

Visiting our Twins in India - 2016

By Stephen Hogg

In the last 2 weeks of January four members made a visit to our Twins in India. Terry Brown and Marie Branch visited the northeast of the country, while Adrian Abel, our National President, and myself, Stephen Hogg, Twinnage Officer for Portsmouth CC, visited the southern Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the city of Mangalore. These visits are made every three years with the purpose of further developing our relationship with our Indian members, in particular the new Indian National President, Johnson Varghese, and his National Council members, who have just completed the first year of their six-year term. We also wanted to see some of the projects that we have funded in recent years, while trying to resolve issues that have been highlighted in correspondence. Such visits allow us to see with our own eyes how the money is spent in India, an increasing statutory requirement for charities sending money abroad.



We attended 15 CC meetings as well as a number of Conference meetings. At some meetings there were over 100 people present, and they always started with prayer, often sung! The clergy, who were often very young, were very involved and supportive of the Society's work in India. At nearly all our meetings there was a priest present, who knew in detail what their Conference was doing for the poor and needy in their parishes. Likewise, we met six Bishops, who all clearly saw the Society as a major asset in their work with the

poor in their Dioceses.

The Indian CCs generally meet monthly, and sometimes fortnightly when they are managing big projects like the building of homes for the aged. It is not unusual for there to be a Conference operating in every single parish in a CC area! One member was celebrating having started his one hundredth Conference! The average number of members in a Conference is around 15, compared with about 8 in this country. Members seem willing to stand for office in a Conference and see it as an honour, not a burden.

We visited several projects, one of the biggest being the Ozanam Education Centre, funded by Shrewsbury CC, where they teach tailoring skills, and computer skills to young people in the Thuckalay area. We visited homes for the elderly and destitute, all funded by the Society, and even stayed in one of them for a couple of nights. At some of the meetings Adrian and I were asked to distribute sewing machines that were given as part of a revolving project, and we also gave out student sponsorships to candidates, as well as Jubiloans for small businesses.



There is an assumption in our country that most Indians speak English, and while it is used as a language to link people across the country, at the local level in Southern India, very few people speak, let alone write the language. They often have to rely on the priest translating English letters

into the local language which in Tamil Nadu is Tamil, and in Kerala Malayalam. This makes correspondence with Twins difficult. We were also warned that the postal system in India is often unreliable. To overcome this problem, the Indian National President is insisting that all his CC presidents communicate by email rather than hard copy. Some Conferences complained of lack of correspondence, but we discovered that this was often where the Twin had gone into abeyance in our country.

In summary, we found the work of the Indian Society to be 'inspiring'. Their commitment to the work of the Society, and enthusiasm in very difficult circumstances, was apparent for all to see. We spent quite a lot of time with their National President and his National Council members, both formally and socially, and have certainly enhanced our relationship with them.

Members in India feel close to their brothers and sisters in England and Wales, and everywhere we went they insisted we thank all the Conferences who contribute. Even in the most remote parts, Conferences confirmed they are getting their grants. These grants help them to serve some very poor families in a country with almost no welfare provision, so the Society 'adopts' families and provides them with the bare basics needed to live. In rural communities the daily wage rate is £2.50 per day at most and that is if you can get work.

Another area where Conferences make a difference is help with medication for those suffering from



cancer. With no National Health Service, only the better off can afford the good treatment available to those who can pay. Although we have ceased raising money for the Jubiloan, this scheme has been a great success and the money is still 'revolving'. They estimated that 95% of recipients pay back their loans, which have been used to finance shops, garment making, purchasing pigs, cows and fowl. The Society in India was doing microfinancing before it became a well-recognised way of raising people

out of poverty, and we saw just how successful it has been.

All who have visited India and seen the work of the SVP first hand have been overwhelmed by the care and consideration given by our Brothers and Sisters in helping the most needy in their communities with regular support of food and essentials, help with the costs of medication and with school fees for the very poorest families so their children can get an education and a future.

Conferences in better off areas such as the cities are now starting to support the poorer Conferences through some internal twinning, but most of our Twins are in areas of desperate need and so the grants we send them are of immense value to the poorest of the poor. In fact, more Twins are desperately needed. Until 5 years ago Twins of Conferences in abeyance or who could not pay were the responsibility of the CC or DC until a new Twin was found. There is a 5-year limit on this kind of support and so we are now faced with a number of Twins which the CC or DC is no longer obliged to support. If your Conference or DC could take on another Twin, or if individual benefactors would be able to support a Twin for a limited period this will prevent us from having to withdraw our support from the most needy in India and our other Twin countries.