

Reports on the MGA (Mahisi Gyanodaya Abhiyan, a regional literacy and support program run by Sister Jessie) 2001 - 2006

2001 REPORT - MGA

As always Jessie is an inspiration to me! She continues to inspire local Indians to help the less fortunate, improving the quality and breadth of her enterprises.

After the success of her chicken project, where chickens were given to poor families so that they could sell the eggs and breed other chickens and due to some very generous donations, Jessie has initiated a cow program. Cows are given into the care of a strong woman in a family unit. These cows give fuel (dung for burning), milk for nourishment and the selling or redistribution of calves to other poor families. This seems to be opening up a lot of possibilities for some poor families. I saw several of these cows on my journey.

Jessie has about 30 school projects with hundreds of children. My travelling friend, Les and I were both in tears to see these poor, barely clad children, sitting on cold cement floors doing their lessons. The teachers themselves were often barefoot or not that well dressed, but here they were doing what they could for the children. These village children soaked in whatever they could and I was reminded that not only the raw information of reading, writing, etc. was being passed on but the very ability to think, which is probably the greatest gift of all.

In a very difficult and sometimes resistant environment, Jessie continues to do her best for the poor. In one school that was held in an abandoned government building holding over 200 children, someone spread a rumour that there was a ghost in the building. Maybe this was due to resistance

to lower caste education or because Jessie is a Christian (although she has no conversion activities) or for no clear reason at all. The result was that all of the children left the building and even after doing prayers and rituals by a Brahman priest only 1/3 have so far returned. In a superstitious and caste oppressive society these and dozens of other obstacles occur while trying to help the poor. Many aspects of village life particularly, seem to keep the poor ignorant and oppressed.

Eoin Liebchen-Meades

2002 REPORT - MGA

An encounter with Sr Jessie
by Karen Longland

Sr Jessie is both an amazing and completely inspiring person. Extremely small in stature, she carried a tough exterior as evidence of years of hard work. She works tirelessly for the under privileged in India's poorest state Bihar. I liken her work to that of the Great Mother Theresa.

Where Mother Theresa worked for the poor and sick, Sr Jessie is focusing her efforts on the poor and uneducated.

In Bihar there are very few schools and no incentive for the children to attend those that are available. Most children are unquestioningly prepared to follow in the footsteps of their parents, and their parents seem unaware of any alternative. The perpetuation of poverty and illness seem inevitable. The caste system is alive and well, removing any expectation that there is a way out of their current existence. With seemingly no national compassion for the situation in Bihar, it would appear a 'hopeless situation', yet it is within this environment that Sr Jessie struggles.

Sr Jessie's projects have included establishing up to 26 primary schools spread throughout the state of Bihar. Abandoned government buildings, churches or shaded tree areas are used as classrooms. The schools work to a curriculum, grouping children of any age according to basic numeracy and literacy skill levels. The teachers are by and large unqualified; some are paid a very small wage through Sr Jessie. Children, who have gained sufficient skills to share with others, teach some classes. Sr Jessie is doing everything she can to encourage government grants and overseas aid to fund her projects.

The wider community of the school is seen as an integral component of the projects success. Sr Jessie works with parents and village dignitaries, understanding the important support these groups can provide to the ongoing success of the education process. She has of course encountered difficulties with lack of community enthusiasm and resistance to her feverish belief in educating all caste groups together. As the wider community is itself poorly educated, the big picture benefits of education are difficult to illustrate. Yet she continues to try.

My introduction to Sr Jessie and her work left me exhausted physically and quite ill. It was an incredibly humid day, a day dedicated to the celebration of Gandhi's birthday. It had been explained to me earlier that we were to travel deep into Bihar country to attend a gathering of school children who had prepared a concert both to honour Gandhi's life, and recognize the teachings he has left us.

The school committee hired a four-wheel drive vehicle to make the three and half hour journey to the school concert. Once packed with supplies it quickly became apparent that everyone would not fit into the car-even after allowing for the usual excessive over loading of passengers. Against the vocal assertions of committee members, Sr Jessie got out of the car (with me in hand) suggesting she would travel by local bus. We had approximately six hours before the concert was due to start and she believed this to be sufficient time to make the journey.

That bus trip will certainly remain in my memory for a very long time. Overcrowding, heat, smells, stops, stares, changing buses, sweat, vomit, animals and a deafening noise, all combined into one experience. Through it all Sr Jessie, smiled, chatted to people, gave up her seat and shared her water. She was amazing. After approximately seven and a half hours travelling, we arrived at the site of the concert. Children, seated on the grass in the hot sun, quietly and excitedly watching their peers perform. Cheers erupted at the sight of Sr Jessie. We were offered beautiful garlands and every respect was provided by the village organizers. The concert continued with songs, chants, and skits performed. The clear underlying theme of every performance was the power of education.

The children, who attended different schools around the area, were all well versed in many chants, knowing the words by heart and yelling together with confidence. The chants were in local language and later were translated for me; 'education is for us', 'we will not be tricked by the rich, we want education too', 'we need education and we will work hard'.

Sr Jessie explained she works with the pure spirit of the children. She uses the example of Gandhi's peaceful resistance, providing an environment for the children to learn they can rise and reach their fullest potential. She believes the strength of her message is the acceptance of the children that they must take responsibility for themselves, and to work hard and use the opportunity provided to them. Following the concert, the children were provided with some fruit and bread and I had the long trip home to consider. There was an obvious respect and appreciation shown to Sr Jessie.

She was revered and clearly loved by all those present. It worried me to contemplate how much of her popularity was in expectation of her continuing ability to provide, organize and inspire this grass roots education program. It was clear that many people relied on her unending enthusiasm and continual dedicated support.

It was an exhausting day, my senses had been absolutely overloaded and much later in the evening, lying on my wooden bed, I achieved peace only in recalling that the day was over.

I found it astounding to consider that the events of the day were nothing special or out of the ordinary for Sr Jessie. It was just another day for this miraculous Christian nun.

This was to be one of three concerts I attended over the following week. All were inspiring and all left me with an underlying respect for Sr Jessie and her cause. Where total dedication and unwavering persistence is present, anything is possible. May we all learn from the beauty of her living example.

2003 Report - MGA

One Woman Can Make a Difference

Dana White

It had been three years since the last time I had visited with Sister Jessie. I've known Jessie since 1992, when I first started to go to Bodhgaya. She is one of those very special people whom I find incredibly inspiring. This time was no exception. I remember at one point in my visit recognising that she had been carrying on with this huge project the whole time I've known her which is now over 10 years!

Every day she does what needs to be done to keep the project flowing within a climate that is very challenging and often thwarts her work. She empowers the poor villagers of the Bodhgaya area. It's a huge task that only someone as inspired and dedicated to improving the lives of the poorest of the poor in Bihar could do.

This time, Eoin Meades, his son Toby, Caroline, a fellow manager from the Bodhgaya retreat, and I headed off for a day-long visit with Sister Jessie. It was wonderful to experience the very peaceful environment that she has created in the home of Massihi Gynodaya Abhiyan. It really is a sanctuary. Her gardens are thriving and I felt happy to know that finally she has a place where she can rest and be renewed after the very challenging work of keeping the project going. In our hired jeep, we went to three different villages this particular day.

It really is quite an event visiting a school. As soon as Sister Jessie arrives a crowd of villagers gathers around the school. I'm always struck by the way she relates to the villagers. Her manner communicates so much respect and belief in their own capacity to keep the schools going and to create a better life for themselves. This visit, I began to think that this in itself is a very transforming aspect of this project. These villagers who are really the bottom of the ladder, even in poor villages, are shown that they are important just by Sister Jessie's wish to be involved with them. She is helping them to improve the conditions of their and their children's

lives. In a country where these people are considered "the untouchables" this is indeed a powerful message of caring.

It really was incredible to go to each of the schools and find so many children working away with either their books and pencils or on their slates. What they are learning is quite elementary in some ways because the instructors are not highly educated themselves. Slowly but surely however these children and their parents are accepting the value of education, which is the essential goal of this project. It is amazing to think that none of these children would have any opportunity to go to school because there are no schools there for them and, if there were, their parents would probably not send them.

Sister Jessie has worked hard and long to convince the parents that sending these children to school is important. If they were not at school, most would be at home helping with the daily chores. This is particularly true of little girls who, particularly in the lower castes, are not educated. It's a wonderful sight to see a row of little girls learning to read and write. At these times, I know that substantial change is happening.

I find each time I go out with Sister Jessie that I'm moved to tears both by her strength and her commitment to this work and also by the children themselves who are obviously so proud of themselves sitting there in such simple settings learning the alphabet and how to write Hindi. It's a real treat when they sing us a song which Sister Jessie has usually taught them. They just light up as they perform for us.

Part of the daily routine in the schools is to say various inspiring sayings which are taken from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and others. It teaches the children healthy values such as respect and nonviolence. It's heartening to hear the children wholeheartedly yelling out these phrases.

There are many different projects that Sister Jessie has initiated over the years. It's not easy, though. We saw a project where a large fish pond was started this year but due to some problems with construction and the villagers being sold bad stocks of fish, the project flopped. Still she's not giving up. They are going to try it again this year. Through the years one thing I have seen over and over again is that Sister Jessie does not give up. She just tries again!

I strongly encourage you to continue to support Sister Jessie in her work. Each time I go to the Bodhgaya area, I'm touched deeply by the difference it makes to these villagers to know that there are people in far-off countries in the Western world who support their children to become literate and to better the lives of the villagers.

Sister Jessie is very open to people coming and visiting the project and helping in whatever way they can. If you find yourselves in India in this area, do go and visit her and see what she is doing. Words don't adequately describe the power of her work, which can only be seen in the villages where she is so deeply committed to the empowerment and well being of the people.

MASSIHI GYANJYOYI PROJECT - 2005 Report

Sister Jessie

Hello everyone!

The Girl's boarding school in Dobhi has been officially open for a month. Our 24 students have been working hard, studying English, Hindi, Science, History, Social Studies, Math, sewing, knitting, and drawing. All the girls are about 12 years old, and are Harijans. They're from caste

groups considered to be very low, and the caste system is still very much a part of life here in Bihar. Many would have no education if it were not for Jessi's schools.

It is amazing to see how quickly they are picking up on new skills! English and drawing are being taught by myself, we have experienced local teacher named Basudev teaching most classes, and Jayanti teaching swing and knitting. Already many girls are done creating their first project- a scarf.

At our school we have tried to simplify our rules to two which should be followed by everyone: To be kind, and to work hard. We have been working hard to teach the girls to follow these two rules. In addition, Jessi has been teaching them the values that Gandhi preached. Beginning with non-violence, each day the girls reflect on one value in their diary.

Speaking of diaries- we have been having the girls write an entry everyday! We have already seen improvement in their writing. More comprehensive sentences, and the ability to write in greater depth is already appearing from their hard work.

A few days ago we were also fortunate enough to receive many of the Class 6, 7, and 8 text books. They are already studying these new texts. It is our goal to try to help them pass their Junior High School Exams, at the end of this year.

Each day the girls eat their typical meal of rice and sabhgi (potatoes, spices, vegetables) or kitcherie (a mixture of rice and daal). At night they sleep under the protection of our two faithful watch dogs (or watch dog and watch-puppy!) Rex and Pixie.

The school functions purely on outside donations. It costs \$1200 for about a month of food, teaching, supplies, books, etc, That is approximately \$50 per student. We would like to find sponsors for each of our girls for the school year at \$50 a month. The normal functioning of the school and its residential program is generally covered by the generous donations received from donor groups like the BDA.

Unfortunately,. recent developments have forced us to broaden our areas of responsibility. There have been no substantial rains over the last three seasons. This long standing drought is taking its toll on the local community, with many students families reporting deaths in their families due to hunger. Finding access to aid at this time appears to be impossible.

All of the children in our schools are very poor and whilst we can support our student's needs, it is their families that need extra support at this time.

SJ



Sister Jessie in early 2005

Letter from Sister Jessie (2006)

Dear Friends of the Massihi Gyanoday Abhiyan

The vision of the Massihi Gyanoday Project is to provide education to the people of the lowest caste in Dobhi and its surrounding villages. It is my hope that one day the people will be able to educate themselves and in turn be able to increase their standard of living to include health care and economic livelihood. It is law that all people are entitled to a government provided education, however, many of the children of the lower castes are sent out of the government classrooms. This project has been created to remedy this injustice in society.

To my amazement the project has flourished over the past 15 years and the community is already seeing its benefits. For example, the parents of the girls in the residential school program have agreed to regularly send their children to the ashram for vocational training. Previously, the parents were suspicious of the project's intentions, and currently, the parents trust the project.

The project addresses health related, economic, and educational needs of the people. The homeopathic clinic operates bi-weekly and provides medical assistance to up to 130 local people. Various members of the villages have volunteered and taught others how to manage livestock such as cows, pigs and chickens. Most importantly, the people learned how to manage their income and keep savings. As well, educational services are being provided to 55 villages in the surrounding area.

International volunteers and I have taught local teenagers and young adults, mathematics, English and Hindi who in turn teach students in the villages. There is also a residential school program that has provided vocational training for physically challenged girls of the lowest castes.

The MGA project has expanded and it has now the potential to reach many more people in need and to increase the standards of service. To achieve these goals, I have decided to share the responsibilities of the project with a group of sisters from Orissa, the Hand Maids of Mary. These are members of the Society of St Theresa.

The Hand Maids of Mary have moved into the ashram and by mid next year will take the full responsibility for the management of its daily chores. They have also agreed to continue the residential school program for the girls and manage the homeopathic clinic. Education and health care are the areas of strength and resource within the Sisters supporting congregation.

The Hand Maids of Mary have greatly developed the vision of the project. Improvements in all services will take place. We would like to have a school built in the field in front of the ashram. Then to have a vehicle purchased for a mobile homeopathic clinic.

The Sisters have set up supporting financial structures and hope to receive the BDA's ongoing support in realizing the project's expanded goals. One project the sisters and I have launched, and would like to commence by next year, is the building of a new school.

In May 2007, I will focus on my core work with the volunteer teachers in the village schools as my heart remains intricately tied to the local students and their needs. I will take up residence in a smaller dwelling where I can have more time for contemplation.

With love and blessings,
Sister Jessie

Note: The BDA have made contact with the Hand Maids of Mary and we will watch this development with interest.

Drought Relief News

The MGA is very thankful for the BDA's generous support. The assistance and funds have worked well in providing for the shortfall in food and basic necessities caused by ongoing drought in Bihar.

The size of your response called for two separate activities. The first involved the delivery of five tons of rice to ten of the worst-hit villages. It took all of our staff and many of the students. It was conducted on the day we normally have prayers and celebrations to mark the birth of Gandhiji. Transporting and distributing the rice proved a very different way to celebrate this year.

Our next mega distribution was to 500 parents of our children in fifty-five villages served by the MGA. Because it would have been difficult to carry supplies back to their villages, up to thirty kilometres in some cases, we provided money for local purchases. A blanket was also provided to each family.

May all people who have contributed to these events, be merited by this big Puja/Seva. Thankfully this year the rains have been more substantial. Hopefully, the wide spread food shortages of the last few seasons will not be repeated. If significant feed can be harvested, then hopefully we can start replacing roofs that are missing due to insufficient straw, and distributing cows to support the needy families.

Due to the better season we are also planning an annual Mela fete, the first function conducted with the Hand Maidens of Orissa. Participants will include children from all the 55 centres around Dobhi. They will be able to display their good works produced throughout the year. The fete will be held at the Dobhi Ashram on 18-20 December. You are all welcome if your time permits.

Thanking you again on behalf of the poor people of Bihar and the MGA at large. May all be blessed and be rewarded with love.
Jessie

Volunteering in the Gyanyoti Ashram (2006)

A number of people have expressed interest in going to India to work with Jessie. But they would like a better idea of what to expect. The following is an account from two young volunteers from Denmark helping Sr Jessie in Dobhi, Bihar.

Hello Kim

I thought I was writing a potential volunteer. But this is even better. I did not know about the BDA, and the fact that the group supports Sister Jessie. I am very glad to hear you do. It sounds really good that you might send Australian people to help out in Bihar! Especially, as the need for volunteers at the ashram seems quite urgent to me. If they could come regularly it would make an enormous difference.

Anyway, I will attempt to give you and supporters of Sr Jessie some impressions of what it was like as a helper with Sr Jessie.

We lived and worked in the ashram from the middle of January to end of March. She has room enough and could accommodate a maximum 4 people in the ashram. It was not ideal, that we only stayed in the ashram for 2 months, because it was hard for Jessie to really benefit from such a short stay. It took a while before we got used to it and learned the routines and customs. It would have been better if we could have stayed a little longer. It also would have helped if she knew there was someone to continue the work after we left.

So news of volunteers coming regularly seems like a very good idea to me! What does Sister Jessie say about it? Well, she has not had more than two volunteers at a time. This makes it hard to start new initiatives.

However the projects and the responsibilities she gave us would never be bigger than something she knew she could not follow up and do herself when we left.

I will now attempt to answer your questions one by one.

What would I be expected to do?

We were actually not expected to do anything when we arrived. It was mainly up to us to decide what we might be able to do.

In the beginning we found it hard to really be useful when it came to teaching and helping in the clinic.

So when we were still having the new India "look" and were adapting to the place, we would mostly be helping out with cleaning, gardening, cleaning the cow shed, milking the cow, cooking and whatever was to be done. So if nothing else, it will always be helpful for Jessie to have helpers to get those day-to-day things done. If we did not help her, she would most probably have to do those things herself!

As time went by, we and Sister Jessie both had some ideas and we started out by teaching very basic English in the local school. Soon we would also be teaching the teachers and potential teachers some English. The other work was to help out in the homeopathic clinic by registering the patients.

It was a great challenge to communicate with the patients and writing down their Hindi names with English letters. But as we learned a few Hindi phrases and they got used to us it became a bit easier.

After a month we decided to take about 10 young girls to the ashram and give them a short but intensive course of handicraft, Hindi, math, English and art. We knew very little of Indian knitting and sewing but did all we could to teach some simple art and English. In that way, Sister Jessie had some extra help with the classes. But the most important help was probably the way we could give her a break from the responsibility of being in charge of 10 girls and taking care of them.

We never learned good Hindi, but after 2 months we were able to communicate with the girls who had also learned a tiny bit of English. That was essential to our stay, because people in the area don't know English. So I would say that it would be helpful to spend some time on learning a bit of Hindi when you arrive. But again, nothing is expected of you!

What skills do I need?

We do not have any particular skills when it comes to teaching and assisting in the medical clinics. We actually only speak English as a third language, and have only just finished 13 years of school. To do something like this it was very important to have a whole lot of courage, a lot of patience, a great sense of understanding, a great flexibility and the capability of adjusting. And finally the most important skill is the motivation to share your love with the children and people who need it.

What guidelines does Jesse work by?

I think that is a question for her to answer. As far as I know there are no rules in the ashram.

How long a stay would be appropriate?

As I wrote, the 2 months of our stay might have been too short. I would suggest the ideal stay would be from 3 to 6 months. It takes a lot of energy to adapt, and only after knowing the place (and maybe some Hindi) would you be a great help.

How do I provide for myself?

You need to be aware that there is no electricity in Dobhi (the village) and all water you need is to be pumped up from the ground with a pump. This was no problem to us, even though we had never been in India before or tried anything like this. You need to adjust totally to the way of living to be of help in the Ashram.

We both found the experience very special and it was really great to live there. We felt very safe inside the ashram, even though it seemed a bit unfriendly around the village. You will live in a nice room with a bathroom and a small kitchen and with vegetables and rice from the local market and the garden you will be able to cook for yourself.

Is it appropriate to suggest a program?

I think that is very appropriate!

Sister Jessie was very interesting to talk to, and for most of our spare time we talked to her and learned incredibly about India. She was a great source of knowledge and inspiration for us, and we enjoyed her company very much.

As for the project, which you have probably already read a lot about, I will just say that the spirit and the ideology are beautiful. But the work is not easy and there is a long way to go to get the people of the area enlightened. So I hope you feel like helping Sister Jessie in helping the people. It is really needed, and it will be a great experience for anyone. It is nice to hear what a beautiful thing that the BDA is doing.

Take care,
Rie Poulsen