

FreeSchools— A Life-Changing Experience

Sue Tennant, Mark Bloomfield and Saskia Raevouri visit the FreeSchools in India, November 2006

For a while I had known that my friend Sue Tennant was supporting humanitarian Mark Bloomfield's work in India and Thailand and had established a Canadian charity, FreeSchools World Literacy, to sustain it. I had even been making a token monthly contribution, so when Sue suggested that I accompany her and Mark on a tour to see the schools firsthand, I thought it would be an interesting way to spend a vacation. Little did I know that it would change my life and give it a whole new meaning and purpose. ■ *by Saskia Raevouri*



Mark Bloomfield



Sr. Mary Crescence

Photos:
Sue Tennant
Mark Bloomfield
Saskia Raevouri

How it Began

This story starts in India with an Englishman named Mark Bloomfield, a world adventurer and humanitarian. It was in the early 1990s when working with Mother Teresa that Mark first met Sr. Mary Crescence of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who live and work in India's most undeveloped state, Bihar. While in Calcutta, Mark had organized temporary "eye camps" where volunteer doctors performed corneal surgery on the poor, and here he met Sr. Crescence in a hospital waiting room.

She told Mark about the conditions in Bihar, where thousands of villages were cut off from the twentieth century, with no modern conveniences, no medicine, and most of the people illiterate with no hope of rising out of their situation. The Sacred Heart Sisters had convents in most of the larger towns—Patna, Muzzafarpur, Motihari and Bettiah—and for 80 years they had provided medical aid through their dispensaries and education through their formal schools. To support the convent, each child was charged \$3 per month tuition, plus books and uniform, but some families were so poor that they could not afford the \$3. Others parents, themselves illiterate, saw no reason to send children to school who could work to help with the family income or take care of their younger siblings while the parents went out to labor in the fields.

Sr. Crescence told Mark about her dream to open non-formal schools for "untouchable" children to attend two hours a day, using existing classrooms and structures, even porches or backyards. Regular teachers, preferably female, would be



hired and earn overtime pay to teach basic Hindi, English and mathematics. Sr. Crescence had no funds with which to implement this plan, but Mark shared her vision and for the next few years he raised the money and sent it to her.

With an evening school functioning in the town of Motihari, in 2000 Mark paid a visit to the Sisters, accompanied by an Australian friend, Dr. Robert Coenraads, who was so impressed he decided to finance a second evening school in the town of Muzzafarpur.

In 2005, when Canadian Sue Tennant, herself a humanitarian, met Mark and heard about his work, she was inspired to form FreeSchools World Literacy, a Canadian charity with the mission of supporting, sustaining and expanding the schools, not only in Motihari and Muzzafarpur but also in Patna and Bettiah and neighboring villages.

Some villages were so primitive and the inhabitants so superstitious that the Sisters had no way of making a connection. In the past it was mainly through their medical services that they were able to get an “in.” Because they never attempted to convert these Hindus to Christianity but simply wanted to improve their lot, the nuns were soon trusted and welcomed wherever they were known.

With the Bihar schools established and in capable hands, Mark moved to Fang, in the far north of Thailand, to establish schools using the Indian model, for Burmese refugees and hill tribes who would otherwise never learn to read and write. With Sue raising the money for both endeavors, by 2006 there were 22 FreeSchools in Bihar and a growing number in Thailand.



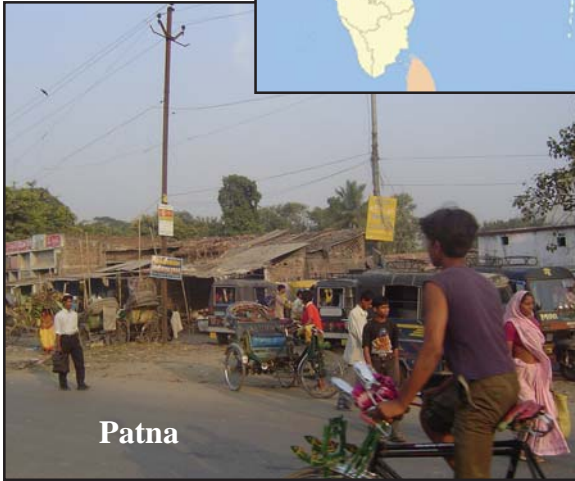


Arrival in Bihar

On November 5, 2006, we flew from Bangkok to Delhi, India, and from there to Patna, in the state of Bihar. We were met at the airport by Sr. Crescence and two other nuns, in a beat-up Mahindra jeep with a driver. Mark explained that this car was built in India especially for Indian roads, and it didn't take long to figure out why.

With the seven of us squeezed together inside, we set off for the Sacred Heart Convent in Muzzafarpur to spend our first night. This 214-kilometer journey took us over potholed, crowded and polluted roads, our daredevil driver dodging cows, pedestrians, motorcycles, rickshaws and overloaded buses at every bend.

At one point we were forced to detour through a village, where we stopped to swap jeeps and drivers. When we stepped out of the jeep a group of women and children came out to greet us. They had never seen people like us before in their village, they told Sr. Crescence. We gave them packages of unopened airplane food to break the ice and they were delighted with it!



Patna



Muzzafarpur

It was dark when we arrived at the Sacred Heart convent in Muzzafarpur, where we were lovingly welcomed with a meal in the dining room. The original plan was for us to visit the three FreeSchools run by the Sisters of this convent, but we arrived so late that the children had been sent home. Instead, three little boys, perhaps orphans boarding at the convent, were brought out to meet us and to present us with garlands.

After dinner we were immediately shown to a simple room with minimal toilet facilities and sparse furnishings, wooden plank beds without mattresses but, thankfully,



Posing with the formal school class



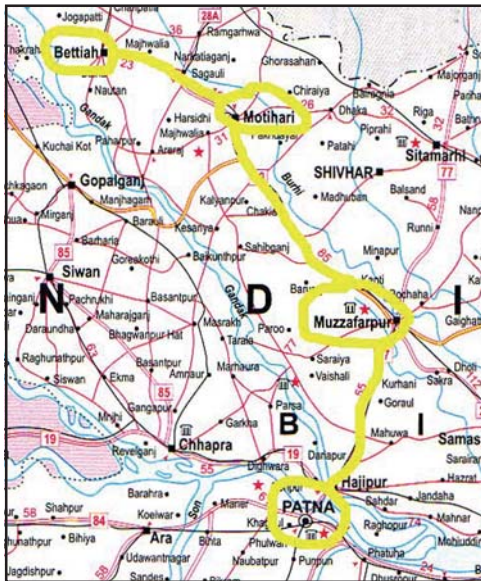
equipped with mosquito nets. Being Westerners, we weren't sure if we'd be able to sleep, but we slept like babies. The convent felt like a peaceful sanctuary after our harrowing drive from Patna.

Muzzafarpur to Motihari

The next morning we woke up early to the pleasant sound of the Sisters singing hymns somewhere in the convent. After an early breakfast, still dusty from the day before, we were on our way to Motihari to see the first round of FreeSchools, promising the Sisters we would return to see the schools we had missed on our way back.

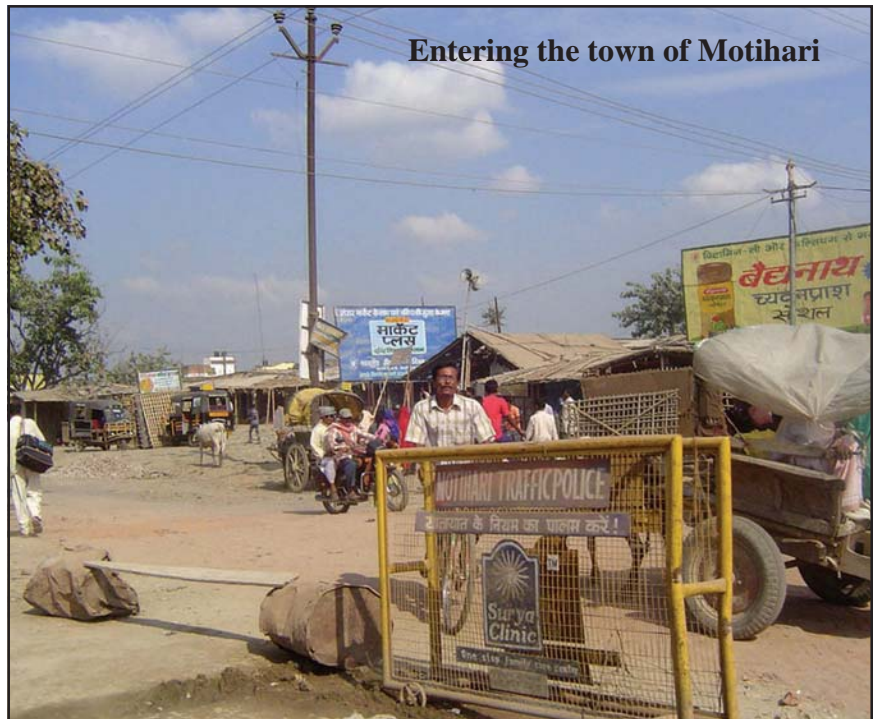
As we were leaving, the children attending the formal school classes came out to meet us and we all posed for pictures together. These classes support the convents, students paying \$3 a month plus books and uniform, totaling roughly \$65 per year per student. These are the fortunate children, who will have a chance at a future, compared to those who may never learn to read and write.

The 84 km drive from Muzzafarpur to Motihari was a continuation of the same dilapidated road of the day before. Arriving at St. Mary's Convent in we were once again welcomed by a group of Sisters who had very sweet, milky coffee and biscuits ready for us. We were learning to eat and drink everything offered to us by the Sisters, as they rarely permitted themselves such delicacies and had prepared them especially for us.



Our jeep

Entering the town of Motihari





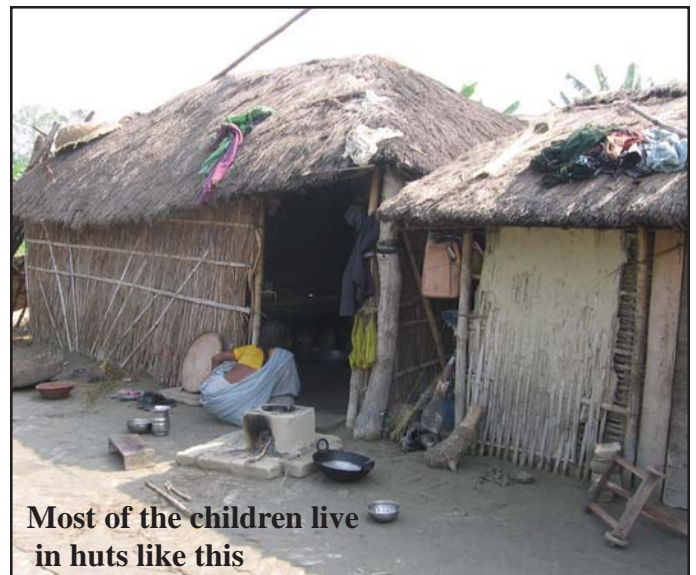
Manager, our driver



Animals still do much of the hard work in Bihar!



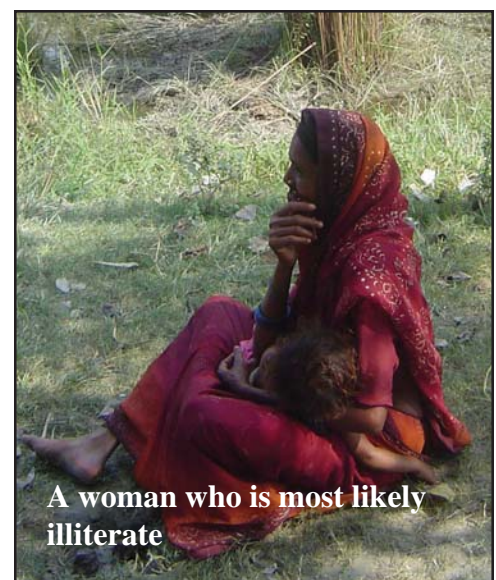
A group of curious villagers



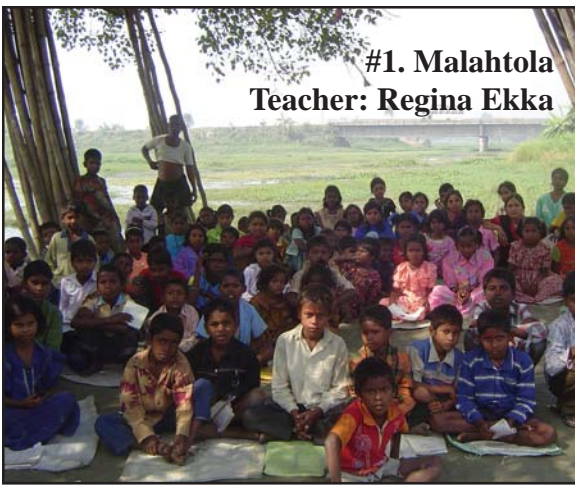
Most of the children live in huts like this



Typical view from inside the jeep



A woman who is most likely illiterate



**#1. Malahtola
Teacher: Regina Ekka**

The Motihari FreeSchools

In the morning we set off to visit four FreeSchools in Motihari. The first was in Malah Tola, a fishing village. After parking the jeep on the side of the road, we approached the school on foot, passing by the grass huts in which the families lived and stepping over piles of cow dung. Waiting for us in the distance, seated on the ground under a large tree, was a group of scruffy children, dressed in their Sunday best, eyes gleaming with anticipation, and their teacher, Rezina Ekka. A row of chairs had been placed in front for us, and we were presented with welcoming garlands and a musical performance by the students.

Sr. Crescence then gave a talk and verbally quizzed the class on their language and math skills, and Mark gave a rousing pep talk which Sr. Crescence translated. Sue and I struggled to hold back tears as we saw how bright these “untouchable” kids were and how eager to learn. One clever little boy in particular caught my eye, and I wondered how boys just like him in the past—and many who were not in such a class as this—were forced to spend their lives as rickshaw drivers because they had never learned to read and write.

The second FreeSchool was Bankat I, where a villager had donated his building for classes. There was no shortage of spectators, and Sr. Crescence used this opportunity to address the crowd, to try to convince the parents to allow their children to attend the FreeSchools.

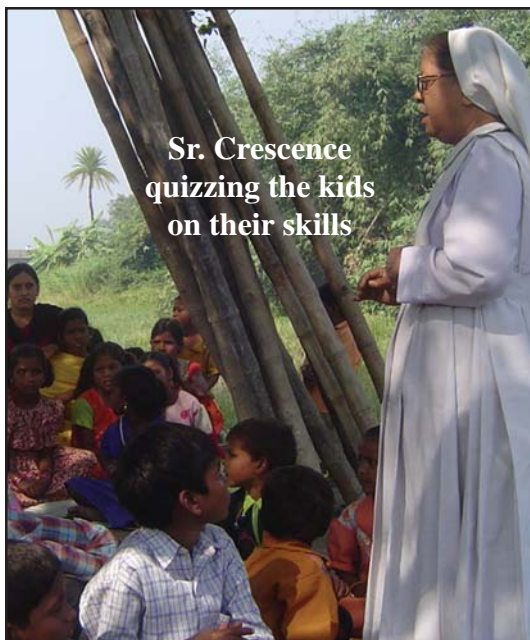
Cows were a common sight in the outdoor classrooms, as we saw at the third school, Bankat II. Here, with most of the villagers looking on, the older girls, in their best saris, welcomed us with songs and garlands. Here, along with basic language and math skills, the teacher, Reakha, also taught sewing to the older girls, using treadle machines because the village has no electricity. (Money to purchase these machines has been raised by FreeSchools Australia).

The last school of the morning was Harijan Tola. The teacher, Summi Kumari, and her class were waiting for us, the children seated neatly on the ground in rows, their slates in front of them. We were surrounded on all sides by parents of the children as well as groups of villagers whose children had not yet enrolled in FreeSchools.

After this first round of visits, our jeep laden with garlands and all of us drained emotionally by the scenes we had witnessed, we drove back to the convent for a meal of rice, vegetables and chicken, lovingly prepared for us by the novices.



**The older girls
welcome us with
a song**



**Sr. Crescence
quizzing the kids
on their skills**





Scenes along the walk
from the convent to the
next school. . . .



After lunch, we set off to visit four more schools, the first two going on foot from the convent through the town, causing quite a sensation as we passed by. A young boy led Sr. Crescence by the hand, as she is almost blind. We noticed many young girls carrying baby brothers and sisters around, obviously baby-sitting while the parents were out working in the fields. It's no wonder they have no need of dolls here, with every family having at least one baby to play with!



The Afternoon Round of Motihari Schools





The Motihari Sisters

After this round of visits, we walked over to the Parish church where Sr. Crescence introduced us to Father Jerome, then we returned to St. Mary's convent. Out on the lawn we found all the Motihari teachers waiting for us, where we were all served tea followed by a question-and-answer session. By then it was late in the day, and we took our leave and started off for the long drive to Bettiah.



The Motihari teachers and supervisors



The Convent in Bettiah

The Sacred Heart convent in Bettiah is where Sr. Crescence is Superior, and this was to be our headquarters for the next three nights. The distance of 42 kilometers seemed like 400, with the bad road conditions and thick pollution. We had to keep the windows open at all times as it was unbearably hot in the non-air-conditioned jeep, and Sue's contact lenses gave her endless grief as specs of dust would fly into her eyes, forcing her to cover them at all times. By now it was dark and I prayed a lot as the driver narrowly missed hitting pedestrians, cows, dogs and other vehicles that were all sharing the road. We noticed that many villages had no electricity, and huts and shops were lit by camping lamps.

From what we could see of Bettiah as we entered the town, it seemed even more primitive than the earlier towns we had visited. Most of the transportation was by horse and cart or rickshaw, streets were thronged with pedestrians and cows. As we approached the convent, which was surrounded by high walls, two large gates were opened for us, and closed behind us. It was pitch dark but as soon as we began to unload our bags lights came on all over. Electricity, we were told, was on a generator which was turned for two hours a day, between seven



and nine P.M., and as it was now much later they turned it on especially for us.

The main building, more grandiose than anything else in the area, was two stories high, with an enormous pink cathedral next door. Our guest quarters were in a separate building consisting of two rooms, one for Mark and one for Sue and me, each with its own bathroom. The beds were once again wooden planks covered with a sheet, with a small pillow, and draped with mosquito netting. We had a Western-style toilet but no real shower, just a tap with cold running water sticking out of the wall and a drain in the floor. While to us this was primitive, villagers living in grass huts without plumbing would have regarded this a luxurious bathroom!

Soon after we were settled in, two young novice nuns brought us each a bucket of warm water, saying, “We knew you would like a hot bath after your long journey.” To us, this was heaven sent and we were very grateful. We later learned that they had to stoke a lot of coal to produce two such buckets of hot water!

A large building next door to ours, we discovered, was used by a social service organization, and the social worker, Amrita, had a computer with a dial-up connection! Their electricity stayed on longer, so finally we were able to get online. Having a few unbroken minutes to check our email seemed like the last word in technology to us at that moment!

After a while the lights went out, a large grille around our building was locked and guard dogs let out to patrol the grounds. While the convent itself was a haven of civilization, outside the high walls barbarism still raged and the Sisters had to protect themselves against possible attacks.

Between the hard beds, the mosquitos, the heat and lack of a fan, and the strange noises we heard all night, it was not easy to get a good night’s sleep! Fortunately there were some camping lamps in the room, so we were able to read for a while, until those ran out of juice.





Wednesday, November 8.

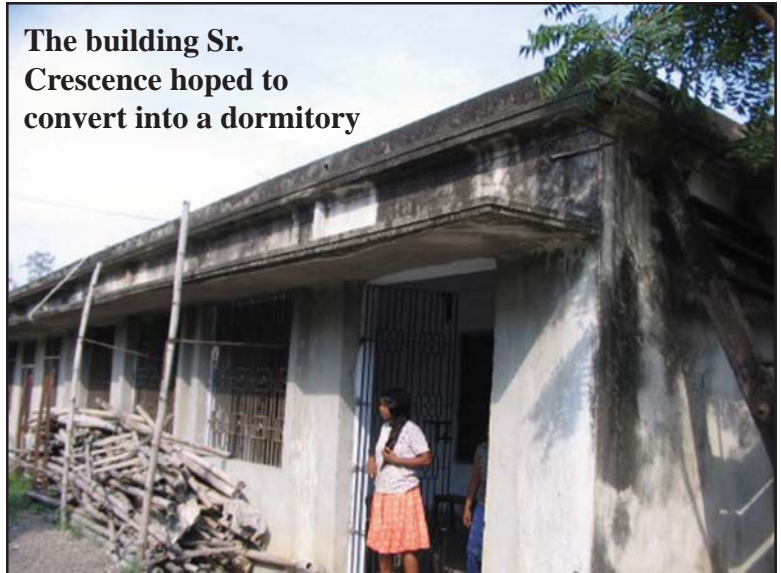
Breakfast was early in the guest dining room, a building donated by a Canadian visitor to the convent decades earlier. Here the nuns always had a meal, a snack, tea or coffee ready for us, and it was in this room where we had informal meetings with each other. The Sisters insisted on providing us with a Western-style egg breakfast daily, although we would have loved to eat whatever Indian food they themselves ate, which they insisted we would not like!

First Sr. Crescence gave us a quick tour of the convent grounds, a peaceful environment of gardens and structures that included offices for social work and a hospital with dispensary. Workers, mostly Hindu it seemed, were busy at a variety of tasks. The kitchen, wherein all cooking was done with coal and in natural light, seemed very gloomy to us and we noticed that the roof had been leaking badly. The pantry shelves were bare but for some vegetables. Adjoining was large dining room where the Sisters ate, with Sr. Crescence's portrait hanging in a gallery alongside many Sisters past and present.

Outside, walking amid piles of coal and drying grain, Sr. Crescence led us to a building, now fallen into disrepair and housing cows and other animals, and revealed to us her dreams for renovating it, to turn it into a dormitory for 25 poor girls who can then study at the formal convent school. [Note: since then we have raised the money to get this started and at present, July 2009, the work is almost completed. A separate article on this will follow.]



The building Sr. Crescence hoped to convert into a dormitory





Some FreeSchools Near Bettiah

At 8 am we set out to visit four FreeSchools schools near Bettiah, the first in the village of Satthi. Mark mentioned that we were very close to the border of Nepal. By now we were getting used to our bumpy jeep ride.



#9 Satthi
Teacher: Kiran Devi



Satthi education officials who served us tea and snacks

First was School #9, in the village of Satthi, where the education officials served us sweet tea and snacks.

From Satthi we drove to School #10, Lalgah I, where classes were again held under a tree. The little boy in the picture at left bottom was not enrolled in school but his curiosity knew no bounds! We hope to see him in class next time. This is also the village where I found my poster child (see top of page 2).



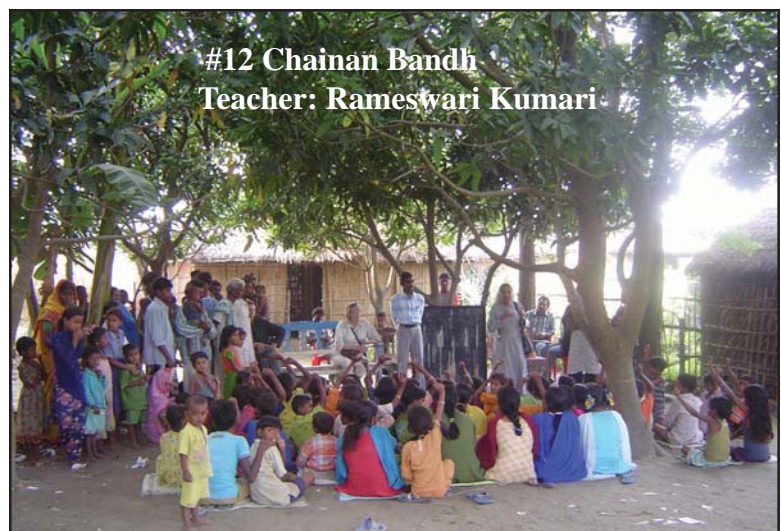
#10 Lalgah I
Teacher: Subhardra Devi

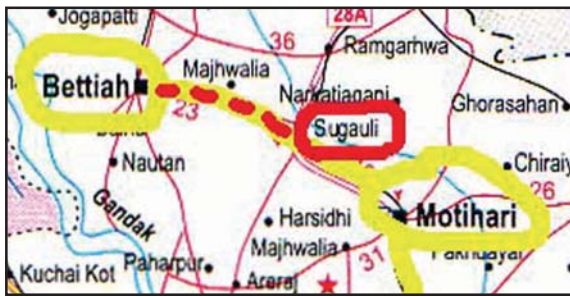


By the time we arrived at the next school, #12 in the village of Chainan Bandh, it was so late that the children and teacher had been sent home. Someone ran off to call them back, and while we waited the curious villagers came out to look at us.

While most Indians in Bihar crouch or sit down on the ground, they know that Westerners prefer to sit on chairs. Everywhere we went chairs were provided—everything from kitchen chairs to fold-up garden chairs to stools. In this village one of the men, not wanting us to stand, rushed off to a nearby house and came back with two men carting the fanciest seat in the village—a long blue wooden bench. After proudly setting it down for us, they insisted we sit on it until while waiting for the teacher and pupils to arrive.

Classes were conducted in the donated back yard of a house. The teacher, Rameswari Kumari, was handicapped and arrived limping on bare feet. Being handicapped is stigmatized in Bihar, and especially for girls. The fact that Rameswari was hired as a teacher has elevated her social standing in the village.





A Memorable Morning in Sugauli

Thursday, November 9,

On this morning Sue took some time off, and I went alone with Sr. Crescence and Mark to visit the schools in the town of Sugauli, about 23 kilometers from Bettiah. This took us about an hour over the bumpy, potholed roads!

Entering the town, we stopped off for coffee at the Sacred Heart Convent, run by Sr. Ambrose, specializing in handicapped, disabled and terminally ill children. Some boys were boarders and other students lived at home with their families but attended school during the day.

Before we went inside, the Sisters brought out a small group of handicapped boys, mostly polio victims, which broke my heart. Polio may be eradicated in some parts of the world, but not here!

Inside, a group of crippled children were gathered in a dark hallway (electricity is only available a few hours a day), and a little girl with a deformed leg was brought forward for me to inspect. Sr. Ambrose told me that the Lilianefonds in the Netherlands paid for the children's surgeries but not their room and board.

She also explained that these unfortunate children, especially the girls, were treated like outcasts in their own families, it being considered a curse to have a handicapped child. The convent was full to capacity with boarders, and Sr. Ambrose showed us a room where about twenty boys slept in little cots.

The convent also ran a formal school of around six classes to provide them with an income. Costs are around \$65 a year per child, including books and uniform.



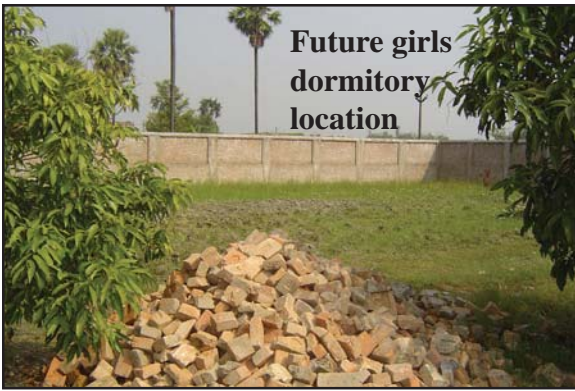
The girl with a deformed leg



A formal school class



The polio victims



**Future girls
dormitory
location**



**Tricycle wheelchair for
the handicapped**



**Donated FreeSchool room
is in this building**



Classroom

After coffee Sr. Ambrose took us outside and pointed to a small plot of land next to the main building, now used as a garden, where the nuns hoped to build a hostel to take in as many as possible of these unfortunate girls from the surrounding villages. (This I would love to help her achieve, but as always it takes money. By our standards, however, it would not take much to build it!)

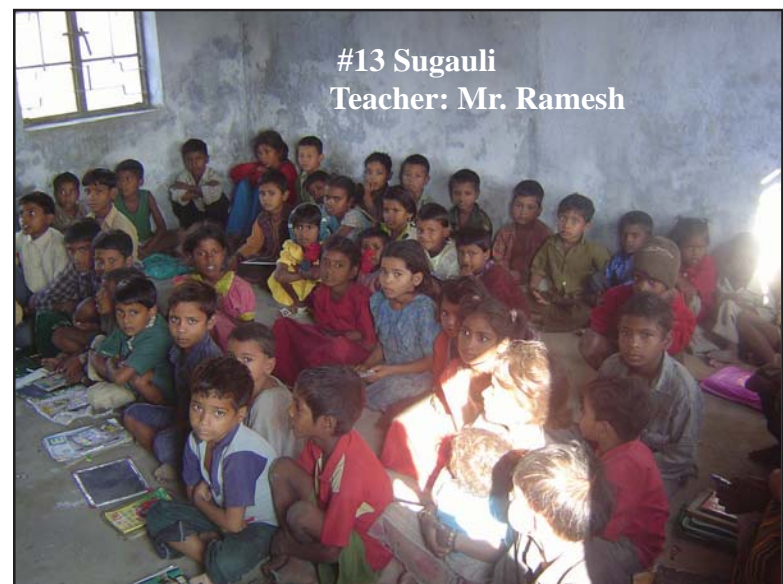
Outside stood a tricycle wheelchair, something we had noticed everywhere we went in Bihar, used by those who can't walk—if they are lucky enough to afford one—operating them in traffic right in with the vehicles and cows! It works like a bicycle but instead of pedaling with their feet they turn a handle with their right hand and steer with the left.

Sr. Ambrose told me the convent had only one for everyone to share, and that they could use 14 more, that they could be made locally in Patna and cost around \$100 each. I immediately decided that raising this money was a doable goal and it would also give the tricycle maker in Patna a chance to earn a few rupees, since everyone there is so poor! [Note: since then we have raised the money.]

The Sugauli Free Schools

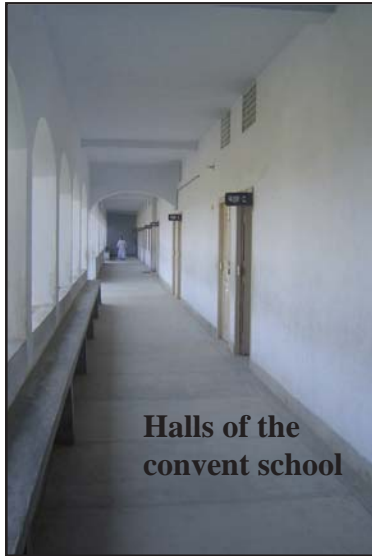
There were four FreeSchools in Sugauli, but on this day we only visited one, a short distance from the convent. An inhabitant of the town had donated a room in his building for use as a classroom. This building, as most of them in this area, had no electricity, but it was a step up from the outdoor classes as it gave a roof over their heads in rainy weather.

I must say that I left my heart with these adorable children of Sugauli!

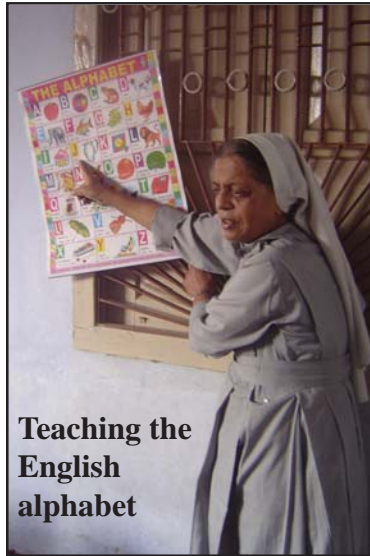


**#13 Sugauli
Teacher: Mr. Ramesh**

Back in Bettiah, after lunch I had a one-on-one talk with Sr. Mary Elise, who told me the history of the Sacred Heart Order in Bihar. I asked her why they couldn't get more money from the government, and she explained that the nuns refuse to pay the bribes, which were sometimes as high as 30%. Afterwards we all walked across the street to visit the Sacred Heart convent's own FreeSchools.



Halls of the
convent school



Teaching the
English
alphabet



Our welcome!



#14 Sacred Heart Bettiah
Teacher: Aklima Bano

School #14 was conducted in a classroom of the formal convent school, after regular school hours.

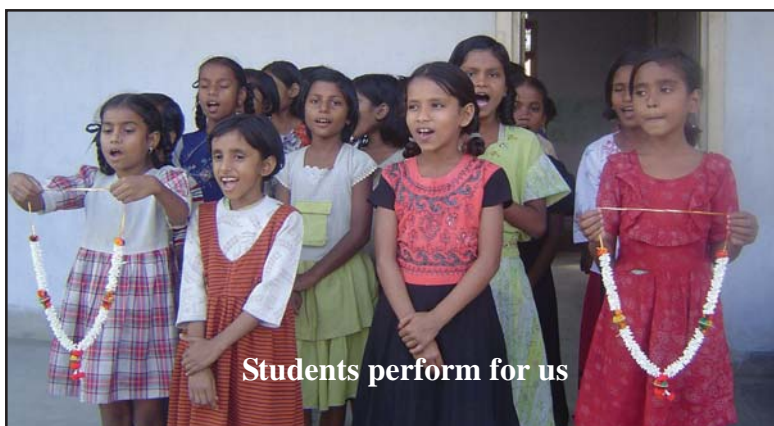
The little boy on the right was so anxious to show us his stuff he ran up to the blackboard three times, even when Sr. Crescence had picked another pupil! It would be tragic if an enthusiastic child like this never gets a chance at an education.

School #15, a younger group, was held in another classroom of the Sacred Heart convent. They did not rate desks and chairs like the older ones and were sitting on the floor.

Afterwards both groups came outside to present us with garlands and perform for us.



The eager
student!



Students perform for us



#15 Sacred Heart Bettiah
Teacher: Sr. John



Vanhoek Convent Bettiah

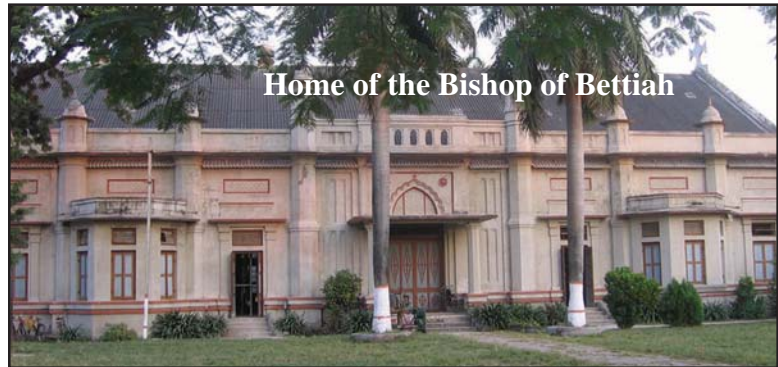
School #16 was at the SH Vanhoek convent in the center of Bettiah, in a neighborhood of concrete structures. Typing and sewing are taught here also.



#15 & 16 Vanhoek Convent Bettiah
Teachers: Stella, Sr. Alma



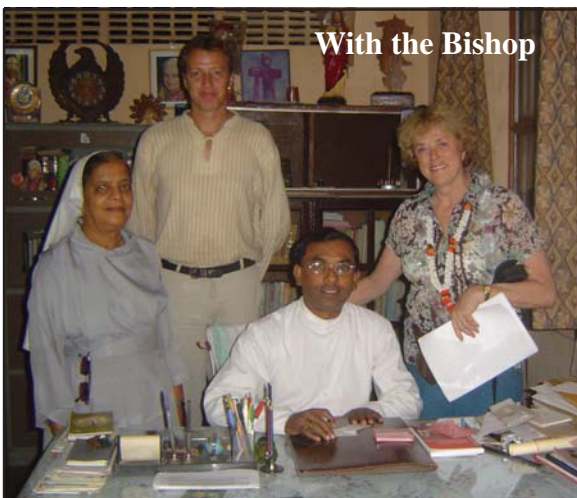
The typing room



Home of the Bishop of Bettiah

From there we drove across town to the Bettiah Diocese, to visit the Bishop, Victor Henry Thakur, someone we grew to like during our conversation. Over more sweet tea and biscuits—and an army of mosquitoes which the Bishop didn't seem to notice—he told us stories of how he was working for unity among the three big religions in the area.

While we were talking several mosquitoes had flown inside my clothes and I had to leave the room. Sr. Crescence followed me, to show me the bathroom, and managed to corner me, to tell me about a woman in desperate need of medical help which would cost 8000 rupees (about \$200). I looked in my wallet and that was precisely the amount I had, so I handed it over. Several months later I received a letter from the sick woman, thanking me for saving her from "immature death," along with a stack of receipts covering surgery, ambulance and medicines, all for under \$200! Yes, a little goes a long way in India!



With the Bishop



Last Day in Bettiah

Friday, November 10.

Immediately after breakfast two little girls in their best dresses arrived at the convent to fetch us, to guide our driver to the school in their village, Kurmi Tola, on the outskirts of Bettiah.

Entering the village, we were greeted by a welcoming committee of cows and children, and women sitting around on the ground. While they make a beautiful picture in their colorful saris, the sad fact is that they are illiterate, and the future of their daughters is equally bleak unless people like us find a way to help them.



#17 Kurmi Tola
Teacher: Rambha Devi



School #17 and it was held on a porch donated for use by a villager. There were approximately sixty children assembled when we arrived.

At every school the older girls were always chosen to bestow us with garlands, accompanied by a little song of welcome. No sooner had a garland been placed around Sr. Crescence's neck than she would remove it almost at once. We soon found out why: These beautiful flowers would leave orange and magenta stains on our clothes, and she had to conserve her habit! One day I asked Sr. Crescence how often she received a new habit, and she said, "Oh, I just wait until an older Sister dies and then I take over her habit."

As usual, the whole village came out to watch, including the children not attending school and their parents, and this always gave Sr. Crescence a chance to encourage them to enroll.



From there we drove on to a nearby village, Barahritola, where the class of School #18 was conducted in the yard of a house. The teacher, Vandana Kumari, was very young, and handicapped. This visit was memorable for they brought us tea and biscuits and everyone stared at us in silence while we consumed them! We fell in love with these little faces!



After a farewell lunch at the convent, it was time to leave for the drive back to Patna via Muzzafarpur. With our bags loaded on top of the jeep and accompanied by four nuns (Sr. Crescence plus three going to Patna for medical reasons), we said farewell to the assembled group.



In Muzzafarpur we stopped briefly at the convent to catch the three classes we had missed due to our late arrival the first day. The Sisters there welcomed us as old friends, and we felt the same way about them! After a brief reunion over sweet sweet tea and biscuits, we visited the classes, all of which were held within the convent walls in the regular classrooms of the daily formal schools.



At each school, after testing the children's skills, we would ask (with Sr. Crescence as interpreter) what they wanted to become when they grew up, and here were the most popular answers: Doctor, teacher, pilot, lawyer, policeman, engineer, superintendent, magistrate, and Sister (nun). Since these kids don't have television, and virtually no contact with the outside world, these are the only occupations they are familiar with. Not one boy wanted to be a rickshaw driver, which is one of the few ways an illiterate man can earn a few rupees in Bihar—if he is lucky enough to get a passenger.





The singing nuns

#22 Patna convent FreeSchool
Teacher: Sheela Anthony

One last meal together

Afterword

After this firsthand experience it was impossible to return to my life and do nothing to help. Via an online fundraising effort I managed to raise \$20,657.57, which I hand-delivered to Sr. Crescence when we returned in November 2007, this time with Sue Tennant and another humanitarian friend, Dr. John Lange. This story will follow.

Last Day in Patna

After saying goodbye once again to the Muzzafarpur Sisters, we drove to Patna to spend our last night there at the convent, the main Sacred Heart convent and far larger and superior to anything we had seen so far. Room decoration was bare bones, but here they had constant electricity.

We were each escorted to our separate rooms to wash up and prepare for dinner. As I was unpacking my bag I noticed a group of curious young novices standing outside my door, very anxious to meet me. One very tiny nun asked me if I could take her with me, and when I said sure, if she could fit in my bag, they all broke out in a fit of giggles. While waiting out in the hall for Sue they asked if they could sing for us, and would have sung twenty songs if we'd have let them!

Saturday, November 11

Later in the morning we met the teacher of the FreeSchool in Patna. Because the class was conducted on the convent grounds in an existing formal school classroom which was in session, it was not possible for us to meet the class, so the teacher had a photo made for us.

This was followed by a tour of the convent grounds, where we noticed a spectacular cathedral under construction, funds for which come from Catholic groups much in the same way that we are raising money for FreeSchools.

Upstairs in the Sisters' private dining room we all shared a last meal together, and from here we were taken back to the airport for our flight back to Delhi.



All sisters—and Mark, the guy who got us mixed up with these Sisters!