



Walking to class from the new dormitory block

Malcolm Harper Reports

Apologies for the long delay since the last newsletter; there are no real excuses except that there has been a lot going on, in comfortably warm Odisha/Orissa and here in cold old England, and it has been difficult to find the time to write about it.

I spent a week in Bhubaneswar at the end of January, and was able to see a lot of PUSS's and of SOCH's work, and to attend, observe and contribute a little to both organisations' advisory board meetings.

I was joined by Manmath Dalai, an old friend from my time working in banking and microfinance in Hyderabad. He has semi-retired to Bhubaneswar, and has joined us as a part-time advisor and friend for PUSS, for SOCH and for us here in the UK. He is strengthening the management of PUSS in a number of important ways, and is helping Manoj and SOCH to find their way through the new government regulations and to plan and implement new directions for all of us.

One immediate issue has been the need to organize new separate accommodation for the sixty girls who have been officially deemed by the government to be in need of care and protection and have therefore been sent to PUSS. The government has in its wisdom decided that such children should be accommodated separately from the other children who have been sent by relatives or others, without government intervention.

These children can have meals and attend classes with the other children, so PUSS is planning to acquire a plot of land adjacent to the present campus and to build a new dormitory block there; in the meantime, these children are staying in very spacious rented premises some ten minutes walk from the main school.

I walked with them one morning in a traditional 'crocodile', an excellent start to the day, and Kuku plans to get umbrellas for the 45 degree summer in May and June, and the monsoon thereafter.



Robin bear meets sacred cows

Robin Bear's first trip to India

We were accompanied by a small knitted doll known as Robin Bear, who is the mascot of the Robin Hood Inn in Clifton Reynes, near Filgrave. He travels extensively and his photos are entered in a competition whose prize, if we win, will be a valuable contribution to our funds. Robin has never been to India before so we have high hopes of an award, and the PUSS girls entered wholeheartedly into our efforts to photograph him in exotic circumstances.

Day-Boarders

There are now some sixty so-called 'day-boarders' at the school, who are picked up in the mornings from the nearby (and truly awful) slums where they live and brought to PUSS. They are given a good breakfast, they attend classes all day, with lunch at midday, and they have a good supper before they are taken home in the evening. The PUSS outreach staff are trying to persuade their families to allow the children to become full boarders and to stay at school, and there is now space for them because sixty children have moved to the new block.

This is not easy, because the children's families want their little girls to join their regular moves back to their home areas so that they can join in the farm work or stay in their villages to take care of babies, but they are achieving some success; while I was at PUSS a dozen mothers from the slums attended a meeting at the school along with their children, and most of them decided there and then to enroll them as full boarders and to leave them there.



Arriving at PUSS in one of the two school vehicles

What next after school?

We are often asked what happens to the girls at PUSS after they leave the school. I happened to be with Kuku when she was talking to a brother and sister who were adopted some six months ago and now live in Silver Springs, Maryland, near to Washington DC in the USA.

They used to live with their parents on Bhubaneswar railway station, rag picking and begging, but one day they came back to the plastic rubbish heap in a corner of the station corner where they used to sleep with their parents, but found that both of them had disappeared.

The railways police arranged for them to be fostered by a couple in town, but they ran away again and were eventually sent to PUSS in 2015; PUSS is apparently a favourite official choice of destination for naughty children. They were adopted and went to live in USA in mid-2018, and they seemed to be well-settled; their new mother is of Indian descent and works with the World Bank, and the children's English already has an American twang.

I also talked to Milli, who now works in IT in Gujerat on the other side of India. She was found unconscious on Bhubaneshwar station in 2010. She was fiercely independent and naughty, and ran away from the care home where she was sent initially. She worked as a labourer and as a domestic servant, and finally came to PUSS in 2014.

She successfully completed classes 9 and 10 at PUSS, and stayed at PUSS for two more years while attending a local college. She told me that she loves PUSS but is now happily settled in her new home with a very good job.

PUSS Annual Day

The PUSS 'annual day' event was postponed because Kuku was not well, so I was not able to be there, but it took place on Friday 1st February and was apparently great success. Kuku asked me to send her a short message from the Friends of the Children of Orissa, and I sent her these few words:

"Greetings from me and from all the hundreds of Friends of the Children of Orissa, here in the cold United Kingdom but also in USA, France, Germany, China, Italy and throughout the world. It is minus two degrees here today, but my heart is warm when I think about PUSS and all its friends.

I am sorry that I am not able to be with you for the 2019 Annual Day Function; I know that it will be a happy occasion, with wonderful dance and yoga performances, and my first greetings and thanks go to the children. PUSS exists to help them, PUSS could not itself exist without them, and I am very proud to have met and learned so much from so many of them myself.

Only last week, in this same hall, Kuku asked me to talk for a few minutes about how girls are better than boys. I am a boy myself, rather an old boy now, but it was not a difficult subject to talk about. The children already know that women can bear children while man cannot; they also know that women can be soldiers, they can be pilots, and they can be leaders of countries, as we in the UK and you in India know very well.

But we still believe that men are physically stronger than women, so that we are in some way the 'bosses'. I asked one of the girls who learns karate to stand up and walk towards me, and I pretended to attack her; in about five seconds I was thrown on to the floor ! Luckily I knew what was going to happen so I was not injured, but the point was made. Girls can be as strong as men too !

The girls at PUSS are also learning to be stronger than men with their minds as well as with their muscles.

The brilliant exam results prove this, so we should congratulate all the girls and thank the Head Teacher, all her colleagues, and the all the other staff for making PUSS into a real home from home, where they can learn, and can enjoy a happy and secure life.

Thank you also to the Tec Mahindra Foundation for their support, and above all thank you Kuku for so wonderfully continuing the good work which your father Bhagavan Patra and Kadambini Bhuyan started in 1985, which has benefited so many hundreds of children for so many years".

SOCH

Everything continues to go well with SOCH's three station rescue teams. One team has moved from Puri, the temple town by the sea, to Khurdha, an important junction a few km down the line from Bhubaneshwar.

The local authorities in Puri seemed to be doing a reasonable job, perhaps because they are so concerned that the thousands of visitors to the town should not be put off by vagrant children, but in Khurdha the team rescued 15 children in their first two weeks in their new location, whereas the local police had rescued only 50 in the whole of 2018.

There are a number of similar junctions elsewhere in the State, and SOCH have already surveyed two potential locations where they estimate that a team would reach about 30 children a month; all they need is the resources to enable them to do it.

Construction is moving ahead on SOCH's Pat and Del Page Memorial Rehabilitation Centre at Jatni, after some delays with organizing the electricity connection. The first building is completed and the larger class room block is moving ahead; Manoj estimates that construction will be completed in March or April, and the buildings will be ready for use in May.



Construction in progress at the Pat and Del Page Memorial Rehabilitation Centre

They will then have to complete the official inspections and other procedures which are necessary before the premises can be used, and the first programme should

start in August or September, after the worst of the hot weather and the monsoon.

Marlborough College

Here at home we visited Marlborough College on Sunday 4th February and talked to some of the students about what we do in Odisha.

Marlborough have been regular supporters for some years, and we expect too that some of their students will spend time in Odisha as volunteers. We cannot offer air conditioning, or corporate attention or elaborate care, but we can guarantee a remarkable experience, which often changes the lives of children at PUSS and of the volunteers; get in touch if anyone is interested.



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Please excuse the length of this newsletter, but as you will have gathered there is much to write about, and much more for which there is no space.

Thank you all for all your support,
Malcolm Harper