

## SVP TWINNAGE – A VISIT TO THE TRIBAL AREAS OF NORTH AND NORTH EAST INDIA

At the end of December 2012, Bros John Wild (Arundel & Brighton Twinnage Organiser) and David Wiles (National Twinnage Committee (NTC) & Southwark) undertook a visit on behalf of the NTC to some of the tribal areas of North and North East India (the “seven sister” states).



Aims: to develop relationships and our understanding of the needs of the Society in these areas for prayers and financial support. To get first-hand experience of some of the projects sanctioned by SVP(E&W) and to investigate the success and promote the Education Scholarship programme sponsored by E&W.

The Seven Sister states comprise the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. Our visit was to Assam and Meghalaya where the SVP is now established. Currently only one CC exists – Guwahati, the capital of Assam. However, all seven states are largely Christian having been converted by protestant missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now, many of these are converting to Roman Catholicism. In Assam alone there are more than 90 different tribes including the Assamese, with many differing languages and dialects.

Although David visited Guwahati in 2008, this was the first time he had met Sr Gwendolene Menzies the CC President who immediately shone as an extremely hard-working and devoted member of the Society. She continues to strive to start a new CC in Shillong in Meghalaya and covers hundreds and hundreds of miles – all by public transport or foot – to this end as well as other areas of the north east. A remarkable lady indeed!

The area is extremely under-developed and outside of the main towns power is very scarce and there is much poverty. It is an area ripe for the works of the SVP. Bro Balaswamy the Indian National President has stated that the priority for the National Council of India (NCI) is now to target its resources at the North and North East.

We first visited a Conference in Narangi, Guwahati where we distributed 50 solar lamps paid for by E&W project funding. This will primarily help the children of the homes where there is no electrical power to do their homework in the evenings. The lamps are an innovation for these areas as they are charged by the sun and a full charge will last for up to 7 days **at no cost to the owner**. Each lamp provides several lumens and when not used by the children will provide light to the household generally. Clearly eco-friendly and costing E&W only about £18 each with a 6 year guarantee these lamps are surely a remarkable investment.

Travelling next to the very remote Nagrijuli, we visited the Health Centre that E&W project funds - £20,000 - had built following David's recce in 2008. This was to provide treatment to members of 17 neighbouring villages belonging to various tribes such as the Bodos (pronounced “Borrows”), Santhals, and Adivasi. The main complaints treated include malaria, hepatitis, bronchitis, asthma and skin complaints. There was also facility for a few in-patients. Sr Mary of the Handmaids of Mary actually runs the health centre – when it was built we had received an assurance that the Guwahati Diocese would fund the running costs but this had since been summarily withdrawn and the Sisters were meeting the funds needed – about £200 a month. {At a recent meeting of the NTC it was agreed to send a sum of £200 each quarter to assist with the running costs}. Sr Mary was assisted by some young Adivasi girls who she was training but who receive no remuneration for their work. Clearly the Health Centre was a very sound investment by E&W that provided care to a remote region where nothing had existed before.



Nagrijuli Health Centre

From Nagrijuli we travelled to within 7 miles of the Bhutan hills (fording two rivers on the way) to another extremely remote village, Kumri Kuta where we were able to distribute several Vidya Jyothi scholarships for young children.

Next day we travelled to another remote area at Chandrapur which had been devastated by last year's floods from the mighty River Brahmaputra – the vast flood plain was quite obvious. It was New Year's Day and we attended Mass at St Thomas Church on the top of a steep hill without any power supply. The local tribe was the Garos who packed the church. Of interest was the Offertory procession when many locals took food to the Priest including a live goat (for milk, not for eating!). Afterwards we met with a nearby Conference and assisted with giving rice and pulses (about 10kg) to Poor families. Then we also distributed more solar lamps and bicycles to children of school age – funded by E&W. The children had a distance of 15km to travel to school (15km back) each day.



New Bicycles with owners



Solar Lamp Distribution



Distribution of food to the poor & needy

Next day we travelled the “kamikaze” road to Shillong in Meghalaya State – the road is indicative of the underdeveloped nature of the area. It was a long series of patches of reasonable surface interspersed with lengths of reconstruction that provided a very rough ride indeed! Shillong is currently an Area Council under Guwahati CC as it requires 3 more Conferences to become a CC in its own right. It was very cold here being just under 5,000 feet above sea level and surrounded by the Khasi Hills, the local tribe being the Khasis. Apart from the Khasis we also met members of the Jaintias tribe. At each stop we were able to distribute scholarships particularly under the Vidya Jyothi scheme. It was quite obvious that many local Poor depended on the SVP for their very survival. The Khasi Hills are well-populated but very remote and our support is definitely required for the development of the SVP. It is a very scenic area with some panoramic views.

After a few days in Calcutta we travelled by train to Jamshedpur CC in Jharkand State - again very much a tribal area. The station is called “Tata Nagar” because the Tata Steel firm paid for its construction. Examples of the works carried out here are: regular visits to the adopted families in their homes; sick in hospital; medical assistance; several self-help projects such as furniture works, sewing, grocery, rickshaw, community well, and house repairs.

The next day we visited St Anthony’s Conference in Mango which is twinned with Southwark CC but under the personal sponsorship of David and his



St Anthony’s Members



Welcome Dance – drums made from mud



Bro C Thomas with beneficiary of bike for physically-challenged



Village house repaired and renovated by St Anthony’s

wife Lesley. The Conference is strongly supported by the parish priest and undertakes a variety of works. The Conference has also undertaken projects to repair local houses and construct a house for a family on land the SVP had purchased. We also distributed many scholarships to children and young adults. The local tribe is Adivasi and here it is worth noting that the Adivasi – an extremely friendly tribe – were “transported” by the British to Assam to provide cheap labour – not our most glorious moment of Empire.

Moving on to Ranchi we were welcomed by Bro N C Matthew CC President. The local main tribe being the Oraon. Other tribes we met were the Ho, Munda, Kharia & Santhal. After another two hour kamikaze drive we reached the remote area of Gumla where we were given an outdoor feast with the Conference and adopted families. Again, much work was in evidence with blankets and meals for the adopted families and scholarships for schoolchildren. Yet again we were entertained by wonderful tribal dancing. The following day we travelled afar to St John Berchman Conference in Dighia which is twinned with St John the Evangelist, Mongeham & Sandwich situated in David’s East Kent DC. Again a very remote and poor area. The parish priest allows the conference a collection once a month but this normally raises only about Rs 400 - £5. Even so, the conference provides blankets and other clothes, supports 6 adopted families and contributes to school fees. Yet another example of an Indian Conference achieving so much with so little at their disposal.



Adopted families of St John Berchman Conference

Overall impressions from the visit:

- There are a vast number of tribes in India of which we met at least ten
- There continues to be widespread poverty throughout India that the SVP is addressing within its limited means
- “Detractors” that feel India should not receive further support because the country is an industrialised nation with nuclear weapons, great wealth (for a very few), and a space industry are **wrong**, perhaps swayed by press reports. Over 500 million remain below the poverty line (UN figures) and once you step outside the main urban environments the poverty literally hits you in the face
- Education is the main key to escaping poverty. There is no free education system in India so the poor find it very difficult to educate their children: provision of education through our scholarship scheme is very tangible assistance and the scheme deserves full support from E&W
- Based on the sample of projects we visited, our money appears to be very well spent and the beneficiaries happy with the outcome
- In John’s words “Being driven around north east and north India is a very noisy and hazardous experience”

