

As always, there is much to report from Odisha... We would like to start with a topic about which our supporters often ask. What happens to girls after they have studied at PUSS? Manoj Kumar of SOCH tells us that he was recently at a conference about institutional care and happened to meet two young women who had left PUSS some years ago. He and his friend took them to see the on-going rehabilitation programme at the Matt and Del Page Memorial Rehabilitation Centre, and he sent us this picture.



Kuku tells us that one of them had spent thirteen years at PUSS. She came from a very poor 'tribal' family because of family violence and poverty, and has since then helped her parents to stay together. She now lives at home with her family and has a good job in a local organisation. The other is the daughter of a prostitute from the city, who had been at PUSS for four years. She has since then completed a diploma in electronics and telecommunications; she also has a good job and is planning to go to University.

NEWS FROM SOCH (SOCIETY FOR CHILDREN)

On eighth September SOCH successfully launched the first programme at the new Matt and Del Page Memorial Centre. Manoj Kumar has had a wide range of problems with power supply, boundaries and so on, and most recently the destruction and chaos wrought by cyclone 'Fani' on which we reported in the previous newsletter, but thanks to our supporters' generosity and Manoj and his colleagues' hard work, the programme was started as scheduled on the eighth of September.

It is a four week intensive residential event. Twenty three young boys, ranging in age from seven to fifteen, are taking part. They have come from various slums in the city of Bhubaneswar, and all have experienced serious problems; some are addicted to drugs, others have run away from home, in some cases several times.

SOCH has been able to contact them through its wide network of friends and collaborators.



Jumping time at the SOCH Rehabilitation Programme

They plan to run a further four programmes between now and the end of March 2020, including a much longer 'catch up' programme for children who have for various reasons been out of school for long periods, and have thus dropped out of education. This is sadly a quite frequent problem in India, particularly for children from families of migrant labourers, and such programmes can achieve quite remarkable results.



Lunchtime at the Matt and Del Page Memorial Rehabilitation Centre programme

In the four months since April 2019 the three platform rescue teams have rescued 281 children, including 197 boys and 51 girls. Twenty five of them had never been to school, 136 had completed the ten years of education which is provided by Government, and the remainder had some education but less than ten years.

There are obviously many reasons why children run away from home or school and jump on to a train, but SOCH's counsellors attempt to find out what they can about the children's backgrounds and motivation. Around half of the rescued children were employed as child labourers and said that they had run away because of problems at their workplaces. SOCH staff advise the children and their parents to continue their education rather than to be employed, and in most cases their follow up contacts show that the families take their advice.

SOCH's staff patrol the station platforms themselves but are heavily dependent on collaboration from the large numbers of staff who work on the railways. They have regular meetings with porters, cleaners, police, vendors, ticket collectors and with the police.



Initial counselling session at the Matt and Del Page Memorial Rehabilitation Centre

NEWS FROM PUSS (PALLI UNNAYAN SEVA SAMITI)

The girls at the PUSS school continue to flourish under the loving care of Kuku and her staff. There are now 321 children at the school, including 271 boarders, and 50 so-called 'day boarders' who come from the neighbouring slums and spend a full day at PUSS, including three good meals. Thanks to the generosity of donors we have been able to support PUSS's acquisition of a special school bus, which will replace the inadequate and unreliable service which has up till now been provided by an outside contractor. The new bus should be taking to the road as I write.

NEWS FROM VISITORS TO INDIA

Sophie James from Harrold near Bedford is spending a month with PUSS, teaching English and also helping the girls at PUSS to improve their sporting ability. The school already excels at Karate and girls have won state wide and even national awards for this, and many visitors to PUSS have seen their great displays of yoga as well as gymnastics, Odissi (a classical Indian dance) and Western dancing. Sophie is a great netball player, and she is sharing her enthusiasm and skills with the girls at PUSS; she has set up nets and acquired new balls, and is coaching the girls for local competitions.

Carla Swan is a psychotherapist and relationship counsellor who works in Milton Keynes. She has just returned from a brief (and we hope only initial) visit to Odisha, and she sent us the following note:

"I have just returned from spending five days with two amazing charities.

I visited the SOCH rehabilitation programme, the children were amazing. Despite extremely difficult lives, they are so warm, interested and eager to learn. This organisation offers children the opportunity to stop their drugs, to learn, and to make a difference to their lives. This is a safe space for them, not something that a lot of them have ever felt.

I also spent time with PUSS, an orphanage and school for girls. From the moment I arrived, I was made to feel like part of their family, they actually called me sister from the moment I arrived! Now even when I am back here in England, I feel I have a second family there. They are warm, enthusiastic, wonderful children and the people who look after them are truly amazing too. Kuku works tirelessly day and night for them, she lives on site with these girls, she is a true saint, although she would be very embarrassed to hear me say that!

This was the most humbling yet inspiring trip of my life. I cannot wait to go back out there and spend time with these truly amazing people."



Visitor Carla Swan with the children at the Matt and Del Page Rehabilitation Centre programme

We are as ever grateful for your interest and support, and please do contact us if you or any of your family or friends are going to India; we can promise that a visit to PUSS and to SOCH in Bhubaneshwar will be the high spot of any trip there. Even better, let us know if any young (or not so young) friends or family members might be interested in volunteering there.

Malcolm Harper, Vice Chairman.