

## **MASSIHI GYANODAYA ABHIYAN**

(Literally: Campaign for a Awakening Wisdom)

### **Background - September 1994**

Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan (Campaign for Awakening Wisdom) is an effort to bring literacy to the area around Bodh Gaya, a small town in the state of Bihar in North Eastern India. The Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment here 2500 years ago. In spite of this illustrious past, many of the people in the area suffer tremendous hardship. Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan was initiated and is managed almost single handedly by Ma Jaishree Upadhyay (Sister Jessie), a Christian Sannyasin (renunciate) from Kerala, who has spent many years teaching and working among the poor of Bihar.

Sister Jessie decided to leave lush Kerala for depressed Bihar because she knew it had the lowest literacy rate in India. She is not attached to any order, but spent nine years with the Sisters of Notre Dame working as a teacher and social worker. Now 44, Sister Jessie wears the ochre robes of a Sannyasin and practices karmayoga (contemplation through action), and nishkama (actions without reward), and has virtually no possessions. Her life is devoted to the welfare of the people of Bihar. With her unbridled compassion and years of experience working in the area, Sister Jessie is the ideal person to undertake this effort.



Sister Jessie with students and a teacher

There are a few other assistance programs which reach the area immediately around Bodh Gaya proper. However, most of the tiny villages within a few mile radius receive no assistance at all. It is in these poorest and most forgotten villages that Sister Jessie focuses her work.

### **Why They're Illiterate**

These Harijan (formerly known as "untouchable") villages are among the most illiterate and poverty stricken in India. Most of the children in these villages are bound to labor in the home by the age of five while parents go out in search of work. Apart from scarce work during the harvesting and planting seasons, many must resort to begging. Primary education is free in India

but these children are not able to take advantage of it because of their duty to help support their families.

Sister Jessie focuses her efforts on literacy because she believes that the caste system is a cancer on Indian society and that only through education can people overcome, or at least question their status. In her own words: "Our earnest effort is to bring about total literacy as a basic reformation for the underprivileged.

### **An Innovative Model for Self Help**

The Literacy program joins with and motivates local people to help themselves and each other, across caste barriers in a unique way. High school students and graduates of various castes, mostly Harijans, are motivated to teach the children of their own or nearby villages basic literacy.

Every Sunday, these student-teachers attend a two hour training session. Instruction is given in creative teaching methods and how to improve living standards. Environmental education, especially the saving and replanting of trees, is also included. All student-teachers and pupils use a small but effective lesson book that Sister Jessie designed herself.

As a necessary incentive, student-teachers are paid two rupees for every boy and three rupees for every girl taught per month. The added incentive to teach girls is offered because women are especially oppressed in Indian society. An exam is given every three months to insure that students are learning. Only after the exam are student-teachers paid.

Until now classes have been held either under a tree or the veranda of a local temple. A current effort is to motivate students' parents to construct a mud hut in which to hold classes at each of the school sites. The hope is that more of the villagers will recognize the importance of literacy and make a personal investment to it through this cooperative effort.

Although the primary focus is on education, Sister Jessie also makes some effort to distribute blankets and clothing. Around 95% of the Harijans, including the old, have no blanket or warm clothing. Because of their malnutrition even 50 degrees (F) is unbearably cold and during the winter it often drops down into the 30's.

### **Progress: A Sign of Hope**

This program is already achieving enormous success in spite of tremendous restraints and minimal resources. Last year, with the help of 47 student-teachers who range in age from 14 to 40, Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan was able to reach over 40 villages. More than 1700 children, who otherwise would not have had the chance, received some instruction. Sister Jessie intends that ultimately the work will be sustainable in real terms, when the childrens' parents see the value of education and are willing to contribute just a few rupees to the cause. Hopefully many will eventually also be able to participate in the government's educational system which is not possible until present vicious cycles of poverty and illiteracy end. Even though many students will not be able to continue on to a full education, this is the first step toward education for many families.

### **Success Requires Support**

To date the success of Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan has been made possible only through private donations, but with no regular means of support. At this stage funding is critical for Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan to continue and become established. Please help this extraordinary work to continue by sharing whatever resources you can. Sister Jessie administers the spending of every

rupee herself, there are no administrative costs. Your money will directly help towards the literacy of those for whom otherwise it would be an impossibility.

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