for me to ask the driver “how much further?” to which he would reply “just one more km!”

The SVP in England & Wales had been left a substantial legacy to use “for the benefit of our works overseas” and National Council of India (NCI) had proposed we fund the building of a Health Centre in Nagarjuli. The Twinnage Committee had tasked me with investigating the project and reporting back. We eventually arrived just before 10.00 at Nagrijuli that is situated quite close to the border with Bhutan. It is in the middle of nowhere. We stopped at the beginning of the drive to the Church and were met by crowds of locals and then led slowly to our seats by two lines of dancers. This area is inhabited by tribal peoples but there is a very strong Catholic population. We had no option but to have our feet washed by some delightful young ladies as this is the local tradition. I was a very willing volunteer!



The school building can be seen in The Parish Priest and his assistant where the Health Centre would be Archdiocese of Guwahati and the the land to be used for this below is shown the field where the which amounts to about 1½ acres road to be built from the main road serves 14 local villages and so the is very high. The people come



the picture behind the dancers. then took us to the actual site built. This land belongs to the Archbishop was prepared to allow purpose. In the picture on the left Health Centre will be built and and will be accessed by a good (“that road!”). The Parish Church catchment area for medical patients from three distinct tribes: the Bodo;

the Aswathi; and the Khasi (nothing to do the 'Carry on up the Khyber!' There is a great mixture of the main religions but as always, everyone who needs treatment receives it of course.

A new presbytery is nearing completion and the two priests had been living in temporary accommodation but had moved into the school building as a herd of 15 wild elephants had taken a dislike to their temporary quarters and destroyed it!

At present there is a very small dispensary run by the Handmaids of Mary Sisters since 11 April 2005 available for all the local population and this has been very successful. In the almost 3 years to date a incredible total of 43,150 patients have been treated by this dispensary for a wide variety of ailments:



The picture to the left shows the field with the school building in the left background and the new presbytery just visible to the right. The current dispensary is located next to the school buildings. As will be quickly appreciated, the Health Centre will be located very close to the Church and Presbytery. It is proposed that the Health Centre will be run by one of the current Sisters – Sr Mary Mathew.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the Health Centre reflects an extraordinary opportunity to help the local Poor and Needy as well as the general population. I am sure that the benefactor of the legacy involved will be smiling down on our intentions. For the locals to have in-patient facilities for all sorts of medical requirements is beyond their wildest dreams and there will be maternity beds available. I also feel that as we will not be required to meet future running costs it will be an easier project to manage.

As an aside, I asked the ancient parish priest two questions:

"What currently happens in an emergency, say, with a heart attack?" He responded that they simply send the patient along the bumpy road which is likely to act as a defibrillator! From my experiences I believed it!!

"Do you have Englishmen visit this remote area very often?" After consulting the locals he responded that the last Englishman/White person to visit the village was a tea planter before Independence in 1946!! At his age he could probably just remember too.

On return to the Montfort Centre and a short stop we left in turn for Shillong in Meghalya state – a journey of about 70km. On arrival, we had to leave immediately to attend a meeting with two local Conferences at the Divine Saviour Parish. When we arrived we found they members had been waiting for us for two hours – sadly not uncommon with timetables in India! The meeting followed with speeches from all of us and gifts before we were asked to hand out scholarship grants. Then we were treated to local singing – this was accompanied by music played on old and modern instruments - and dancing which as always was beautiful and very much appreciated by all of us. I noticed how the facial features had changed again and there was even more of a Chinese and Burmese influence. Bro Joseph had made it one of his missions to expand the Society in the north east and he wanted to form a new Central Council as soon as was practical. I tried hard to encourage the members to go out and develop the Society and they took up my challenge. I hope to hear of the formation of a new Central Council in the near future.

Friday 4 January

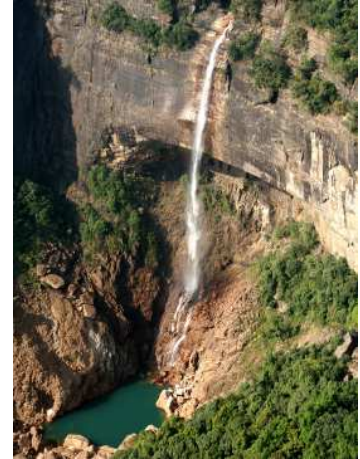
After a good breakfast we left for a meeting with Archbishop Dominic (Shillong) at 09.00. A very warm, friendly Archbishop who is clearly a man-of-the-people and someone that anyone can easily relate to. He was a tribal himself being a Khasi and was clearly respected by the faithful. Then we moved on to the Divine Saviour Conference again as we had requested the opportunity to meet their adopted families. It coincided with the morning on which the Conference handed out various supplies to the adopted families to help them subsist. The appearance of the adopted families was that they were very poor but



very grateful for the help given them by the Conference. I was very impressed by the aims and ambitions of the Conference(s) to help the local Poor and Needy. After all, to reiterate, the SVP is still embryonic in this area of India.

After this meeting we left for some sight-seeing to Cherrapunji and this involved a very scenic journey and not too long for once. I recall my mother telling me that Cherrapunji was recorded as the wettest place on Earth and I had always wanted to visit. Yet another personal ambition fulfilled. Wettest place on Earth it

may be but our visit coincided with the dry season and that is what it was – bone dry! We enjoyed some stunning views of the foothills around us we were also able to look down on Bangla Desh and it was easy to see why it rains so much as the winds come up from the Bay of Bengal carrying the moisture and then hit the foothills where Cherrapunji is situated. We then carried on through Cherrapunji to a hilltop plateau from where we had spectacular views of a high waterfall – I would love to see this in action when the stream is in spate. We then had a lovely lunch in a “restaurant” that could really best be described as a roadside shack. Pamela and I were able to buy delightful wooden



Rosary Decades here too. Another sign that there were many Catholics in the area. Soon it was off back through Shillong to the Montfort Centre at Guwahati for an evening meal and a little rest.

The day had started with official SVP engagements but had morphed to a little sightseeing and relaxation. However, again we got know our hosts even better.

Saturday 5 January

A very early breakfast and Centre and the Sister who then drove to Guwahati said by Archbishop Thomas With a name like that he Kerala and so it proved as out to be a former most of us on the Twinnage who we would be staying been a Bishop for over 25 north east of India. After a breakfast with the Archbishop and staff. After breakfast we negotiated with the Archbishop for the grant of the land for the Health Centre at Nagarjuli. He was a very shrewd businessman and I would not like to horse-trade with him! It was agreed that the Diocese would grant the use of the land for the Health Centre but there were still a few administrative points to clarify and this would be done by NCI in discussion with the Archbishop. I left with the understanding that the Health Centre project would proceed but I would report back to our Committee in England. We left the Archbishop and his staff having received a pile of books about him and his career. Then it was off to the airport for the flight to Calcutta.



happy farewells to the Montfort had looked after us so well. We itself where we attended Mass Menampampil especially for us. had to have originated from he came from Palai and turned classmate of a great friend of Committee – Bro V K Ignatius – with in a few days time. He has years and is well respected in the beautiful Mass we had a tasty