

## Prajna Vihar School Reports 2001 - 2006

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### 2001 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL

Much sadness surrounded news of Thomas Jost's death. His skills as the director and his friendship will be sorely missed. However, we have been very fortunate in that an old friend to Bodhgaya and the school, Katie Mitchell, has volunteered to do what she can to help us out. She is a frequent visitor to Bodhgaya and a lady of many talents. We are very grateful for any help that she is able to give.

The school is running smoothly and competently with an attendance of 350 children. Many thanks to the teachers and particularly the headmistress, Sister Anjali.

We continue to be very proud of the school and the quality of the students. It has now reached the second stage of development; the school is stable in its basic needs and now the emphasis is focused on continued improvement of facilities and the quality of teaching.

We have maintained our commitment of a 1/3 of the schools budget, the other 2/3 being raised in India and Europe. Next year there will be another raise as we have increased the teachers' salaries and the Australian dollar has fallen against the Indian rupee.

There are many areas that need attention and the acquisition of new land for a secondary school has not yet eventuated. Charitable status in India has also not as yet been achieved. In severe monsoons, the schoolyard floods so badly that the school must be closed for days at a time. The first two issues are close to being achieved; the last is difficult because of the lowness of the land. As all of you who read this and have been to India would know, things can seem to take a long time before progress is made.

Yet, in other areas things are changing very quickly. We managed to get a complete bank record in only two hours - we were all totally amazed! Yes, India is changing. Internet cafes all over, more regular, irregular power and an amazing array of middle class comforts. The downside to this is the gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing and the organic nature of Indian society seems to be breaking down.

I was more saddened by the poverty this time than ever before. Mother Theresa used to say the West was materially rich but spiritually poor, whereas the East was materially poor but spiritually rich. I'm afraid India may be heading into materially moderate to poor to spiritually poor.

Eoin Liebchen-Meades

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**In Memory of Thomas Jost  
1950 - 2000  
Director of Pragya Vihar School  
Servant of the Dharma  
Friend to all**

This is the inscription on the memorial stone for Thomas that has been erected at the school.

Thomas died suddenly from illness late last year and will be sorely missed by all. He liaised with us, was a friend, counsellor, arbitrator and manager to so many over the years. Most notably was how his presence was deeply felt amongst the Indian people who knew him. Tears came to their eyes when they talked of him. Ram, the local chai walla couldn't eat for over a day when he heard the news and numerous were the stories of how he would be missed.

He quietly ambled his way into the hearts and lives of so many, an unimposing gift to us all. There were two memorial services held at the school in January with many attending including two of Thomas's brothers.

From all at the BDA and many others may we share the blessing from having known and worked with this man who lived such a virtuous life.

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## **2002 REPORT - PRAGYA VIHAR SCHOOL**

### **News from the PV School: Enrolment Process, Students By Anton Eastick**

Last year before leaving for Bodhgaya, where I helped manage the annual Bodhgaya retreats, Victor asked me if it was possible to interview 3-4 children from the PV School (PVS) with the idea of doing an article for the BDA newsletter. Once in Bodhgaya, Sister Angeli, principal of the school was also enthusiastic about the idea and we quickly arranged a time and date. On the chosen day, the children I spoke with, Rakesh, Pankaj, Sweety and Rekha were all even more excited at the idea of being interviewed. As they were introduced by Sister Angeli they each jumped up from their chairs with a broad grin and quickly adopted me as Uncle!

The two boys, Rakesh and Pankaj, have the surname of Kumar while the two girls, Sweety and Rekha have the last name of Kumari which indicates which caste they come from. This is the same caste but the "i" in Kumari indicates that it is a girls name. Kumar(i) is apparently one of the lowest of the many castes in this area.

During the Prajna Vihar School (PVS) enrolment process during which Sister Angeli chooses who can come to the school from the many applicants, frequently all she needs to do is look at the name of the family to have a reasonably accurate picture of the financial status of the family. In some cases this is not true but generally it is a good indication.

Martin Aylward and I were at the school on the morning that the successful applicants for this year were announced and emotions were running very high as parents dealt with the news, either favourable or otherwise. It was a very touching experience as parents pleaded with Sister Angeli to reconsider her decision but some perspective was placed on the situation later as she related to us that a small proportion of the parents were indeed capable of paying for their children to attend another school.

When faced with this performance worthy of Oscar nomination, it reinforced in us what a difficult job Sister Angeli has with this enrolment process and how difficult it is for a westerner to really know what is happening.

Rakesh has been coming to the PVS since he was 4 yrs old and he is now 11. He has 1 brother and 2 sisters who go to Govt schools. When asked about what he likes most about the school he replied that science is good and the cultural program which they perform at the end of the retreats is also good, but mainly all his friends come here and he enjoy playing with them the most! It sounded quite familiar to my experience of school. Maths... English? Isn't that cutting into the playtime a bit too much? Rakesh's parents live in Gaya, some distance away and he

stays with his Uncle in Bodhgaya so that he can attend the school. He is the eldest son and without the support of free education from the school he would be home with his parents helping to work the small block of land that they have.

Pankaj has a brother and a sister who come to the PVS school and one other sister who doesn't go to school yet. His favourite subject is English but mostly he said it is the teacher's kindness that makes him want to come to school everyday. This was a sentiment that was reflected most sincerely by all the children and very evident in their relationship with Sr Angeli.

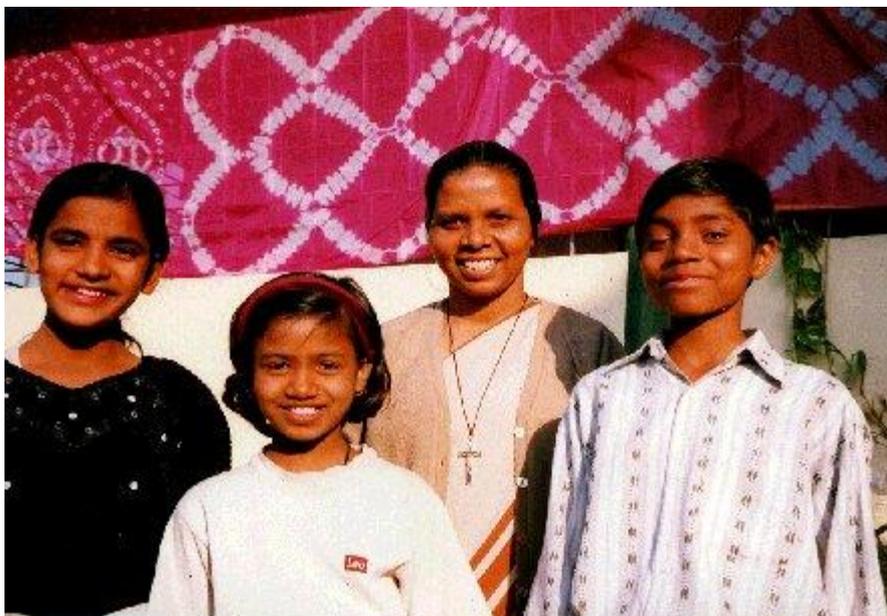
Unfortunately Pankaj's father passed away after a fall while working at the Ladakh monastery in Bodhgaya and now his mother has to support the family by sewing which I was assured she is very good at!

His mother approached Sister Angeli to allow the children to come to the school after his father's death and Sr Angeli readily agreed. Pankaj very much enjoys the discipline of regular classes and excels at his studies which he spends long hours on after school hours, unprompted. Sweety has been very aptly named and like Pankaj, enjoys the discipline (their word) of school the most, especially the homework! After picking myself up off the floor upon hearing this somewhat startling revelation, she assured me that this was indeed true and mathematics was the best of all.

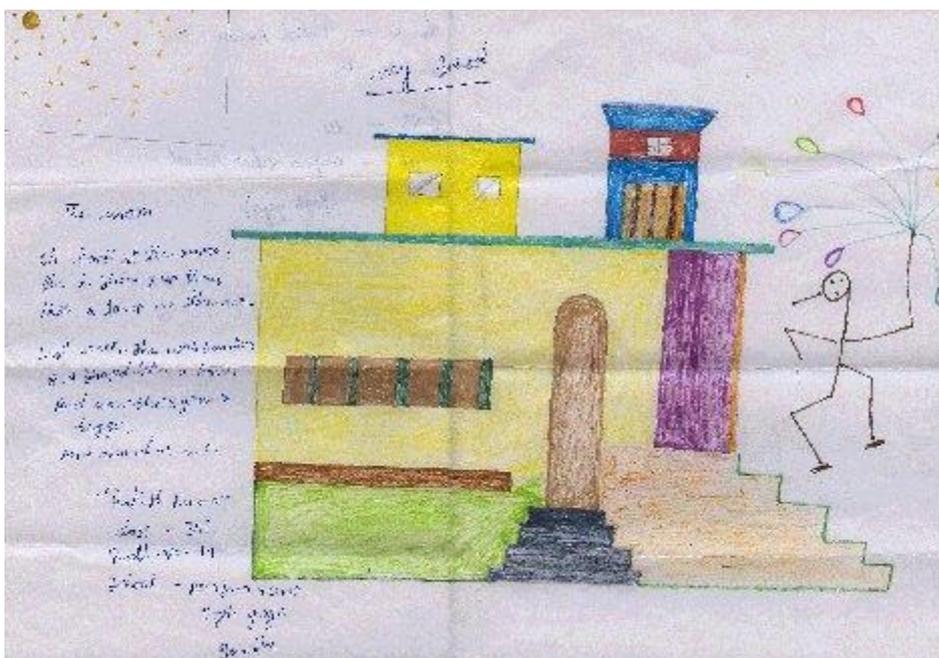
Sweety was one of the announcers at the cultural program held for the retreatants this year and excelled in her role. Her parents sell shawls and blankets during the tourist season at a roadside stall near the main Bodhgaya Stupa which gives them enough money to feed her 3 brothers and 2 sisters for the year.

Her previous school, run by Ven. Anurudh a monk at the Thai Monastery, only went to grade 5. Going to the PVS enables her to extend her education further where otherwise it may have ended, depending on what opportunities came up at Govt. schools.

Rekha, 11 years old, has 2 brothers, no sisters and has been at the school for 7 years. She likes all the subjects at the school and all the teachers. So easily pleased! Her parents also sell shawls and blankets etc at a roadside stall in Bodhgaya and she goes there after school to help out. One of Rekha's brothers also goes to school at the PVS but one has moved to Ranchi, in Jarkhand just south of Bihar, to live with his Uncle who has adopted him. This brother has lived with his Uncle since he was 5 years old, he is now in high school, and doing this has allowed him to receive the education his parents wanted for him, but were unable to afford. Rekha's family moved to Bodhgaya so that they could attend the PVS.



Rekha, Sweety, Sister Angeli and Pankaj



"The Moon over Pragna Vihar School" - Drawing with Poetry by Rakesh Kumar

## 2003 REPORT: DEVELOPMENTS AT THE PRAJNA VIHAR SCHOOL

Most of the committee of the Prajna Vihar school met together in Bodhgaya in February 2003 to share developments and concerns about the school.

We expressed our deep appreciation to friends around the world, especially in Brisbane, Australia, Switzerland, England and the USA for over the years, sustaining the annual support needed to maintain the school. It now costs roughly around £23 (A\$55) per year to give a full year's education to a child. There are now around 500 children in the school aged from five to 16 years.

Our wonderful teachers continue to work hard to support the inner development of the children through study, meditation, culture and the arts. Yet it is never easy. We have only just been able to afford the purchase of mats for the children to sit on on the floor. Until now they have had their lessons on the cement floor and shared the text books. We are trying to do everything we can to nourish their education. The school is generally recognised as the best school in the heart of Bodhgaya for the quality of education of the children. But we feel we have a long way to go.

We have the opportunity to lease land just outside Bodhgaya to build another school. We estimate it will cost around \$50,000 to build a new school. We want to go ahead but it is a major step and exploration for this project is underway. The current school would then become a vocational training centre to learn such skills as house-building, clothes-making, plumbing, gardening, weaving etc.

We hope that very soon the school will have access to the world, via e-mails and internet. One dharma student in the West kindly gave \$800 for the school to buy a computer and go online. We hope that when this happens it will enable the school to link up with other schools in the West.

Our major concern is the lake of polluted water surrounding parts of the school. This happened from new hotels destroying the ancient irrigation scheme. We have made several appeals to the authorities to act. Other issues also arise. We were shocked at the electricity bill that the school had to pay. It looked like we might have been cheated. Then we checked the records. The last bill had been sent to the school in 1997. Our telephone bill suddenly leapt to about \$40. The phone is hardly used. Someone had tapped into our line and used it. We then had to change the line.

Never forget that the school depends entirely on donations from ordinary people, who know that every cent goes directly to support the school and the desperately poor children who attend it. Please support the children.

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## 2004 Report on the PV School: A Visit and Some Views

Jiva Masheder

My first visit to the Pragya Vihar School this year happened to coincide with a staff meeting and so I was invited in with a friend and we sat and waited, listening to the meeting in progress. I was impressed with the clarity and leadership of the new principal, Sister Yogita, the atmosphere of cheerful cooperation and the dedication to the pupils. Later, on the street, I met some of the students in their distinctive uniforms, all chirping "hello,hello what is your name". Even the smaller ones were able to talk a little with me in English, now the national language of India and the key to good jobs and working with tourists, a major source of income in Bodhgaya. They all said how much they enjoyed going to school - and they even looked like they meant it!

I spoke to several of the Christian nuns who are on staff at the school as well as Sr Yogita, the new principal. All of them spoke about the joy it brings them to serve the children and I was especially struck by the teachers' warmth of heart and love for the children. The job has its challenges though, ones that are hard to imagine in the West. There is a big drainage problem; of waste water from hotels which is not reaching the river. The school, which is built upon raised ground, is surrounded on all sides by stagnant water, a breeding ground for disease-carrying mosquitoes. The water was at least 30cm deep while I was there in the dry season and the sisters told me that in the rainy season they have to hitch their saris up to their waists and wade through thigh-deep water to get to work! However it is also worth remembering how

priceless education is in a country with a literacy rate of around 50%; in Gaya District this drops to single figures in some villages. It is easy for us to take education for granted; here the children at the PV school know how lucky and privileged they are. Everyone I talked to both within and outside the school agreed that it is the best school in the area.

I spoke to one former pupil, Umesh, who works in one of Bodhgaya's most popular restaurants, Mohammed's. His English was fairly good, and he has a steady job. I asked him what his peers who had not been to school were doing for money. He shrugged and said "field-work, carrying bricks". These jobs are poorly paid, physically demanding and very unreliable sources of income.

It is good to remember that the pupils of the PV school are low-caste children in a country where caste determines everything. If a child is born knowing he or she is inferior it is a wonderful gift to be able to help them to feel self-respect. So, as well as better earning prospects, education has other benefits too. Talking with the teachers about this most of them agreed that present and former pupils of the school had noticeably better self-esteem and were generally more considerate to others.

The teachers expressed a wish for a little more equipment for the school, as well as a couple of extra class-rooms so that each class has a separate room. At present the lower classes have to share a room, which adds to the challenges for both teachers and pupils. Also on the wish-list were some desks so that the pupils were not hunched over when trying to write, and some more floor mats for the younger students to sit on; they only graduate to benches in later years! All these things are being prioritised. New desks have been ordered and slowly the facilities at the school are getting better.

The whole thing is heartening to see. There is room for growth and improvement but the school is also having a wonderful impact.

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## **PRAJNA VIHAR SCHOOL ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE 2004 CALENDAR YEAR**

by Sister Bindu Thomas, Principal

Here I give you a brief account of the School. The Prajna Vihar School was started in the year 1990, with the objective of educating the students of the less privileged sections of the society. The School was started in a small shed with 45 children. Today we are happy to tell you that with your generous contributions, we have a School building with 13 rooms, in which 500 students study. We do not limit our education to the bookish knowledge alone. But we give them value based education, through which they are helped to live effectively in this world of competition. When North Bihar faced the worst conditions of flood this year, we encouraged the students to contribute in kind and cash for the victims. Thus making them aware of the inter-dependency on each other and that we all belong to one world at large.

On every Saturday we organize competitions like singing, painting, dance, speech, quiz etc. to build up their hidden abilities and potentials. We help and encourage the students to participate in various competitions sponsored by various organizations, such as Rotary Club. This enables our students to interact with other students as well as to come out of their own shells and to have a wider perspective of life. The teachers are ever willing to render their service to the students whenever they are in need. I feel happy and proud to say that there is a cordial and affectionate relationship between teachers and students.

Celebrations such as Teacher's day, Children's day, Independence Day, Republic day etc. are celebrated with lots of joy and enthusiasm. These celebrations foster love and respect between the teachers and students as well as for the country. This year a Vietnamese Buddhist nun was generous enough to donate desks and benches for the students. We also had built two more rooms for the students. There is a great demand from students and parents for upgrading the school to Class X, as without this they have to go to Government school where there is no teaching at all, for their further studies. We hope this dream of our students will come true one day with your help and support.

We know that each of you works hard to raise funds for the maintenance, development and better functioning of the school. The School family is grateful to each of you for your generous help and support. May god bless your every efforts and under-takings. May He be a constant companion in your life's journey. Once again thanks to each one of you.

## **THE PRAJNA VIHAR SCHOOL IN 2004 AT A GLANCE**

by Sister Bindu Thomas, Principal

Statement of purpose: To educate the less privileged sections of society, and to foster inter-religious understanding.

School Board of Directors: Venerable.U Nyanienda, Christopher Titmuss, Ranjit Bhandari, Prama Bhandari, Priye Ranjan Dwyer, Sister .Bindu Thomas (principal).

Number of children: 410 (boys-208, Girls-202)

Number of teachers: 12 (Male- 5, female -7)

Age of youngest student to oldest student: 4 to 15

Names of hamlets where children mostly live: Piparpatti, Mastipur, Bhagalpur, Amuwa, Taridih

Typical work of parents: agriculture, rickshaw pulling, small scale business

Subjects taught in the school: English, Hindi, Maths, Science, Social studies, General knowledge., Moral science, Drawing, Hand craft, Dance

Inter-religious appreciation: Prayer meetings on various religious festivals

Colour of the school uniforms: Brown trousers and cream shirts for boys, Brown Skirts and cream shirts for girls

Cost of the school uniform: 150.00 Rupees [approx A\$4.60]

Total salaries for the year: 4,77,800.00 Rupees [approx A\$14,532]

Two new rooms: 2,50,000.00 Rupees [approx A\$7,603]

Other expenditure: 1,53,805.00 Rupees [approx A\$4,678]

Total Expenses: 8,81,605.00 Rupees [approx A\$26,813]

Plans and Future Vision for 2005 and beyond:

Practical needs and decisions: Service conditions and guidelines for the teachers are updated. Mr.P.R.Dwyer is invited as a member of the management committee, also to be the co-ordinator to inform overseas fund raisers of any developments in the school The name of the school remains Prajna Vihar School and not Pragya Vihar School. The boundary wall has to be raised and another room to be made for the students. More toilets have to be made for the students as well as the staff.

Purchases: A big table for the staff, few more desks and benches for the students, library books, two cupboards.

Future vision in terms of next big steps : Upgrade the school to High School, Purchase land for the school, Computer education for students, Technical school for students, Scholarship for Ex students

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## **PV SCHOOL 2005 - INTERVIEWS**

Jiva Masheder

I set out towards the Pragma Vihar School again this year, and as happened previously, was greeted by crowds of beaming kids in their red school uniform, many keen to try out their few words of English on me and make a bit of contact. Indian kids are so friendly. And when I forgot the way, one of them guided me right to the school to make sure I got there. The village is a maze of paths and shacks and goats.

This time at the school I had longer conversations with four students and these conversations were enabled by the new principal, Sister Bindu, who did the translating.

All the four students were in the later classes in the school, and all had ambitions for further study. Unfortunately the quality of further education available to them is very poor, but for the moment it was good to see them enjoying and appreciating their school time. I was struck by the difference in attitude between these kids and many in the West who are often either ambivalent about school or resent having to go.

One of the kids was Kumar from Mastipur, the nearest village. He is part of a typically large Indian family, with 3 sisters and 3 brothers. He's the baby of the family. Three of his siblings are married already. Among educated families in this area the marriage age tends to be around 17-18: young for us but quite late by the standards of many other Indian families. Sister Bindu assures me that it is the education that makes the difference here.

Kumar's father is the caretaker at a medical college, and he has worked there for 14 years. His salary is around A\$200/month, which has to support him, Kumar, and three older brothers and their wives. Kumar's mother died 3 years ago, so they have to share the domestic responsibilities between themselves. When I asked if the A\$200 per month that was enough for all these people, he just said that they had to manage as that was all there was. They have no animals or land to produce food, and have to buy everything from the market.

Kumar really seemed to appreciate the quality of the teaching at PV school compared to other schools. He plans to go to the Government High School to complete the 10 years of schooling, and he would like to come back one day and teach at the PV school. Actually a lot of students say this.

Next I met Priti Kumari, a young girl who walks a couple of kilometres, half an hour, to arrive at school at 8:30am. Before she leaves home she often needs to clean the whole house and make breakfast for the family - typically chapatti and potato curry. She often cooks on a rice-husk fire - something I had never heard of. Apparently the rice husks are cheaper than firewood in deforested Bihar, and available in the market. Sometimes she prepares the food and sometimes it's done by one of her older sisters. Priti Kumari is 12 and has 7 sisters and no brothers. She is the middle child and when she cooks it is for all of them. One of the big problems for her family will be the financial burden of paying the dowry for 7 girls, with no dowry coming in from any boys. Her father has a business making baskets for local people and selling baskets he gets from Benares. The baskets don't get sold to tourists and so he doesn't get any direct benefit from Westerners with their money. They manage on her father's income but the seven dowries are a worry.

They all live in a small house with two rooms. Father and mother in one room, sisters in other room, but they all get on well and no-one snores! They don't have any land or animals, just the house, so they are totally dependent on their father's business to buy what they need.

One good thing about the house is that there is a hand-pump outside, so there is no problem with carrying water long distances. The water in the area isn't always clean though.

This is Priti Kumari's last year at the PV School. She is in Class 8 and next year she will go to the Government High School. She doesn't want to leave PV School. She would also like to come back one day and teach - Science, her favourite subject.

The third student I talked to was Afroz, from the Bodhgaya bazaar area. He lives in a larger house with 5 rooms, his parents, three sisters and two of his three brothers. What he likes best is the discipline (!) at the PV school. Many kids say this and it is often surprising for Westerners. I think they like the discipline because they really want to learn and find it frustrating to be in undisciplined classes. Afroz is pretty disciplined himself, according to Sister Bindu. She said that students are sent back home if they're late but Afroz is never late. He likes maths, wants to go to the Government High School then onto college for the final 2 years, then maybe a BA.

His real passion though is art. He won a local art competition, he can draw cartoons and portraits and Sister Bindu had the view that he really was talented. Afroz wants to develop his artistic skills as well as the more formal academic study. And he is already thinking how he could make a living from art: commission paintings, wall painting, pictures for tourists, maybe of Bodhgaya landmarks and monasteries, portraits, pictures of the Dalai Lama. His mother says that he needs to do all the formal schooling first before going to Art School. Sounds like what a Western parent might say. She said that when his formal schooling is finished, he might be able to go to Art School in Calcutta. That's his dream.

The last student I talked to was Anku Kumari. She comes from a village about three kilometres away and often comes to school with the nuns in a rickshaw. She has seven in her family: her parents, herself, the eldest, two sisters a brother and an aunt. She does the cleaning and sometimes the cooking. She's 11. It's hard to imagine many Western 11-year-olds with that level of responsibility. When pressed, she said that she liked cooking, and reluctantly admitted that she cooks well.. They use firewood and plug-in electric stove (but frequent power outages make that not very reliable). She said that that morning, before coming to school, she cleaned the house totally and cooked breakfast for everyone in the family- chapatti and vegetables. After school she'll eat, study, play a bit with her friends. I asked her what games they play, wondering if children's games were similar, and found that they play Hide and Seek! Also a game catching stones on the back of the hand, and another one in groups where one group splits off and tries not to be caught by the other group. Some things sound similar the world over.

All of Anku's friends go to school, and her and her 2 sisters and one friend come to PV school. She said that if she didn't come to school she would be at home doing housework. She thinks she is likely to get married around 18 - quite old for some parts of India: the education makes the difference. She'd like to go to the Government High School after finishing at PV school, and go on to teach Science. (Another one wanting to be a teacher).

I talked further with Sister Bindu. She comes from Kerala in the South of India, she joined the Congregation of (Christian) Nuns in 1989 in Varanasi, and then took full ordination 1994. Then she did a BEd in Jamshedpur and started teaching. Before the PV school, she was teaching in Chattisgarh State in an English medium school (many schools in India teach in English rather than the pupils native tongues) She said she really loves teaching.

She particularly likes the PV School because it's just for the poor and gives free education for those who can't afford it elsewhere. She doesn't know how long she'll be able to stay because her Order can simply call her away and assign her other duties.

Apart from the principal role she teaches English, reading and writing, and she says she likes all of them. I commented on how the kids here seem to enjoy going to school and that's often not the case in the West. Sister Bindu said they know that school is their opportunity to make something of their life and so they're motivated.

She would like to have classes up to Class 10 - many pupils can't go on because they can't pay fees for better schools and in the Government school she said there is no real teaching. She said in the Government School the teachers often just come to collect their salary and don't teach at all.

She said there is great demand from parents for classes up to Class 10, but that it's just not possible at the moment as they have no space, no classrooms. There are 475 students already. And looking at the building myself, I found it hard to believe you could fit so many in

Sister Bindu talked about the problem of waste water overflow from the bigger hotels which is likely to get worse as tourist numbers increase. There are no laws or regulations governing such things and it's a problem because the dirty water can lie around for months and turn into a mosquito breeding ground. There had been a debate about whether to move the school because of this but in the end, mainly due to the cost of moving and building a new school, the decision was made to stay put.

There has been some expansion of the school in the last year: two more classrooms have been built and they are now used as nursery classes for 5-year olds. They are teaching them reading and writing and numbers.

She said there were only two sisters available from her congregation for and it was hard to find trained teachers, in part because qualified teachers need to be paid more. Most of the teachers there are untrained so they don't have good teaching skills. Many of them have a BA but not a BEd or other teacher training. She said some were good but others not so good. She gives professional development seminars on teaching methods, but she doesn't think it is enough. Sister Bindu said that one of the challenges was to try to stop the students going out begging. She said she understands it is very tempting for the kids with so many rich tourists around.

She also said that there was no religious education in the school, and so far no conflict between the Christianity of the nuns and the local Hinduism . She said the locals genuinely appreciate what the nuns are doing for the area.

She went on to say her greatest joy is knowing that the school is doing something for the most under-privileged children. Some of the old students come back to visit and they are often doing something that they wouldn't have been able to do without having gone to the PV School: like further studies or even university or in business. One of them went to Bombay and now works in a shipyard. She said that if it hadn't been for the school they would more likely be at home or in the fields or begging.

Of the many students who had aspiration to teach, she thought that in general it was not so realistic, but good to see that teachers were being admired and that students wanted to emulate them.

She said that many girls don't continue studies after going to the PV School. They just stay at home until they get married. Even so, their education still brings many benefits. They have a taste for education and are likely to make sure their own children get educated, they know how to manage money better, have better hygiene and understand the importance of cleanliness,

they don't get cheated in the market because they can read. They also tend to be more disciplined.

Sister Bindu would like to expand the school to teach up to Class 10 and find good teachers. Both these things need more money. She hopes some teachers will "be charitable" and accept a lower salary, but this is not something to count on. Her dream is to have more children coming to the school and to make a real difference to the community.

Walking back from the school I thought of all the things in the West we take for granted.

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## **Prajna Vihar School 2005-6**

Victor von der Heyde

At a glance: 530 students enrolled (2006) ; ages 4-15; up to Class VIII (new Class IX starting 15 July 2006); priority given to students from very poor families who would not otherwise receive an education; Hindu, Christian and Muslim teachers; Buddhist, Christian and Hindu members on the Board of Directors, funding predominantly from people in the Insight Meditation and Buddhist communities; 12 teachers; subjects taught: English, Hindi, Maths, Science, Social Studies, General Knowledge, Ethics, Drawing, Craft, Dance.

The school is going well and there have been a few new developments. The school buildings are slowly being expanded: in addition to the two new classrooms that were built in 2004-5, the decision was made in January this year (2006) to build another extra classroom on the first floor. This will cost around A\$5900 and address the problem of having two classes taught at different ends of the one room.

Teachers at the PV School have in the past been paid less than teachers at other schools in the area and we have fortunately been in a position to increase the salaries. The new rates are 3000 rupees per month for teachers (A\$88) with a two month bonus (A\$176) per year, and 5000 rupees per month (A\$147) for the principal, also with a two month bonus per year.

After finding the best way to get through the various bureaucratic hurdles to do with appropriate registration of the school as a legal entity, a process which took many years, we were finally in a position earlier this year (2006) to apply to regularly transfer funds from overseas directly to one of the school accounts. This is known as the FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) application. We are hoping that this will be approved in the next few months. This would make the accounting arrangements with the school much more straightforward.

There was a report recently on some of the old students who were in the first intakes of the school in the early 1990s. For poor and generally low caste kids, some of them have done very well. One is doing further study to prepare for medical school entry, two are studying Chinese at the Shanti Niketan University in Kolkata, one trained in electronics and works in that area in Chennai (Madras), one got qualifications in marine engineering, one is studying Japanese at the Indira Gandhi Open University and others have jobs in hotels. It is hard to imagine that kids would be in these sorts of positions if it were not for the PV School. In general while many of the boys continue their education, it is unfortunately not so common for the girls.

There is still the drainage problem next to the school - this has been a problem for years - and at times the school looks from some angles like it is in the middle of a lake. There has been a commitment from the head of the local government body (the Gaya District Commissioner, who came and inspected the area) to have the problem fixed and while we're not holding our breath, it could well happen.

At the beginning of the year there were discussions between the principal and teachers as to how many new students to take in. There were lots of applications and this is partly because there are a many poor people trying to get their kids into a school and partly because the school has a good reputation. In the end the teachers and principal decided to take in considerably more than they had before. This has resulted in very large class sizes which have proved a little difficult. Next year the numbers taken in may not be so high.

There is room for improvement in the facilities and support for the teachers. Some of the items on the teachers' wish-list in January this year were:

- (a) a teacher training program at least once a year
- (b) teaching aids (maps, charts of animals, birds, flowers)
- (c) more limits on the number of students per class
- (d) a science lab, and
- (e) being able to offer classes up to Class X (currently Class VIII is the highest)

From the 15th of July this year (2006) there will be for the first time a Class IX. This was partly a response to requests (or pestering in the words of the Principal) from Class VIII students, partly a wish from the teachers and it was made possible because we had the funds.

Teachers also wanted the students to have a more substantial playground. We're hoping this will happen by the end of the year.

In the past teachers had hoped to arrange a study tour for some of the senior student and in February this year, this finally happened.

Thirteen students aged around 14 years old went with the Principal, Sister Bindu and three other teachers to Kolkata (Calcutta) on short study tour. Kolkata is about 500 kilometres away. The trip was enabled by one particular donation. Even though Bodhgaya is not far from the Gaya railway station, it was the first time many of the students had been on a train. After the trip they wrote about their experience, and here is the translation.

*We consider ourselves very lucky to get an opportunity to visit Kolkata. We went from Gaya on 25th February by the Poorva Express. We reached the Howrah station in Kolkata in the evening and went to the Bengal Buddhist temple by taxi. There we were given rooms to stay. After having our dinner at a restaurant we went off to sleep. Next day after breakfast sister took us to the zoo. We were amazed to see all the different animals, and birds and snakes. We saw most of them for the first time. We saw snakes which were poisonous and snakes which were not poisonous, big birds which could fly, and even animals which could swallow a human being. The world is such a marvellous place! In front of the giraffes we felt ourselves very small. We were very happy to meet our ancestors, monkeys. Even though we didn't want to leave, we had to, because we were going to visit the Science City in the afternoon.*

*We got inside the Science City by a lift, and in that you could get an all round view of the whole place. First we went to the space theatre, where we heard about the seasons, and how much they effect our lives. Then we went into a mirror maze where we saw ourselves in different shapes. In some glasses we saw ourselves without heads and in some without a body. The different mirrors are made of concave and convex lenses. It was wonderful.*

*From there we went to a place called Evolution Park. It had animals of the past like dinosaurs and huge reptiles and showed the life style of early man, how he walked, ate and lived amongst the wild animals.*

*After that we went for a boat ride on the River Hooghly. The boat had a special provision for orchestra. From the river the famous Howrah Bridge looked beautiful, adorned with lights. The*

*next day we went to see Queen Victoria's memorial by metro. It was the first time we had been on the metro. The memorial is a historical place, and we were told of the British rule in India. We had many photographs taken in the garden. From there we went shopping. Due to lack of money we purchased only few things but we enjoyed looking at the shops and the crowd. Though the city is thickly populated, the traffic rules and other rules are well maintained.*

*The roads over there are very clean and the people are educated. The tour was a learning and enriching experience for us. Bodhipala Bhante was a great help for us. He arranged everything for us to make our stay and tour comfortable. We are grateful to Sr.Bindu and all those who have arranged and made this trip possible for us.*

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