

NEWSLETTER



Correspondence address: *Friends of the children of Orissa, Rose Cottage, 19 Filgrave, Bucks, MK16 9ET*
email: *secretary.foco@gmail.com* website: *orissa.org.uk*

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Registered Charity No. 1074935

From Malcolm Harper, our Chairman:

Dear Friends,

I am all too aware that our supporters do not want to be bombarded with communications, and I have been inundated with messages from every institution I know telling me how they are coping with COVID. But, several of you have asked about PUSS and SOCH and the hundreds of children whom they assist, so I hope a further message will be excused.

First, there has been a very generous response to my urgent plea in the last newsletter, asking for help with the unexpected cost of flood proofing the main classroom and dormitory block at PUSS; thank you very much, from all the children and staff and Kuku at PUSS.

Unfortunately, the 'lockdown' in India forbids even urgent construction work. As of April 18th, in Odisha state, there had been 60 cases of the disease and one death among the 46 million people, but it is not clear when the lockdown will be removed. Nevertheless Kuku and her colleagues are reasonably confident that the work can be started and completed before the monsoon, which normally starts in the middle of June.

In the meantime, the State Government has ordered about 250 of the children who board at PUSS to return 'home', whatever home may be. It appears from occasional contacts that most of these children are being fairly satisfactorily taken care of by families or friends, although many would rather be at PUSS. The 50 day students who come to PUSS every day from nearby slums are also not allowed to come to school; Ms Priyanka Pattnaik, who works for PUSS as a counsellor and field coordinator for these children has ascertained that their families are receiving food every day from Government and private charities.

Priyanka usually calls on these families regularly; here is a picture of her with one of the families which was taken shortly before the lockdown.



Those of you who have visited PUSS will have driven over the viaduct which crosses the river between the city and Naharkanta and may have noticed the slums which lie below in the riverbed.

Priyanka reports: “the children from Gangua slum which is located under the bridge are getting daily food supplies i.e. Rice, Biryani, roti, and dalma. Some people who stay on the other side of the canal are unable to get supplies properly, although they are registered voters and have lived there for more than 15 years.

Kuku’s husband Bapi has connections in the local government and is apparently taking steps to ensure that these families are also taken care of. Priyanka will follow this up, and otherwise there are no reports of COVID in the slums which are home to the PUSS day students.

The fifty or so children whom it was totally impossible to return ‘home’ have remained at PUSS. Forty of them who are nominally in the care of the Government are in a separate building as required by the Government, some ten minutes’ walk from the main block. Kuku and her colleagues risk arrest if they break the lock-down and move from one building to the other, so the housemother and others do their best to keep them occupied. Here they are practicing yoga.



Several of the PUSS teachers, and some of us from the UK and even the USA when the time difference allows, have been trying to entertain and we hope educate both groups of children, using the PUSS laptop and, when the power supply allows, the on-line teaching equipment which Vicky and Alessandro recently donated.

Here is a ‘screen shot’ of Philippa Baylis and two of her ‘distance learning’ pupils, in this case not the required two meters apart but some eight thousand kilometres!



In the meantime, Manoj Kumar, and his colleagues at SOCH find that their activities have been seriously curtailed. Very few trains are running, their three reduced teams rescued 30 children at the beginning of March, but since then they have been withdrawn from the stations, and the new Matt and Del Page Rehabilitation Centre is totally 'locked down'.

Manoj has redeployed some of his staff to intensify SOCH's usual schedule of regular telephone follow up calls to check on the welfare of children who have earlier been rescued from the railways or have taken part in one of SOCH's rehabilitation courses. They are also helping with the distribution of emergency food and other supplies to slum communities, such as those from which the PUSS day boarders come every day; here is one of his team hard at work; which is reminiscent of the similar relief work SOCH's staff undertook in the aftermath of the 'Fani' cyclone in 2019.



The SOCH team working in their new slum community rehabilitation project in the port city of Paradip are doing what they can to occupy the local children whose schools are closed. They have organized some drawing competitions; here are two examples of the results, one with the all too familiar international messages about COVID; and the other of a more colourful and let us hope, optimistic bird.



Manoj's fellowship assignment with the Gratitude Foundation in California has unfortunately had to be postponed until next year, hence he will not be with us in the UK in June, but we hope that we and indeed all of us will be able to renew our usual activities in the near future.

Back here in the UK we have had some changes to our board of trustees: Richard Cook and Colin Allen have resigned for personal reasons. I have myself re-occupied the Chair, Dawn Copsy remains as our Hon. Secretary and Mark Segal has taken over as our Hon. Treasurer. Linda Deverell and Vicky Rizzo, both of whom have visited our partners in Odisha many times, have joined our committee.

Many thanks as ever for your continuing support, which is needed now more than ever in these difficult times. Please keep it coming; our website is now updated to allow one off payments via PayPal and JustGiving as well as through the usual methods.

When conditions allow, please try to visit Odisha and to see what good things you have made possible.

Please do stay safe and well during these unprecedented times,

Malcolm Harper, Chairman.

