

Reflections on the District Visit to India – January 2020

The following is a short personal account of the visit which 6 members of this District made to the Diocese of Cuttack, Church of North India, in the latter part of January this year, in order to further our partnership with that area.

Deborah Kirk, TDSS Circuit

I was to make the outward journey alone, spend 4 days with hosts in Puri, a large coastal town, and then a small group from across the District would join me late on the Friday of the same week. We would spend a further week travelling around some of the churches and programmes of the Diocese, before returning together to the UK on Monday 27th January.

I had not travelled to India on my own before, but I managed not to get lost – a significant achievement, as those who know me will attest – and I arrived in Bhubaneswar late on Monday evening. There was a wonderful sense of returning; of looking forward to building on my earlier experiences and learning more about this complicated country; mostly there was the anticipation of renewing friendships made over several previous visits.

The next few days were spent with our hosts, Rev Surendra Mohanty and his wife Bulbul, their family, and their lovely staff members who help to look after the nursery school, the retreat centre, and the grounds of the charity 'The Christian Organisation of Development and Education'. As you can see from the picture, the Retreat Centre is a green oasis in the middle of a busy, dusty town.



Puri is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus, who flock to the Jagannath Temple, and the town's 'sea-beach' which attracts tourists. A continuous cacophony of sound assaults the ears from the incessant sounding of horns, wedding processions, calls to prayer from the mosque, and various political or business announcements over loud hailers. The weather was a balmy 20+°C, however our hosts muffled up in woollen hats and thick coats against the risk of catching a winter chill. One evening there was a heavy fog, which is apparently so unusual that everyone went outside to have their pictures taken in the eerie gloom.

During the quieter days before the rest of the team arrived, I spent time with the nursery children, chatting, reading, attending an afternoon prayer meeting, and doing a little shopping!

Since my last visit in 2018, the nursery school has grown to more than 70 children, all from very poor and needy families in the area. Attendance is free to the children, who are funded through sponsorship. Their parents seem to take great pride in the fact that their little ones are at school and they are supportive of the Christian ethos, even though many of the children are from Hindu families. The school was badly damaged in May 2019 by Cyclone Fani, which made landfall in Puri, and caused widespread devastation throughout the area. It is a great tribute to Rev Mohanty, his workers and supporters, that much of the damage to the school has now been repaired.



Rev Graham Thompson, Rev Stuart Innalls, Rev Liz Singleton, Mrs Anne Browse, and Miss Shannon Beveridge arrived on Friday night – a beautifully varied group, the members of which complemented one another wonderfully well and grew closer together through our shared adventures. Any barriers between us were quickly overcome as we laughed over the cold showers, mosquito bitten legs, salted fruit salad, and aching bones.

The Bishop of Cuttack, Surendra Nanda, had devised an interesting and varied programme for us, and we travelled long distances (sometimes 4-5 hours) in a beautiful 7-seater vehicle. We quickly worked out that the 3 who sat in the 'boot area' needed to be prepared to balance as best as they could on the

rear wheel arches – which was considerably less comfortable than it sounds. Many of the stretches of better road are regularly interspersed with ‘sleeping policemen’ in a bid to thwart any attempt at speed. Smaller tracks need no such traffic calming measures since the potholes serve the same purpose. After a particularly full day, the discomfort of one very long return journey was relieved by Liz downloading popular music from the 70s and 80s on her phone for us to sing along to – much to the amusement of the Bishop and our driver, and the good-natured tolerance of Shannon, who at 18 years old, had a completely different repertoire. A very bonding experience!

Approximately 80% of the population of Cuttack Diocese is made up of Dalit (non-caste) and Tribal peoples; of these, approximately 2% are Christian – around 900,000 people across the Diocese. The church is committed to serving the poor and excluded in their communities, irrespective of religion, and it does this in many imaginative ways through partnerships with other bodies, and through their social outreach programmes, aimed at improving hygiene, access to education and health facilities, agricultural and vocational programmes, etc.



The purpose of our visit was to consolidate the partnership that the Plymouth and Exeter District shares with the Diocese of Cuttack, a partnership based on friendship, learning, mutual support and prayer. It has taken several years to build trust and relationship, to discover the best way to demonstrate partnership, and to work through the difficult issues of communication, expectation and process.

We visited remote tribal villages where beautiful people welcomed us with garlands, singing and dancing, clasped our hands, and washed our feet; we experienced worship, and were able to bring greetings, reflections, and preach the Gospel through interpreters; we met young students training to be pastors and evangelists at the Theological College in Gopalpur; we visited the busy Christian Hospital at Berhampur with its impressive and visionary Director, Dr Nanda, and its little clinic (which this Circuit supports) in the remote area of Dengaambo.



We attended an area Revival Meeting, learned about social outreach and support for remote village communities as well as the slums in Cuttack, and we listened as Christian leaders spoke about how diversity in modern India is being increasingly discouraged, bringing challenges to minority groups.

There were so many moments of joy - the renewing of friendships and the making of new ones; evenings spent sharing meals in the homes of gracious hosts; and joining in vibrant

worship with people who have almost nothing materially, but who exhibit a deep prayerful dependency on the God who provides.

Little did we know that within a few short weeks, the lives of many of these people would be under the same developing threat as the rest of the world. On 23rd March, a country of 1.3 billion people was placed into lockdown by their Prime Minister, with 4 hours' notice and no preparation. Access to markets, employment, transport, and routes home for the thousands of migrant workers, all immediately closed down, the restrictions policed with violence. Arundhati Roy has written a powerful article about the current situation here:

<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

We are in daily contact with our friends in the Diocese, and exploring how to help in practical ways within permitted channels. Holding them in faithful prayer is the most valued and accessible response at the present time. I know that you will join me in doing this, as we remember our worldwide family in Christ.

Deborah