

**Report to World Church Office on visit to  
The Diocese of Cuttack, CNI  
by Rev Alison Richardson and Rev Deborah Kirk : 6<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012**

**Purpose of visit:**

We received an invitation from The Right Reverend Dr Samson Das, Bishop of the Diocese of Cuttack, to lead a series of seminars on Women's Empowerment in various locations across the Diocese. The purpose of the seminars was to encourage the women, particularly in the rural areas, to appreciate the importance of education for themselves and their children as a tool for social reform. The Bishop also felt that we, as Probationer Ministers, would have the enthusiasm to encourage women in the church to offer themselves for ministerial training.

Following a pre-visit contact with Jill Baker, President of Methodist Women in Britain, we were also asked to gather stories/information which might help inform MWiB's proposed partnership of solidarity with the Dalit people.

**Background**

Orissa is one of India's seven poorest states. Much of the terrain away from the coastal towns is mountainous with a high percentage of tribal villages. The Diocese of Cuttack is the oldest of three Church of North India (CNI) Dioceses in Orissa. The area is divided into 4 pastorate unions, comprising 38 pastorates, approx 135 Christian congregations, and approx 12,214 communicant members. 80% of the members are Dalit and Adivasi people.

The Diocese runs educational institutions, including schools and one college in the urban centres of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar. It also runs schools in the rural areas, many of which were started by the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) and continue to provide vital educational services. The Christian hospital at Berhampur is run by the Diocese, as well as a small health clinic in the rural Gajapati pastorate which serves the surrounding villages.

**7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> January**

We landed at Bhubaneswar Airport early on 7<sup>th</sup> January, to be met by Bishop Samson and his driver Raoul. Our first engagement was to be the following day in a remote tribal village called Kutlari Gaon, deep inside the Gajapati District, in the south of the Diocese. After a 6 hour journey and short rest at the Diocesan Retreat Centre at Godalpur-on-Sea, we continued inland for a night at Godamaha, near to the hot sulphur springs at Taptapani. We met with Miss Jyostna Rani Patro, who was to be our interpreter on a number of occasions during our time in India. Miss Patro holds a number of Diocesan offices, as well as being the President of the All India Council of Christian Women, the President of the Women's Fellowship for Christian Service, and the representative to the UN Observer's Office in New York.

The following morning we set off again for the last leg of the journey up the forested slopes to the little Christian village of Kutlari Gaon, where approximately 500 people had gathered to welcome our party, and to hear our message. We were totally unprepared for the enthusiasm and warmth of the welcome – the floral bouquets and garlands, the singing, clapping, dancing, drumming, the foot-washing and reaching out to touch our hands and feet, were all very humbling. Our address was part of a bigger service of preaching, prayer and singing, and we



each had the opportunity to preach the gospel to the gathering.

We visited the Diocesan Mission Station at Ladruma on the return journey; run by Wardens Anand Radh and his wife Muni, the station co-ordinates health and education for the surrounding villages, and is home to around 40 boys – orphans and semi-orphans from the area. Here they receive an education – up to college standard for those who are able, vocational training and Christian teaching.

### **Monday 9<sup>th</sup> January**

The following day was a complete contrast – a Women’s Empowerment Seminar for the ladies of Oriya Baptist Church, Berhampur. This was a mixed audience comprising a few ladies from surrounding tribal villages, but predominately literate, educated women, some of whom were government workers, doctors and teachers. Some of these women held positions within their women’s fellowships, and they were interested in our women’s groups in UK. Alison shared the inspirational and encouraging story of her aunt – who grew up in Penzance and took the enormous step of travelling to India, where she was to spend over 40 years as a missionary.

The Reverend Mrs Sushma Kumar, is the only woman pastor in the Diocese of Cuttack ..... and that is in a diocese where the Bishop encourages the education, training and ministry of women. It was interesting to read that as far back as 2003, a statement from the CNI Synod said ‘The door is open: women have to prepare themselves for the task. Hence they can no longer say that it is a fight against men that they have to face, but it is a question of uplifting the status of women so that they can, in their own right, stand the test’. It is a matter of concern that ladies in his Diocese do not have the vision or the confidence to offer for ministry, but this is a reflection on the entrenched attitude to women in Indian society generally, which is compounded when the women are from the Dalit or Adivasi communities. We met two young girls, both from Adivasi (tribal) villages, who are being supported through their BTh and ministerial training, but even after they have qualified and been selected, they may have difficulty finding a congregation which is willing to accept an Adivasi woman as a pastor.

### **Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> January – Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> January**

An early start to speak to an assembly at Bhubaneswar Stewart School – one of five English medium schools run by the Diocese. The school is justifiably proud of its 1900 polite and motivated pupils. Some of these are boarders, some fee-paying, some subsidised by the Diocese and charitable giving.

Puri was the next destination, a popular seaside resort, and home to an elaborate Hindu temple, attracting vast numbers of Hindu pilgrims. We were to attend (and preach) at a wedding for a young Christian couple.

As the church is currently being rebuilt, the wedding took place in Puri Children’s Home still decorated brightly for Christmas (decorations remain in place until the end of January). The home, founded in 1985 by Rev Surendra Mohanty and his wife Mrs.



*Marriage of Biswa and Sweta*

Charushree Mohanty, now looks after and educates 40 boys and 20 girls – orphans and semi-orphans – with support given through sponsorship and fostering schemes under the charity Christian Organisation for Development and Education (CODE).



*Rev Mohanty & children from the Puri Children's Home*

The following day we had the opportunity to attend another wedding, this time of the daughter of the Secretary of the Diocese of Cuttack. A number of CNI officials gathered for the pre-wedding party, the Christian wedding and the reception afterwards. The Rt Revd Dr P Marandih, Moderator CNI, the Rt. Revd. P K Samantaroy, Deputy Moderator, and Mr Alwan Masih, General Secretary CNI Synod were among the guests to whom we were introduced during the day. We were also able to have an in-depth conversation with Kasta Dip, CNI Synod

Co-ordinator for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation, who told us about various challenges the Dalit and Adivasi people face, and CNI proposals for future strategies in their support.

### **Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> January**

Today we were accompanied by Mr Ullas Pradhan, Honorary Director, on a visit to the Khanditar Child Development Centre (KCDC), one of two CDCs in Orissa supported by a partner charity 'Compassion East India'. The Khanditar CDC provides children from the surrounding tribal communities with quality childcare and education, focussing on the holistic development of both the children and their communities, irrespective of caste, creed, gender and religion. Of the 248 children supported through the Khanditar CDC, only 23 are Christian, however over a number of years, the Hindu population has seen the Christ-centred work of the organisation, and the improvements in health and hygiene which have benefitted the communities, and it supports the work. We needed to quickly adapt our programme to be appropriate for a much younger, and largely non-Christian group.



*Pupils from the Khanditar CDC*

Later that evening, we were invited to the home of Mr Ullas Pradhan, to meet his wife Rani, his mother, his daughter Aditi, and his niece Veronica. It was a great privilege to be the guests of such gracious and inspirational people. Ullas has a background in industry, healthcare and social development, and explained to us some of the effects of globalisation and industrialisation on his country – on the one hand bringing wealth, world recognition and employment, and on the other, affecting pollution and ecological imbalance, displacing and marginalising some of India's poorest communities, and contributing to social problems such as migration and trafficking.

### **Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January – Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> January**

Friday was a free day(!) and we were taken by Rashmi to a Fabric Fayre, with sellers from each of the states of North India, a riot of colour and textures, sights and sounds. Rashmi's bargaining strategy on our behalf was formidable!

Our next engagement was in Ashrayapur, a small rural village in the Gajapati pastorate. This was a smaller group of women, a few literate, but most illiterate. Following our presentation, they asked questions about our women's fellowships, our families, and wanted to know about the young people in the church. CNI share our challenges and concerns over how to connect with young people. Several ladies came up for prayer, and some told us about the persecution they had suffered as converts to Christianity. One lady wanted us to pray that, after two daughters, her next child would be a boy, so that her Hindu husband would have the same respect as his brother who had sons. We responded as sensitively as we could with a prayer that her girl children would be respected and honoured in their future encounters. In rural areas of India particularly, girl children are not valued, and in one area of India, some are even named 'Nakushi', a word that means "unwanted". To be a Dalit or Adivasi woman, is to be disadvantaged socially, economically, and through gender. To be Christian adds another layer of discrimination since Christians and Muslims are not entitled to even the minimal 'rights' of the Dalit Hindus. We were asked to teach the group of women and children 'Who's the King of the Jungle' and 'Wide, wide as the ocean', and they joined in enthusiastically and with much giggling!



### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> January – Monday 16<sup>th</sup> January**

Sunday brought two preaching services in Bhubaneswar; Alison preached at the English service for the Stewart School pupils and their parents, with musical accompaniment and singing from the boys; I preached at the afternoon service, which was translated into the local language of Oriya. A visit to the Boys Hostel followed, and the opportunity to talk to the beautifully mannered and motivated teenagers about their hopes for the future. Education – and particularly English-medium education – is highly regarded, and seen as the strongest tool of empowerment for young people who would otherwise be discriminated against because of low caste or non caste status.

As the next day's programme was planned for the Christian fishing village of Pentakota, we journeyed to Puri for a night in the church house as guests of the pastor, Reverend Lohora and his wife Meena. The next day, a badly infected leg due to the numerous mosquito bites we had accumulated over the previous days, unfortunately prevented me from accompanying Alison to the seminar at Pentakota.

After a short car ride to the fishing village of Pentakota Alison found herself swamped in a sea of eager faces, all chanting and cooing with excitement. Ladies from three churches were present, many having to sit outside because the church is so small. There was need for three interpreters, due to three languages being spoken, in addition to English. Alison preached, focusing on the way Jesus liberated different women in his path, always encouraging and appreciating them, in an attempt to liberate and encourage the women present. Of the 30,000 Telugu fishermen and women, approximately 3000 are Christians. They are very poor, and mainly illiterate, with 95% people are living in a huts along the beach. The monsoon season brings great danger, as well as extremely difficult living



conditions. People are frequently washed away, and homes destroyed. There is no sanitation, and great need for food, education and clothing.

### **Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> January – Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> January**

The final day of our programme took us back to the Gajapati pastorate to deliver a seminar in the forest village of Denga-ambo to an audience of around 500 men, women and children. Here we met Sulakhani Mandal, a young lady from Denga-ambo studying for her BTh in Gopalpur with a view to becoming a pastor. Following the seminar, Alison was invited to open the new Health Clinic – a subsidiary of the Christian hospital at Berhampur, which had taken a year and 3Lac to build (1Lac = 100,000 Indian rupees). It would be a valuable service for the remote rural villages around.



*Alison opening the Health Clinic at Denga-ambo*

On the return journey, we stopped at Stewart School Mohana to share in their 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Day celebrations with prize-giving and various presentations from the children. Our last night in India was spent back at the hilltop Retreat Centre in Godalpur-on-Sea, now busy with groups of men and women who had gathered for a Christian conference; this centre for training, retreats, and Bible schools, has residential facilities for up to 100 people.

### **Concluding reflections**

Alison and I would like to thank the World Church Office of the Methodist Church for endorsing and enabling our visit. We are particularly grateful to Steve Pearce who met with us before our trip to give us vital insights into some of the challenges and opportunities we might experience.

The people of India were so gracious and welcoming, and exhibited such generosity towards us, that we felt extremely privileged to be their guests. It is the hope of both Alison and myself that we can contribute to the proposed MWiB project for solidarity with the Dalit people, and also that we may be able to encourage some local partnerships with churches and villages of the Diocese, so that we can support the work and mission among some of the poorest and marginalised people of the world.

*Deborah Kirk  
02.06.12*

