

In our February edition we had mentioned that Anne and her teenage daughter, Estelle, had decided to make their first trip to India to visit our school. We asked them to give us a report on their impressions....

After reading the excellent Newletters reporting on the activities and progress of the school, *Estelle* and I packed our bags this past February for an extra-ordinary trip.

By 'extra-ordinary', I mean off the beaten paths - - to meet part of the Indian population and observe and participate in their daily lives, far from the restrictions inherent in a standard tourist itinerary.

I also wanted to see another 'ordinary' life - far from my 'ordinary' in France which consists of almost 300 acres, 50 dairy cows, a model farm with all of the amenities of modern life - water, electricity, machinery, good roads, and of course, education for my three children.

After two days in Delhi and three days in *Agra* (we had to see the *Taj Majal*), we were eager to leave the cities to find the peace of the countryside and to discover *St. Anthony's School* where we knew we were expected. To get there, it took us 8 hours to make the 200 km (125 miles) trip because, even in the smallest villages, we had to deal with a lot of traffic on poorly maintained roads.

We finally arrive at the school. What a joy to find such a simple, peaceful place and to recognize some faces.

We deposit our bags in a building that during the next school year will house the new employees. The paint is hardly dry. Everyone had worked at breakneck speed to get the place ready for us.

We meet *Fr. Borgia* and all of the staff who are living there, each one offering us 'their' *chai*, a drink with milk, sugar and a their own mixture of spices.

We stayed there for 10 days with our program determined by the school schedules.

We gave talks about agriculture in all of the classes.



In the classroom, *Anne* explains farm life in France and the differences and similarities with the pupil's farm life in India.



Estelle learns how to wear a sari.

We attended English classes for the Indian teachers and embroidery classes for the village women.

We joined social workers on their rounds for a *Self Help Group*.

We went shopping at the food markets.

We visited a sugar mill during the harvesting of sugar cane.

We had the opportunity to travel with a group of women to a cooperative for the production of embroidered saris (an extraordinary afternoon as they so rarely ever leave the village).

I know that in order to give a full report we would have had to spend more time there and experience different seasons. Nevertheless, Estelle and I are going to share with you our most vivid impressions with an infinite respect for all of those who crossed our paths.

First of all, to appreciate India, you must relax and put aside (and it is not always easy) your western way of life and allow yourself to be carried by what you see, you feel, you imagine. Everything is so strange to us - often incomprehensible. The total chaotic disorganization of the Indians contrasts with the Western idea where everything should be rational, controlled, foreseeable and safe.

In India, the laws do not seem enacted to be applied. Each person seems to get along with a blend of individual liberty and rules dictated by his or her social group.

The archaic and the modern mingle - and always with a capacity for hope in all circumstances.

In this context, we came to realize the phenomenal energy of *Marc* and *Molly* (founders of *Œuvre des pains / Anthony's Charity*) who



Estelle joins the *Self Help Group* in the village.

brought this school into being and monitor its daily activities.

This is a disadvantaged part of India where the vast majority of pupils come from peasant families who raise one or two cattle and work a few acres of land in the traditional way. This labor requires lots of hands and does not create a setting for education.

I want to emphasize here that St. Anthony's pays particular attention to girls.

In this country of patriarchal rules where women do not 'exist' except through the men in the family, girls are being taught to think for themselves and become individuals in their own right.

The equality of the sexes and the right of education for all - are they not part of the Indian Constitution ?

Is it not in the largest democracy in the world ?

But in spite of laws, habits are hard to break and traditions control all aspects of family life.

Indian society is profoundly unequal.

One of the great features of the school is that education exists beyond the walls, reaching

out with a *Self Help Group* to the women of surrounding villages often including the mothers of the pupils. This is of benefit to all of the family, including the men.

And now Estelle will speak about the attitude of the pupils:

« Before I left for India, I had only a vague idea of the school - how it functioned - its pupils – its teachers. I had seen photos of the school and a great number of children wearing the red and blue uniform of St. Anthony's School.

I was surprised by the size of the school and the attention of the pupils during the morning assembly. They then lined up to proceed to their classes.

I had a real impression of order and respect that hardly exist any more in our French schools.

One point in common with our two countries: as in most institutions, the teachers talk



It is through Molly's leadership and dedication that the charity *Cŕuvre des Pains* (Anthony's Charity) became the founder and support of Saint-Anthony's School. Imagine that in 2003 there were only fields here !

about their 'worst' class – that is, the most undisciplined.

Other observations that impressed me: the difference of ages in some classes; the computer initiation training in some of the younger classes; the very good level of English in the older ones; the curiosity about French students (often treated as 'stars'); families being aided by social workers. »



The villager's welcome is always extraordinary.

I, Anne, felt that the pupils were so happy to meet us. There was great vitality among them and with some, signs of intelligence that only awaited cultivation.

I will finish by giving my impressions of the teachers.

Even if they bring a lot of enthusiasm, conviction and devotion to the classroom, their methods remain old fashioned. They are not at all accustomed to team teaching and one



Here is a riddle: How many can travel in a rickshaw ?

senses a spirit of rivalry with the system of seniority. I believe that with more contact with the outside world they will overcome this, will acquire more modern teaching methods and will put creativity above obedience.

In conclusion, I have about succeeded in realizing what we all have in common on this earth -- our humanity. The wall of differences is fading. I even felt, aside from our different living conditions, a solidarity and understanding with these women.

The cultural shock I expected to have upon arriving in India was actually produced when I returned to France. Everything seemed bourgeois and skimpy.

I went back to my regular life but did not feel quite the same.

I leave the final word to Estelle:

« My main souvenir will be the way my Mother and I were greeted. I believe I never will have such a warm welcome. Everybody was kind and friendly. I met so many wonderful people and hope to return again to India in a few years. »

Anne



Anne and Estelle have unforgettable memories of their visit at St. Anthony's School.

Saint-Anthony's School

Construction of Saint-Anthony's School was started with funding by the *Œuvre des Pains* (Anthony's Charity) in 2003 and today it has become the vibrant center of village life for all of the surroundings.

Rural India lacks basic infrastructure such as electricity, health care, and education. There are government run schools, but attendance is sporadic by pupils, by teachers. The caste system is still very prevalent.

Saint-Anthony's School started in 2004 with 160 children, 4 to 9 years old, in Nursery, Kindergarten and First Grade. A special effort was made to recruit girls, as the idea behind the school is that educating girls eventually educates a family. Beyond that, educating the mothers and other village women is a goal. In this society, there are fewer girls than boys due to female infanticide. Moreover, the mindset of the local population is to educate boys first - if at all. At the start the ratio of boys to girls was 4 to 1. There is some improvement for today it is 3 to 1.

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