

**1994 REPORT - MGA
A Personal Perspective**

Recently, during my travels, I was asked to name a woman I most admired; my thoughts and then verbal response quickly turned to Jessie. I had the privilege of spending a few days with her during my stay in Bodhgaya. My background training and interest in education, social justice and women's issues meant that rapport was quickly established. The intention was to photographically document her work in order to raise awareness and subsequently more funds back in Australia for her project. I feel I gained richly by my contact with her.

It was in high school years when Jessie first became aware of the deplorable educational opportunities for many of the underprivileged, especially in the state of Bihar. It seems since then she has been preparing herself for the work she is doing today. Gathering skills (in education) and increasing her knowledge & commitment to social awareness (through experience & extensive reading) and deepening her spiritual practice.

Jessie's approach to education reveals her sharp creative mind, mixed with passion for social justice. In order to firstly motivate the children to learn, simple nursery rhymes were taught by reading these at home. The parents, of course, were impressed and able to quickly experience the fact that their children can learn. This increased their self worth & so encouraged further attendance. Gradually the use of known rhymes leads to reading. It is the next step, I feel, that shows Jessie's uniqueness and the blend of qualities mentioned previously. She uses rhymes that she has written (simple and catchy) that include a social comment. For example, about a beggar's life (looking at the conditions of people poorer than ourselves; therefore encouraging compassion) or about the inspiring life of Mahatma Ghandi. Firstly, the school age tutors learn these rhymes and through discussion with each other and Jessie their understanding of social issues relevant to the rhymes are increased. Then, with enthusiasm the children are taught and then they carry the message to their homes.

It can be seen that Jessie's project operates on many levels. Firstly, she needed to find (through the schools & colleges) a group of willing young tutors (often 15-17 yrs old) to work for the lesser privileged for token payment (plus whenever possible small gifts of encouragement). The tutors gain also practically by developing career (teaching) skills and simultaneously a greater social conscience. The children benefit of course, and then the parents individually and collectively. Jessie's next stage is to encourage each village to build a classroom (at present classes are held out in the fields or under trees). A blackboard will be given as encouragement upon completion of the building and then a garden will be made next to each classroom for the villagers to learn basic skills in market gardening, help develop self-sufficiency and raise nutritional standards. Womens classes in literacy are just beginning, which Jessie hopes will develop into groups of simple cottage industries. The benefit to the women is obvious. Jessie believes that it is through education that the conditions for Indians will be uplifted and their rights increased.

To develop this Jessie works unceasingly, creating simple, appropriate teaching aides with materials available cheaply and locally, writing songs and making them into attractive books for the children and tutors. She travels constantly to different villages to check on progress, and investigate possibilities for new classes; conducts group sessions with the young tutors frequently and sets them tests to determine the progress of the children.

I remember as the subject of her payment was raised during one of our informal conversations as we crossed a rice paddy going from one village to the next; she said "happiness is my payment". I knew by this she meant seeing the positive impact that her "schools were bringing to each village was enough for her. I suspected that sometimes Jessie was not sure whether she would eat a full meal the next day herself.

Jessie taught me the meaning, through the example of her life, of renunciation and compassion. When I asked her why she made the step from being a nun to a sannyasin she told me simply that by leaving the church she was letting go of any attachment or security or belonging to an organization that could support her. The other side too, she tells me, is that she doesn't have to answer to any hierarchical organization.

Her strong will and commitment drive her, expressed through an open heart, warm expression and a twinkle in her eyes. Although small in stature, I could see and feel (as I couldn't understand the words) the great respect and love that surrounded her from the tutors, children and villagers with whom she made contact. I also witnessed how she dealt with any conflict of ideals by a clear direct manner that allowed the other person(s) room to move and make their own decision to stay with her or leave. Sometimes a decision to leave her is made by another family member, for example, a landowner becomes aware that by educating the harijins they will become more vocal about their rights, so a son is refused permission to continue teaching.

Although greatly inspired by her work, I knew it is not my Path to do the work she is doing, but I hope through my contact with her, the information I've gathered and the photos I've taken I can support her in achieving "her happiness".

Financial support for Jessie is vital, as an independent worker she relies solely on private contributions. This money allows her to pay her tutors, have song books printed and buy simple materials such as slate boards and chalk for each child. As contributions increase more villagers can benefit, materials can be improved to include note pads and pencils; and the token payments increased to encourage more tutors to become involved.

While teaching in a convent previously, Jessie was aware that when she left the education of these privileged children would continue. In the surrounding villages of Bodhgaya, if Jessie ceased doing her work there would be no further education (formal & informally) for these people and for many people their quality of life would be greatly reduced practically and spiritually.

Christabelle Baranay

1996 REPORT - MGA

Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan (Campaign for a Literate Bodhgaya) now reaches 1800 children in 37 schools dotted around the countryside - not exactly our concept of schools as these are under trees or on the verandahs of village Temples. The rain gods blessed the villages with lots of rain and plenty of paddy replanting work but it did disrupt teaching. Many parents came forward to construct village-style mud huts. They will build the mud structure with MGA providing the roof this year. It is planned the schools will have a temporary roof of bamboos and straw.

Older students (2 years standing) were very eager to plant more trees as the monsoon approached. This year, new students will be introduced to tree planting. The seed sown in the students' hearts for environmental protection is growing.

Regular teachers' training seminars are being held for two days in September and ten days in October. Travellers having made contact with these seminars are thanked. If you visit India you too will be welcome. There are many ways you can help. Just call on Ma Jaishree Upadhyay (Sister Jessie) at Burmese Vihar, Bodhgaya, Gaya during the evening as she is out in the villages during the day.

Joy and sadness. India's 50th Independence Day was celebrated in August with flag hoisting and sweets. On Teacher's day a motivational, thanks meal was served and for exemplary service, some teachers received a present reward. The sad note. One of the first young teachers Geeta, who had recently married, died of childbirth complications. Her baby lives and her sister Lalita continues the school.

Imagine this! Switzerland fundraising will provide 1800 children with a dress. The plan is that this uniform be given to all the children at the Dobhi centre. If we can see the discarding of rags and the wearing of the uniform as a shining out of the Light of Literacy, what inspiration this event will hold for students, teachers, villagers and Sister Jessie.

1997 REPORT - MGA

Ma Jaishree Upadhaya, also known as Sister Jessie, was once confronted by a police officer. He questioned her, "I get complaints that you are spreading the religion of Christ?" She answered him: "Oh yes. I am spreading the message of Love, as I understand this is the religion of Christ. At the same time, I am also spreading the religion of Buddha, which is Ahimsa .. non-violence .., and that of Gandhi, which is Truth and Selfless Service. Can I at least spread non-violence and truth?" He laughed and said "You may go ahead and do as you please. Nothing will harm you."

Gandhiji had a lifelong dream of bringing about 'Ram-Raj', a kingdom where the ruler and subjects live together in harmony. Jessie's project 'Massihi Gyanodaya Abhiyan' .. Campaign for Awakening Wisdom is endeavouring to continue this effort, to bring about total unity of castes, creeds and religions. Towards this end, her education program was started. The ultimate aim is education of the heart as well as the head. There are millions of children who never get a chance for an education; she hopes to reach some of them.

The caste system is intricate and many .. here are but a few. There is a caste consisting of people whose task is to raise pigs; another of people who make a living by polishing shoes and giving massage; and another of those who, because they are caste street cleaners, are shunned by others. There are powerful forces maintaining the system, which persuade the people to define what is possible for them. Higher caste people can exert influence on the low caste villagers to discourage them from sending children to school. Jessie's work challenges that system, and is constantly challenged by it. Whilst the policeman's comment was profound, and she is honoured by many, in reality she is seen as a threat by those who fear that they will lose power. Thus, not only must she rise above incredible frustrations, but also daily face great risks.

Eoin Liebchen-Meades and Kevin Corlette (from Chicago) went walkabout with Sister Jessie in January this year visiting some of the village schools. Kevin says: 'Many schools consisted of nothing more than the bare essentials of teacher and students, chalk and blackboard, pen and paper; there were few buildings, no desks or chairs. The sky is the roof and the earth is the floor. It was a joy to see the excitement of the children as they greeted Jessie by standing and shouting "Didiji" .. Elder Sister.

Sister Jessie now reaches around 52 villages. Each day she visits a village and with so much territory to cover she might only be able to stay long enough for a brief conference with teachers and perhaps the parents, hear the children sing a song, and distribute some supplies.

Her mode of transport? .. She walks! Or she catches an overcrowded bus and walks the rest. By listening to the song, Jessie can gauge which children have been attending school regularly; and by keeping the timing of her visits a surprise, she is able to monitor how diligent the teachers are in carrying out their duties. Village students number around 1000 and funds raised provide a very small remuneration for teachers, basic teacher/student supplies and some books. Jessie ensures that the money we raise here is used to maximum benefit there. The special Swiss funded Uniform distribution was made to all students last December (1996).

The plight of widows in the villages reached by Jessie has been very much on her mind. When she learned of a government program to provide benefits to widows, which is generally unknown among the villagers, since most are illiterate and have very little contact with government officials, she took on this task of helping them. Basically widows are often illegitimately charged fees to fill out applications and frequently the end up with only a fraction of what they are entitled. Kevin says: "Many of the women looked to me as though they were 60 to 70 years old. I was surprised when Jessie told me that most of them were not much more than 40. She translated a couple of names: the first meant 'one who should be killed'; another was 'one who is always sad'. Death does not always come suddenly. Sometimes it comes slowly, through a premature wearing away of life.

Sister Jessie's work has the perseverance of the spider from this rhyme:

The eensy weensy spider crawled up the water spout,
Down came the rain and washed the spider out,
Up rose the sun and dried up all the rain, ..
And the eensy weensy spider crawled up the spout again.

May we continue to receive the generosity of donations so that this precious being, Sister Jessie, can further her work.

Pam Grayson

Dec 97 Report

I spent a few days with Sister Jessie who organizes our other main support project. Jessie's teaching places are in the villages, often in spare rooms or under trees; and the books the children use are pieces of slate and chalk. Everything is very basic and rustic, even precarious, in its existence.

At one village, one child just died, another looked close to death and one had died four days prior. The mother was grieving as we came. It may have been one of the serious infectious diseases ... smallpox was mentioned ... and medical authorities would not come to the village. The villagers were too poor and ignorant to do anything so Jessie arranged for help to come. One third of the women are widows and Jessie was arranging for them to receive their pensions. Corruption is prevalent and only about one third will seep through to them (worse than tax here!). Jessie extends herself to these and literally dozens of little projects. They are not her main aim ... which is basic education for the children .. but merely side issues. In one dust bowl of a village we gave out clothes and some food to the children. One child was obviously neglected and Jessie said that both his parents were dead and he lived as a waif in the village. The kindness he received from Jessie and us was hard for him to receive ... as if he didn't know what it was ... as if kindness was more foreign than our language. It is these and many more Jessie reaches out to. The seeds she plants are in the hearts of those who spend time with her ... both foreigners and her own people. I am truly honoured to help her as I can.



Namaste: Greetings from children at a village school

1999 REPORT - MASSIHI GYANODAYA ABHIYAN

The MGA was established five or so years ago by Ma Jayashree Upadhyay, or simply, Sr. Jessie. Five years ago she left her (Catholic) order of nuns, where she was a teacher in Patna, to give education to children of the largely musaha (rat-eater) caste, who would not otherwise have had any education. Like many of the activists in the region she sees education as the way to help the people overcome injustice and exploitation, now and for future generations. She takes her inspiration from Jesus and Mahatma Gandhi and is quite uncompromising in her principles, going as far as to return donations from people or organisations whom she feels have an unwholesome hidden agenda.

THE ORGANISATION

She now runs 33 village schools with about 40 teachers who are paid between \$32.00 per month, for a barely educated teacher or teacher's assistant to grade 8 standard, to \$60.00 for a more highly educated/trained teacher. Jessie currently has 2,500 students enrolled in her schools, for whom she provides simple uniforms at the cost of \$2.00 each. I spent an afternoon visiting a few of her schools in the Dhobi area on the back of a donated Vespa, which took me back 30 years to a largely misspent youth. The school buildings ranged from a converted cattle shed to an abandoned government tourist project, which consisted of a lonely building with no water, electricity, windows or doors, where three classes seemed to be under way. The curriculum in most of these schools is quite rudimentary - reading, writing, arithmetic, fundamental hygiene and general studies. Perhaps the most important effect of these activities is to raise the self-esteem, of not only the children, but also the whole village and to increase a sense of personal and political empowerment, which is so sadly lacking.

A CHRISTMAS PARTY

Just before Christmas I was invited to the teacher's "Christmas Party" at the HQ, which is currently in a pitiable rented hovel in Dhobi Village about 20km from Bodhgaya on the Grand Trunk Road. The building consists of two crude rooms of bare brick with a dirt floor, no windows

and no electricity. It is situated in the corner of a walled courtyard, measuring about 10m by 5m and open to the sky. In the corner was a traditional mud brick hearth next to a cast iron hand pump. This space served as a kitchen. About 25 teachers began to arrive by bicycle or on foot. As the light began to fade and the cold night began to descend, the oven was fired up with cowdung and a huge vat of rice was set on heat, together with a lesser pot of mixed vegetables (subje). Only Jessie spoke English, so I found myself surrounded by a hive of incomprehensible activity. Class rolls were handed in for auditing, oil lamps were lit and a rug of sorts was rolled out onto the bare-earth ground in the courtyard.

With an air of respectful solemnity everyone sat on the rug and Jessie led a moment's quiet meditation. This was followed by, what I can only describe as, a sharing in song - someone would chant a line which they would feel moved to utter and all would repeat, then another line would follow and so on. Silence for a moment or two and someone else would begin. As I sat, watching, listening, trying to forget the cold creeping up from the earth under my blanket, the poignancy of the moment was overwhelming. A young teacher, no more than 15 years old, sitting in front of me in ragged shorts and thin cotton shirt, showed no signs of cold under his threadbare cotton shawl, but in one of the silent interludes I noticed a tear squeeze out from under his closed eyelids and run untended down his cheek

The 'sharing' came to a natural end and the courtyard was filled with activity and chatter again. Disposable plates, made of pressed leaves, were placed in front of each person - rice, dahl and subje all round and as fingers got busy kneading the sticky mess, once more silence fell over the gathering. Jessie turned to me and with a grin, said "You know Keith, we Indians are funny people. When we go out to shit in the fields, we never stop chattering to each other, but when we sit down to eat, we can never think of a thing to say. What is so different?"

With the eating finished, plates thrown into the surrounding field and sticky fingers washed, we had a surprise visit from Santa, who had a small gift for everyone. Before I knew what was happening, the male teachers had disappeared into one of the rooms and the women into the other and everyone had bedded down for the night. Fortunately for me Jessie had organised a floor in a nearby house, so that I wouldn't have to face the ordeal of the morning conversations, squatting in the local fields.

A NEW CENTRE

During the last year the landlord has quadrupled the rent, which has forced Jessie to buy her own land and set about constructing a purpose built centre. This will serve as a dwelling (for her), storeroom, office, toilet and a room large enough to train her teachers. Fortunately someone purchased 2.5 khattta of land (by my reckoning about 180 sq. m.) for her and in addition to the donation of \$3,000.00, we gave her a further \$7,000.00, which hopefully will see most of the building work completed. It is a testimony to Sr. Jessie's work that she is rather disdainful of these sort of developments, as she would rather all of the donated money go directly to the poor people whom she serves. But her sense of realism dictates that expenditure on such infrastructure (though minimal by western standards) is necessary for her to continue with her work and hopefully enlist like- minded people to help her.

If any of our friends or supporters could afford the airfare and say \$ 35.00 per week and would like to spend a challenging, but immeasurably rewarding few months in the Bodhgaya region, I'm sure that Jessie would welcome their assistance.

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The New Building

Jessie's new building was easy to find, set in the paddy fields a mere 150m from the main junction at Dobhi village and clearly visible from where the bus stops. She was overjoyed to see us but she seemed rather tired as she showed us around her new place. The building is unique in many respects, none the least for being a rare example of a new Indian building which does not look old and decaying before it is completed.

My first impression of the building was that it was a bit over the top particularly compared to the hovel that Jessie had been working and living in last year. But since my stay in Rishikesh, I realise that it is simply designed in the tradition of all ashrams, in that the most prominent feature is the temple. In Jessie's case, this is a bare room capable of holding maybe 60 people (30 westerners) with a high vaulted roof the typical shape of a hindu temple but without the excessive ornamentation. Set in a large alcove in one wall, behind a large glass window, is a rather confronting life sized image of a sitting Buddha with the head of a stereotypical western Christ. Adjoining this room are two other slightly smaller rooms which serve the dual purpose of teacher training rooms and dormitories for the teachers. Here it must be understood that when the common means of transport is a bicycle even the relatively short distances to the villages, in which they work and live, prove to be quite an ordeal especially after dark.

Other rooms in the building are a small, simple kitchen and a small private room for Jessie. The building is surrounded by vegetable garden and a high wall secured by large double steel gates. On the outside gate are three panels of a mural depicting Gandhi, Buddha and Jesus - her gurus. I asked her if she was happy with it and she simply sighed and said, "it is much bigger [better] than I thought it would be and the people are so poor".



The New Building

The Program

As far as her educational programs go there has been a steady expansion over the year. There are now 42 schools with 43 teachers. Some of the bigger schools have 2 or 3 teachers while some of the very small schools operate on only a part time basis with an itinerant teacher running between 2 or even 3 villages. With 25 out of 42 rolls to examine I counted 1624 children registered which will probably amount to 2600 children overall.

Apart from the increase in numbers the most significant change to enrolments has been the need to yield to pressure to bring non-Harijan children into the schools. Although these children

are a significant minority Jessie feels that little by little the Harijan children will again become marginalised due to the deeply entrenched behaviour patterns in their social conditioning. Jessie enthralled both Dana and myself with stories of children running out during breaks to deftly catch rats which they would immediately barbecue on a fire or waste paper and sticks or forsaking their lessons to look after the family pig and so on.

Jessie has begun a policy of charging fees for each child more to imbue a sense of value for the education more than to raise money. This also allows for a minimal amount of affirmative action to counteract caste and gender inequities. From cursory look at the rolls it appears that only about 35% of the children are girls and 10% are new non-Harijan enrolments. At least as far as the upper caste enrolments go these are very early days. Another of Jessie's concerns is how to attract better (more qualified) teachers.

It is easy to forget that Jessie's efforts are not simply about education. In fact, as was stated in our last newsletter, "Education is the key" but the goal is social transformation. In addition to the school programs, Jessie has been trying to do work with the women, in particular the mothers of the children in the schools. In common with a number of other programs in similar situations, Jessie has been trying to instill confidence in women in their abilities to create and run small-scale income producing enterprises. This has to start with creating some experience with the handling of money at a level most of us take for granted.

Keith O'Neill