

A Volunteer in Davangere

Rachel Wood

January to July 2005

A new challenge for a new year

We¹ arrived as planned, safe and sound, on the morning of Monday 17th January in Bangalore Airport and were met by Fr George Mathew SDB, director of BREADS which oversees the project we are working in. He drove us to Bangalore Provincial House where we spent our first night and met the 'who's who' of Salesians in Southern India! I also went shopping to buy appropriate Indian clothes. It is not too hot at the moment – it is their winter, so quite pleasant for us – but it will start to hot up at the end of February.

6am Tuesday morning saw us leaving Bangalore to travel to the project where we are working in a town called Davangere. We arrived at the first centre at about 11.30 to be greeted with songs and dance by the young people who range from about 5 or 6 years old to 15 or 16. They are so lovely and friendly and are fascinated by our white skin and freckles! They are always smiling and cheerful and you would never be able to tell some of the horrors they have been through. After lunch we travelled a further 30 minutes to the other centre which is where we are working and living, about 12 km away from the town and close to a village called Alurhatti. There we were shown to our rooms which are much more luxurious than we expected – quite big and tall, which helps to keep them cool.

Our work is slowly falling into a routine, which is nice. It was a bit disconcerting at first, not knowing what to do or what was expected of us, but we are slowly making friends with the other staff and learning their names! We can just get by with the amount of English

¹Rachel Wood and Patrick Kerridge. During her stay in India, Rachel sent an email to her friends each week. Her reflections provide a fascinating glimpse into the world of a young volunteer, coming to terms with an entirely new culture.

they know and I am slowly picking up useful phrases in the local language. I am sure will be fluent by the end of six months. . . not!

The children get up at 6am and wash. At 7, half of them do private studies and the other half do yoga. At 7.45 they switch round. I usually wake up in time to join in the second yoga session! Sudha – the teacher – is very patient with me as I have never done it before! At 8.30 the children clean the centre and do other chores, such as looking after the rabbits and chickens that we keep. At 9am we have breakfast. 10am is prayer, then roll call, then period one. I usually teach Standard 9, the oldest class we have. All the boys are 15 or 16. They have the best English out of all the children and are very good at helping me out and even teaching me Kannada (the language that everyone in Karnataka speaks). After a 15 minute break, period 2 begins at 11, then period 3 at 12noon. During period 3 I teach standard 6, who are a little more challenging! At 12.30 there is half an hour of ‘extracurricular activity’ – on the first day they got Fr Pat and me to teach them songs.

At 1 pm we have lunch and then play until 2 when it is back to the ‘classrooms’ (the ends of corridors and verandas with blackboards propped at the end suffice as classrooms in this warm climate!) For period 4, when I have no class, I usually take a snooze, do some washing, and write my journal. Period five begins at 3, and I should have standard 7, but so far the lesson has been taken over by firstly a science teacher who came from outside to give all 100 children a lesson at once, and then by rehearsals of a sketch about Don Bosco’s life in preparation for the Don Bosco Day celebrations. Salesian flexibility is alive and well! At 4 the children are given tea (the drink – very sweet and strong and milky – more like hot chocolate in my humble opinion) and then play games until around 5.30. Normally this is free games – football, volleyball, scoreball, coco (a national game, very fast and fun!) – but there have been various competitions and tournaments going on all in preparation for Don Bosco Day when the prizes will be given. The young people have been split into four houses which are competing against each other in all sorts of things – football, volleyball, coco and drawing (I had to judge the drawing competition – argh!). A concert is being put together including the sketch; I have been persuaded to play something on the violin and Fr Pat is putting together a Powerpoint presentation.

At around 5.30 the children wash and then settle down at 6.30 for private study, where we supervise and provide assistance if they need help. At 8pm we have supper and then we dance! There are loudspeakers in one of the passageways and the children are teach-

ing me Indian dance moves! At 9pm there is a quick meeting so the children know what is happening the next day, then after prayers a Salesian Goodnight is given – a story about Don Bosco’s life. Then some TV programme or film is shown in the dining room for those who don’t want to go straight to bed, Tom and Jerry and Asterix cartoons have featured so far, as well as local Kannada films (the fight scenes of which I have to say are hilarious). And that is our day!

I am making friends with the wildlife – the mosquitos and red ants are especially friendly – but the spiders and other bugs are generally taken care of by the 4inch lizards which climb the walls. Very cute!

Our diet is mainly vegetarian (sob) but I am coping! I have tried everything so far and seem to be ok! Anyone who knows me will be amazed at the amount of fruit I’ve eaten – papaya, passionfruit and coconut from our grounds. . . yummy!

So that’s me! I am well and settling in, and I hope you are all well and happy too. . .

Names, Cooking, Teaching and Sport

I am finally beginning to learn everybody’s names! Savio people – you think it’s hard to learn 40 names? Ha! Try learning 100 names, most of them 4 times longer than normal, with most syllables utterly unpronounceable to the English tongue. I’m still not sure of some of the staff’s names. . . Fortunately the young people never tire of saying ‘my name is. . .’ because it is one of the few English phrases they are confident with! Last sunday we went on our first ‘auto’ (rickshaw) and first Indian bus! Both very interesting experiences! Just when you think that you cannot possibly get any more people crammed into a space, five more manage to, and that’s before they start climbing up to sit on the roof-rack. Also, I wore a sari for the first time!! Noor Fathima (the English teacher) and Sudha (who is a yoga teacher amongst other things) decided they wanted to put me in one on Tuesday as a practice for the Republic Day celebrations (Wednesday 26th) when we all wore them. Whilst wearing my sari, I taught Gorama the cook to make mashed potato! Pat wasn’t too well from Monday evening to Wednesday so he needed bland food. I have introduced mash to India – what a claim to fame! Now all we need are sausages, peas and onion gravy. . . We had six births this week! Rabbits, that is, very cute and very ugly at the same time. Their eyes are not yet open, and they didn’t have any fur, but are

just beginning to get a silky coat. . . awww. . . Part of a longer term plan for the centre has been getting nearer completion this week. A second kitchen has been under progress for some time and the work surface finally arrived this week and was put into place, along with some tiling in the main kitchen. The second kitchen is for the use of people like us (foreigners!) and for making special dishes.

I have not done as much teaching this week, but we're still keeping our hand in. It is more satisfying to teach the older ones as they can actually understand and comprehend what we are trying to say, whereas the younger ones are generally confined to repeating (with great accuracy I have to say) what we say, parrot style. Because we do not have the vocabulary in their language to help them understand what we mean it is very frustrating for us, and probably not too helpful for them. They have mock exams coming up next week in preparation for the May exams, and also to assess what class they should be in.

I have been playing a lot of volleyball (my arms are covered in bruises!) but I'm not great. I am sure will be expert in a month's time. . . and also squareball which, for anyone who has seen the film, is a bit like dodgeball. Well, tomorrow will be a big day for us, and for other Salesians around the world, as it is the Feast of Don Bosco. Huge celebrations are planned and a programme prepared by and for the children is also organised. I will fill you in when I next get a chance to email!

Celebration of Feast of Don Bosco

We had huge celebrations for Don Bosco day. The whole population of our centre travelled to the other centre for the day – we had about 25-30 kids in the jeep alone, which isn't that big. Remember what I said about India and the non-existent health and safety laws? Everyone else came on the bus.

Celebrations began properly at 12.30 with a prayer service, then the masters (teachers/staff) served the children lunch, (usually the older children have the privilege of serving the other children: it's one of the perks of being an older kid) which was special for them – chicken birayani (meat! yey!), bananas and. . . ice cream! For many it was their first experience of ice cream, and I have to say it wasn't half bad – very creamy, unlike some you get in England.

Then there was a special meal for the staff, and afterwards there were party games, which only the staff played! (The kids got to play

them last week in preparation for this event, so they didn't miss out!) This was basically for the amusement of the children, and amuse them we did. Then at 5.30 the evening programme began with all the skits, dances, songs, speeches, etc, that the children had prepared. I have to say that I felt very proud of 'my boys' as they performed their dances, and it made me realise how attached I already feel to them! I also did my bit and played them some traditional English tunes on my violin: not sure what they made of them, but hey. . .

The week has been full of celebrations really, because the next day we prepared to celebrate Fr Joy's birthday. (Fr Joy is one of the priests who looks after our project, along with Fr Koriakose). In the evening we had more songs, and dances etc, many only prepared in about 3 hours during the afternoon! The young people did very well. During that extended weekend I made up for the amount of meat I'd missed out on – we had it for about 6 meals on the trot!

Also on the food front, this week I discovered Indian Cadbury's Chocolate! Of course, it doesn't taste exactly like home but hey, it's chocolate! And – I hope you're all sitting down for this – I actually ate a banana. I know, shocking. They're about half the usual size here, and with much thinner skin, and apparently are much sweeter than in England, but of course I wouldn't really now about that. have to say it wasn't too bad, but am still not sure I will tkae it up as a regular part of my diet! Another new food this week – what I think were fresh chickpeas. You buy a bunch of green stems with mini-looking pea pods on them, then sit and pop 'em open to get the pea out from inside: quite tasty. I also 'helped' Gorama – the cook – to make chapattis this week (round, flat bread-like things). I was meant to be rolling the balls of dough out into circles but I was rubbish! They kept sticking to the rolling pin. I got better as I went along, but I don't think they'll use me as a replacement just yet. . .

On Wednesday things began to settle back to normal. I swear my diction is going to be so impeccable by the time I return? I'm having to pronounce words really clearly so the young people can pick up the sounds, and my hand writing is improving slightly – I have to do non-joined-up writing so they can see the letters properly! The older ones are a good laugh because they have a basic understanding of English already. They've all got mock exams next week, so I had them doing a spelling competition between two teams on Saturday, which was well funny: they're so determined to get it right and get annoyed when their team-mates get it wrong. All in good humour though.

The 'wow' factor of us being there is beginning to wear off slightly, which is great because it means that we're becoming allowed to do normal things (like sitting on the ground with the young people), instead of have everyone run after us all the time (and fetch chairs/water...), which is lovely but tiring and makes me feel a bit useless! This week, after free games in the afternoons, this kids have been helping to prepare the tamarinds which grow on the trees around the grounds. Tamarinds is the English name for them but I have never seen them before so can't think what they equate to. They grow like a runner bean shape, but a bit fatter. The outer skins are brittle and so the first job was to take the skins off. Now we're on to bashing the softer pulp bit which covers the hard seeds, in order to break up the pulp and get the seeds out. Both parts are used for cooking and some will be sold because we have loads of it!

Pat and I have been very adventurous today. We made part of our journey here today on the back of an ox-pulled cart, although we were with Brother Rojan who is looking after us so it wasn't as if we just hitched a ride. But we got an autorickshaw by ourselves into town and from there went on an expedition to find this Internet Café We had to ask for directions about four times, and we made it! En-route we visited loads of shops and bought stuff that we needed (including my sim card). We feel very chuffed with ourselves, but we still have to make it back to the project. That could be more interesting because we don't know where to ask the auto to take us! Ah well. . . if you don't hear from me next week it could just be that we are still wandering the streets of Davangere. . .

Blackouts, football and banana leaves

It has been an interesting week!

Last Monday, as we returned to the centre from Davangere in the afternoon, we discovered that there was no electricity – not a major event by any means, as it is usually off in the afternoon anyway – but as it got later and later, and the sun began to set it still didn't come on and. . . it didn't come back on until almost 24 hours later in fact, which made the evening quite exciting. As the Young People couldn't study for lack of light in the halls, we spent the time before dinner playing games and teaching dance routines in the fading light. I have to say they picked up 'Saturday Night' very well. By the time it was totally dark they had us running races up and down the play area – quite a nerve wracking experience when you can't see where you're going and the 'track' is littered with small children

who you are trying not to mow down! It was a very hilarious two hours!

In addition to the baby rabbits – which have now been reduced to three thanks to the rats – this week also saw the arrival of two kittens! Some of the boys found them abandoned so we were looking after them, but sadly we were told we couldn't keep them permanently as they were wild forest cats, not domesticated, so some of the masters (teachers) have taken them to their own homes. However we may be getting some domestic cats anyway to help with the rat problem.

The male-female separation in this society is very obvious. You very rarely see men and women together in the street, unless they are obviously part of a family with children in tow. The boys and girls at the centre sit on different sides of the room for both study and eating, and even in Church there is a male side and a female side. We already knew this, yet it still amused us greatly to realise that, as Patrick and I walk down the street, or go to church, because we are together people will assume that we are married! Even couples who aren't married are not generally seen together in public, so it's not even as if we could be just going out!

Savio Friends – I have found a novel twist for introducing the theme on the water retreat – use coconuts! We saw this traditional, local method of water divining in action on Wednesday when two guys came to try and find a place to put another bore in (three out of the four we have don't give water). I think it has to be a dry coconut (no liquid inside), which you place on your flat palm held out in front of you. Then you walk around until the coconut stands straight up on your palm when 300 feet below you there is supposedly water. We saw it happen a couple of times, but whether there is actually water remains to be seen!

This Wednesday was also 'Parents Day' for our children. It was very strange feeling to see them all, knowing that some of the children didn't even have parents who could attend. The process was nothing like our parents days in England! They arrived in the morning, and everyone, children, teachers and all, assembled in the dining room. It's great that everyone just sits on the floor – no worries about having to find enough chairs! Then some of the children's reports were read out. The parents had a chance to say what they thought of the centre and were then given a talk about their responsibilities once the children leave here – making sure they go to school every day, etc, etc – and this was followed by some dances and skits done by the children. The day was rounded off with a late

lunch at about 2.30.

My culinary skills have improved this week as I again helped Gorama to make chapattis and even though I say so myself, they weren't too bad! I am still way slower than the professionals but at least they are reasonably round and they don't get stuck to the rolling pin too often!

The weather is definitely getting warmer. My tan is increasing, but sadly only on arms, face and feet, as the rest of me is always covered up!

Patrick's football coaching skills are being put to the test at the moment – and he's taking it very seriously! Last weekend, as we took refreshments with the parish priests in Davangere after Mass, they suggested that we bring a team of our boys over to challenge the boys of the private school next to the church – Lourdes Boys School. It will hopefully be a great opportunity for both sets of boys: for the Lourdes boys, meeting with children who have it far less easy than they, for our boys, the chance to go to a top school and play against those boys. Hopefully, even if we lose, they will go away with some great memories and a story to tell! The match is scheduled for tomorrow, but this is India so anything could happen. We don't even have a kick off time yet! Pat and Rojan have been training the boys up this week and picking the first eleven and subs. Pat says he's not bothered about the outcome as long as our boys have a good time. I'm not sure I believe him!

And as for the banana leaves – on Friday we had no water, so to avoid washing up, the boys cut down banana leaves off our trees and they ate off them: the perfect, eco-friendly solution. I tried to imagine what kids in England would say if you told them they would be eating off banana leaves. I didn't think the response would be favourable!

Yesterday we went a bit touristy. After going to a Syrian rite mass (lasting twice as long as a normal Latin rite one, and then with an added 45 minutes for Station of the Cross at the end) spoken in Malayalam (the local language of Kerala, the province below ours), at the Don Bosco project in Chittadurga, about 1hour 15mins drive from Davangere, we spent the afternoon visiting a wind farm – there are loads of them on the hills around here – and then a famous fort in Chittadurga itself. It is huge and contains about 18 temples to various Hindu gods, several swimming pools, and is generally just a city within itself sprawling up and over the top of the hill. We saw monkeys for the first time! They get a good deal there because the tourists feed them, so they were quite friendly, although Pat was a

bit wary of them! The shocking thing about it was the entrance fee. For Indians, the price was 5 Rupees. For international visitors it was 100 Rupees, twenty times as much! It only works out at about 1 pound 25p, but that wasn't really the point. I was amazed that they would so blatantly take advantage of foreign visitors.

The funniest moment of the week has to be when Fr Joy did an almost word-perfect imitation of Peter Kay, as I tried to describe what garlic bread was to him! It was made even funnier by the fact that Joy has never even heard of Peter Kay, let alone seen his stand-up stuff, and so it was completely spontaneous and came complete with look of disbelief. I will not forget it for a long time!

Football, Brooms and Hindi

Last Wednesday marked one calendar month since we arrived in India? I can't believe it! Time does funny things here: in some ways it feels like we've been here a lot longer because I feel so settled and at home and we've done, seen and experienced so much; in other ways it feels like we only arrived last week!

During the last week we made another big achievement. After writing my last missive to you all, Pat and I had to get the bus back to our centre – by ourselves! Argh! Indian buses are scary at the best of times even when we have a fluent speaker of the language with us. But we survived, mainly by making friends with all the curious people who came to crowd round the 'white people' who then ensured we got on the right bus. We found one who spoke reasonable English and then discovered that he actually knew one of the teachers at our centre – I don't think India is as big as everyone tries to make out, everyone always seems to know everyone else!

If you read to the end of my last mail, you will know that a major event occurred this week – the first ever public appearance of the Sujyothi Football Team! We went last Monday to Lourdes Boys School – a private English Medium school in Davangere (posh, expensive and one of the 'best'). Sadly we were beaten 4-0, which sounds bad, but when you consider that

- their boys have been playing football for years and have weekly training, versus our lads who only had one week to practise;
- they had their whole school supporting them in their own ground,

whereas our lads were on unfamiliar turf and had only a handful of supporters;

- the Lourdes boys were all bigger, taller and stronger than our lads thanks to their privileged upbringing;
- the referee was one of their own students and was friends with the football team, meaning not only was he a genuinely bad referee and didn't appear to actually know the rules of the game but was also blatantly biased;
- and one of the Lourdes boys plays State level football. . .

Considering all those things, they should have won by a lot more, and our guys didn't do too badly at defending. I felt really gutted for them that evening because their disappointment was written all over their faces, but they are now really motivated to have more training and practice. They really, really want to get better and it's wonderful to see. Their enthusiasm could so easily have been crushed, but instead they have been spurred on to greater things, and hopefully in next month's planned re-match their hard work will pay off!

I think it is true of all the young people in our project; their experiences of earlier life could well have left them thinking that life isn't worth the effort, but instead they are so eager to make the most of every opportunity that is given to them. They are a pleasure to teach because even if they can't understand me they really want to and try to, which makes life loads easier for me because I'm not battling to get their attention – the only thing I have to control is their over-enthusiasm! Another thing that the day at Lourdes School made me appreciate is just how lovely our young people are. I was shocked at just how rude and inconsiderate some of the private schoolboys were, giving no respect to our lads in their desperation to get Patrick's and my attention. I feel very lucky that I'm working where I am!

This week I discovered how to make the brooms that everyone in India seems to possess for sweeping out their houses etc. The long, stiff strands of fibre come from the ridges of the fronds of dried coconut leaves, and the lads spent their work time this week cutting them, and once they let me help, I managed to get the hang of it too! They are each given a razor blade to strip away the rest of the leaf (yet another example of how far away the world of Health and Safety in India is from our own!) and once they have enough fibres they tie them together in a bundle to make the broom. 'Tis great fun,

because while we're working, it is still possible to talk and to teach them English words, and they in turn teach me Kannada and then test me to see if I remember – always a nightmare because I usually forget instantly!

Another strand to my continuing education here was that I had my first Hindi lesson yesterday – as if trying to learn one Indian language wasn't enough! To be fair, all I did was copy down the letters of the Hindi alphabet, which is as much of a nightmare as it is for Kannada, because they have a different symbol for every different sound, some of which sound to me exactly the same as four or so others. Joy!

So, one month gone already... I wonder what the next month will bring?

PS – We have finally got two replacement kittens to help control the rat problem – and they're domesticated so we're actually keeping them this time!

Truly honoured

I am going to have to be super-brief today as we have only an hour in the Internet cafe because after doing some shopping on our way over here we're running a little late.

So, the news in brief then...

At the beginning of the week some of the lads got new uniforms, so there was major excitement at breakfast as they were handed out. It was fantastic to see the smiles on their faces and the pride they obviously have wearing them (so different to my own experiences of wearing school uniforms – ties, urgh!). When they wear their uniforms they feel as if they belong to something, as if they we're attending school, it invokes the same sense of pride in themselves and their home. And they look very smart!

This week has been full of lovely exams for all the classes – most of each morning has been taken up by an exam, then with regular classes in the afternoon. Sadly this has meant no yoga as the young people have had extra study time instead, so I'm beginning to creak again. Where is my physiotherapist-in-training sister when I need her?!

I have had the privilege of introducing SClub7 to the India populous this week – well, our little part of it at least! It seems to have gone

down quite well: now they want me to choreograph a dance and teach it to them! Argh – not sure my choreography skills are quite up to that!

Noor Fathima, the English teacher, brought a cone of 'mehindi' (henna) with her on Thursday – so we had great hilarity as she drew a design onto my hand and arm. I have since had a go on Patrick – it ain't as easy as it looks, but with a bit of practice I think I'll get there.

Yesterday saw the digging of the boreholes that we were quite urgently needing. Apparently Fr Joy decided not to spend 40,000Rs on the advice of a coconut and got a geologist to do a more scientific survey of where we should dig. (I say we – I mean the guys with the two hefty trucks and boring equipment!). The geologist got it 50% right – the first bore has been a good success, the second not. Maybe we should have listened to the coconut after all. . .

And, the biggest news of all. . . I found out that Gorama, the cook, has named our two cats – which live in the kitchen – after Patrick and me! I feel truly honoured: how many other people can claim they've had a cat named after them? Apparently it's so they can't forget about us when we return to England. As if that would be possible. . .

A bumper edition

I apologise for absence of newsy e-mail last week, but you're all probably glad that you had a break from my mega-emails!

So. . . I have a lot to tell you. . .

A couple of weeks ago we had a visit from an Italian Salesian, Brother Steven, who currently works in Tanzania but came to India for a few weeks to visit other Don Bosco Projects. The most remarkable thing about him for us was that he is white! Yey! And I saw him before Pat which makes us 1-1 in the 'who can spot the most white people' competition that we are having.

My skin is just about thick enough now to be able to cope with all the stares we still get whenever we venture outside our project. It made me really paranoid for the first few weeks, knowing that I stand out so much, that I am so obviously an 'outsider', but I suppose one good thing it's done for me is made me realise how people that I and our society perceive as 'different' for whatever reason –

skin colour, disability, etc – might feel whenever they walk down the street. . . a good lesson to have had, I think.

My friends, I'm afraid I have to impart some terrible news. My namesake, Rachel the Cat, has sadly passed away. . . *sob*. She died in a most tragic way – she was mauled to death by one of our dogs, whom I have now fallen out with. Haven't liked dogs much since I got bitten by one and now I have even more reason to believe they are evil.

was then elated a week later to find that a new kitten – Rachel mark II – had been brought from the village by the same guy, and she looked almost exactly like Rachel 1. My joy was short-lived however as she ran away and we haven't seen her since. . . sigh. I'm not sure if there is any sort of omen in all this, I kinda hope not. . . Patrick Cat is still with us however and continues to sleep a lot of the time.

I spent most of last week holed up in my room as I became ill for the first time since being here. Lovely. And it wasn't even the sort of illness you'd expect being in a foreign country, just a really, really bad cold! I found this unbelievably ironic given the weather we've got but at least now I can confirm that sod's law is alive and practising in India too. I still have a bit of the cough that the kids have had and generously passed on to me – the joys of living in community, everything gets shared; food, clothes, germs. . . Pat also was under the weather for a couple of days but we are now both well again and back to as normal as we ever were.

What made being ill slightly more unpleasant was the fact that for about ten days we had no running water thanks to a number of factors; firstly the current borewell has dried up and pipes from the new one had not yet been installed, and then some pipe leading up to the water tank on the roof got broken whilst they were cleaning out the tank. So all our water was brought up to us in buckets by the boys but it got used mostly for bucket showers and flushing the loo, so after a while finding clean clothes became a bit of an issue. I managed to find a way to wash them effectively but using minimal water so I didn't use up all of my precious supply on clothes.

On some slightly happier notes. . .

I got a fan installed in my room! I didn't really need it for the first month or so, as it was cool enough to cope with but it is now becoming necessary and makes sleeping at night so much easier – I kept waking up because of the heat, but now I only wake up from the noise of the fan stopping and then starting again at about 4.30am when the power supply switches over. Much better.

We've had a couple of new boys join our centre during the last week. It is nice to see the way that the other boys respond to them and help them get to know the routine. Sadly one of the boys has left already because although he enjoyed being here, apparently his father did not like him to be there, so took him away. He will now go to a school run by some Sisters near his village so all contact will not be lost.

During the times I ventured out of my room while I was ill, I spent most of the time being beaten at chess. . . I haven't played for years and foolishly expected that the boys here wouldn't be particularly tactically minded. How wrong I was.

Pat made his first chapatti last week! Let's just say he is as good at it as I was when I first started. . .

We had our first encounter with a snake last week. Unfortunately it was a dead one because we were informed it was poisonous so understandably they didn't want it hanging around. It was fairly small but I'm not sure what species it was.

Oh, and we had some RAIN!!! I'd almost forgotten what it was. . . wasn't proper bouncing down, and wasn't even the light rain that soaks you through, more a "it's been hot all day so let's have a shower to cool things down" kind of rain. It made the evening very pleasant.

Last Tuesday we had a holiday as it was a festival day – Shivuratri, which means 'Shivu night' (Shivu being one of the main Hindu gods) – which meant no classes and lots of games! Actually I spent most of the morning making fried egg and chips! I had been having a craving for something English, i.e. not spicy, and decided to try my hand at making chips. I have to say I was quite impressed with them. I made quite a few so they staff could try them as well but sadly some of the staff were missing so will just have to make them again. . . shame. . .

In the afternoon some boys came from the other centre for a football match against our lads and this time we were victorious – 4-1! However, Pat is now racked with guilt as he played during the second half and managed to fracture the goalkeepers wrist with one of his shots at the goal. . . He has been playing a lot of volleyball this week. . .

I've taken up teaching some of the youngest young people we have here – class 4 – and I am attempting to teach them ABC and abc. . . quite amusing and a bit more crowd control involved – they're all too eager to show me what they can do!!

I suddenly realised for the first time this week just how young some of these kids are to be living away from home. I didn't move out until I was 20! And at the age of some of them here I was still being helped to wash, and brush my hair and I certainly didn't wash my own clothes... I think it's incredible that these young people are doing all these things and more by basically learning from each other and discovering for themselves. I'm not sure if I could have done it.

This coming Thursday will mark two months since our arrival... I wonder what the next two will bring?

Livestock, Kannada, Treats and Knocks

Yes it really has already been two months since we set foot on this continent, and the time is now flying by.

The weather, although always sunny, has now become unrecognisable from the mild heat we encountered when we arrived. It is now way too hot for me to be out in the middle of the day, so I always hide in the shade of the buildings until the evening when it's cooled down enough to go out and play volleyball! I'm sure I will come back looking as white as I did when I came here. Hmmm.

On Monday morning we set off towards Chitradurga for a cattle market with Fr Joy, Carlotti (one of the teachers at Sujothi) and Casiopa (the father of the family who lives on and manages our farm). We were trying to buy two bulls to replace the two that got old and were sold. All the others that Joy had found were far too expensive so we hoped to get a better deal, but when we arrived we found that we had been misinformed. We had been told that the annual month-long market had started three days previously, but in fact it had not even yet begun, which was frustrating because of the waste of time. Carlotti and Casiopa returned there on Wednesday but I still don't think they got any...

While we're on the subject of animals... we now have three sets of baby rabbits to feed every morning. For a couple of weeks we didn't seem to have much luck and out of the two or three sets that we're born none of them lasted for more than a few days. I'm not sure whether it was due to an illness or disease or a genetic problem or what, but we now seem to be back on track. We have five which are about 10 days old, four 7 day olds and three that were born in the small hours of Saturday morning, and we also have a new dove

which hatched at the same time as the weeks old rabbits, so we are abundant in new life!

Oh, one life that did not quite make it was Patrick Cat. Sadly he too has passed away, and his death was even more distressing than Rachel Cat's – it appears he was asleep in the stove, when the fire was stoked up by someone unaware of his presence. . . so, sleeping isn't the way to a peaceful life after all.

This week I have begun in earnest to learn the Kannada alphabet – I hate not being able to read the words around me – in newspapers, on shop fronts, in the street etc – so I am doing my best to learn. In the morning I join in with 1st Standard's Kannada lesson – I sit at the back and hope no one hears my mistakes! There are 49 basic letters (the first 15 are vowel sounds), but each of them changes very slightly according to the sound that is desired. The language is written phonetically which means that there is a different symbol for every sound which is a bit of a pain, but in the long run will actually make it a lot easier because each symbol will only ever have one sound (unlike English when every letter or letter combinations can be pronounced in numerous ways). I can now write the first 25 characters from memory, the last 24 are next weeks task, and then I have to learn how they all change. I have a long way to go. . .

Dinesh, the science teacher whose English is fairly good, has decided that Pat needs feeding up, so keeps challenging him to eating competitions. Firstly it was a Chappatti eating contest, followed closely by rice eating. And now he keeps giving him extra tiffin (breakfast) by sneaking it onto Pat's plate when he isn't looking, very amusing. Thing is, he proposes the competitions as he is just about to start eating, by which time Pat has usually already eaten a full meal! Pat does us proud though, despite Dinesh's cheating. . .

This week, I had a bit of a 'spring' clean so I could move another bed into my room because we had a visit from the Fr George, Director of BREADS, the organisation who set up our placement here, and one of the BREADS staff, Raji, who I used to e-mail with loads of questions before we arrived. (She was the one who took me shopping for clothes in Bangalore on the first night, remember?) They had to come up for some meetings and so Raji came up a day early and stayed with us, combining her trip with coming to see us to make sure we are ok and to do an interim evaluation. It was lovely to see them both, as they were the ones who first greeted us and welcomed us to India. And Raji made the mistake of asking if there was anything she could bring for us from Bangalore – she ended up importing Pringles for Pat and four cartons of Orange Juice for me!

Yey!! I haven't had any since we arrived. . . it tastes divine. . .

Yesterday I wore socks and trainers for the first time in over two months. It felt very bizarre. After the volleyball the Young People kept asking me to play football, so I joined in for the first time. . . and now I wish I hadn't. Half an hour in I got hit in the face with the ball and now my cheek has swelled up and I can't chew properly. Grrrr. Am sure I will be fine within a couple of days but it was very frustrating – I had to give away my rotis (similar to chapattis but made of different flour) to some Young People last night because it was too painful to try and chew them!

Happy St Patrick's Day for last Thursday – I hope you all had a drink for us, there's not much of it about here. . .

And Happy Easter for next Sunday in case I do not get chance to wish it to you all beforehand! I am not sure what will be happening over next weekend so cannot guarantee that I will get to my e-mails. Hopefully will at some point though, as I think Pat and I will be temporarily moving abodes for the latter part of the week. It doesn't make sense to have to keep coming in and out of Davangere every day for four days so we will stay at Suprabha, the centre actually in Davangere itself.

The Young People get to celebrate Easter by having more tests this week. . . Lucky them!

Lots of love to you all. I hope you have a happy, peace-filled and relaxing Easter season.

Holy Week, Holi and Easter

Hello All!

How confused are you lot going to be getting an e-mail from me on a Thursday instead of a Sunday? Don't want to get too predictable, like to keep you on your toes. . .

Real reason for this is due to the amount of fun we were having last weekend – didn't want to drag ourselves away from our celebrations so we sacrificed our Internet session and came today instead.

So, a lot has been happening in the past week and a half:

The hall at Suprabha – the main centre, the one we don't live at – has had a bit of a facelift. We've now got tiles all over the walls which look much nicer and are way easier to keep clean and looking good.

I especially like the picture tiles which have Disney characters on – Minnie Mouse rocks!

On Thursday Pat and I temporarily relocated from Sujoyothi – the centre we permanently live at – to Suprabha – the one we don't, see above. Reason was because of the Easter celebrations and the fact that we would be going to mass at the big church in Davangere, St Thomas', for about three days in a row, so it made more sense to stay at the main centre which is in the town itself, rather than travel back and forth every day – about a 24km round trip. It was really lovely to be able to spend a lot of time with the young people at Suprabha because usually we only get to see them on a Sunday, and not for that long, so we didn't have the same sort of relationships with them as we do with the Young People at 'our' centre. But I'm now feeling a bit more a part of the Suprabha family as well as the Sujoyothi family.

I took an English missal with me when I went to the masses over Thursday Friday and Saturday night, because they were all in Kannada and although I'm slowly learning the responses I thought it was a bit much to try and work out the readings! It feels really nice though that I can follow the mass even in a different language; it makes you realise just what it means to be part of something that is so global, God is the same wherever you go! I managed to continue with a few traditions that happen in England – for my family at least! I created an Easter Garden in Sujoyothi chapel complete with living plants, tomb and crosses. Then on Holy Saturday afternoon I decorated boiled eggs for our community (the six of us – Fr Joy, Fr Kuriakose, Br Christuraj, Br Rojan, Pat and me – except you can't decorate your own and Pat was too afraid of messing it up so Joy was eventually persuaded to decorate mine. He did a good job!) and on Sunday morning I made chocolate nests complete with mini eggs I brought from England – how impressive is it that I hadn't eaten them before?! Helped by the fact that I didn't eat chocolate during Lent I suppose. . . Was nice to feel like I was joining in traditions even this far away.

It was quite ironic that on what should have been quite a solemn day for us – Holy Saturday – the rest of India, well all the Hindus at least, was celebrating its own festival – called Holi! And I have to say it is possibly the most fun you can have ever. I never really got to the bottom of why but basically it is celebrated by everyone running round with packets of powder paint and water to make it stick and throwing it onto everyone else, and I mean everyone else. It happens everywhere not just in homes or within communities but in the streets and so complete strangers can come up to you

and pelt you with paint. If you resist getting colour then you get eggs smashed on you instead – it is absolute chaos and very very hilarious (although I wasn't laughing so much when I got egged – I'd already let them put colour on me so I thought it was a bit excessive. . .) We had our own celebration of this with the children because most of them are Hindu, and even if you aren't its so much fun you can't not join in so of course, Pat and I got targeted more than most and we do now have some group photos of the aftermath where you can play 'spot the white people' because we're covered in that much that we just look brown! Pat is on about coming back next year just for this festival. . .

Yesterday was our celebration of International Women's Day for which we had a big function in a marquee set up at Suprabha and we brought all the young people from our centre there and all the women who are in Self-Help groups which Don Bosco has helped them to set up also came. Bringing our lot on the bus was hilarious. As well as the ordinary commuters we managed to get all 102 of us in it – or on the top of it in a few cases – plus Pat, Dinesh and me. Yes that's right, only three of us looking after 102 young people – it would be unthinkable in Britain!! Fortunately they're really trustworthy and actually stay hand in hand in a line and don't go running off and the older lads can be trusted to help out too.

And for the occasion I have bought my own sari! anyone who knows me will be able to guess what colour it is but I'm so chuffed with it. They make you feel very elegant, even if they're slightly on the warm side with all the layers of fabric that are wrapped round you. And of course it provides the children with great amusement to see the white girl in a sari.

Pat also made some clothing purchases this week, the most hilarious items being a very loud pair of shorts for playing volleyball in and a dhoti, which is the length of fabric that blokes wrap round their waist like we would call a sarong almost. Joy showed him how to wear it properly but he hasn't quite had the courage to wear it in public yet. . . don't worry; we will be sure to get some photos when he does!

Also, Dinesh has taken his quest to make Pat fat to a new level – he has now engaged the services of Fr Joy to continue the work when Dinesh himself isn't around. Trouble is it seems to be working. We just weighed ourselves before we arrived at the Internet cafe and I am heavier than I was and Pat just got an 'error' message!! Not entirely sure what that meant but it can't be good!

Br Rojan returned on Tuesday; he had been away on retreat and

to spend time with his family over Easter so it was nice to see him again. It felt like he'd been away a long time but it was only about two weeks! We all went to mass together last night, the first time that just all six of us have been together for it, to celebrate Easter, Rojan's return and the success of the function. And then we were taken out to a hotel restaurant to have a community meal which was lovely – and we had a change of foods – got some Chinese fried rice and noodles!! That is the only other national food you can get around here it seems, and we did mix it with Indian dishes but it still made a pleasant change!

Pat's hair is getting to humorous proportions. It will soon need its own room. He hasn't had it cut since we've been here and he has the sort which grows outwards instead of downwards. Joy has threatened to buy a pair of scissors this afternoon and cut it for him tonight (apparently he used to cut the Aspirants' hair while he was a brother or something) so we shall see.

Oh, and my jaw is now fine for those of you who remember that is got battered by a football two weeks ago. I was really afraid when I couldn't bite down normally and my teeth wouldn't connect, but it seems to have settled back down, thank God. Didn't especially fancy repeated trips to the dentist, although there is no shortage of them in Davangere.

We're now reinstated back at Sujyothi. One thing I will not miss about living at Suprabha is the mosquitoes. The Alurhatti mosquitoes seem to have lost interest in us, which I was perfectly happy with, but apparently we are still dish of the day for the Davangere mosquitoes. I was bitten so much that it began to be really painful. But my Aunty's allergy tablet trick worked a treat. Had pretty much forgot I had them, and then I found them when I was at my most desperate. I took one and haven't itched since. Thank you Monica!

Cricket, Kannada, Ugadhi and Rain

I hope you have are all still keeping well and happy and healthy. It feels like a while since I wrote but it's only been ten days!

Pat and I are still healthy and happy, despite the realisation that we are now halfway through our time here – we can't believe it's gone so quickly!

The past ten days have involved a lot of learning for me. Firstly I have been having instruction in understanding cricket. I have

never been bothered before, but there is a big match between India and Pakistan going on at the moment so I decided it was time to learn so that I can work out whether to be happy or sad when the kids tell me the score! Pat and Joy have been very patient with me as I asked a thousand simple questions, but I now know what an over is, where the crease is, how you score 4 and 6 runs, what 300-5 means and the difference between one day matches and test matches, so I'm getting there. The cricket has had a mixed impact on the hostile relationship between India and Pakistan. In some areas it has helped to create friendships and new understanding, with fans coming together peacefully to watch matches. In other places, especially where the communities of either are in the minority it serves to create more friction.

I have also made advances in my learning of Kannada, I can now write the whole alphabet from memory and know the subtle changes which occur to make each of the vowel sounds which come after the consonants so I am beginning to be able to read stuff at last. My next challenge is to actually find out what the words mean once I've worked out how to say them!!

This week the Dance Master came from Suprabha to start teaching some of our young people at Sujyothi a new dance which will be performed at the end of the month when we have a big rally in Davangere. We will join with other NGOs to raise awareness at Anti Child Labour Day by walking through the streets and then ending with a function. It is a big event so preparations are already underway. I am joining in with the dance classes, which take over from normal classes in an afternoon for those involved, so I can learn them for myself and so help give extra rehearsals if needed. The kids are really keen to get it right – we've only been given the steps for the first minute or so of each dance and already they want to practise in an evening instead of watching TV. It's very heartening to see, if exhausting!

This weekend has been very strange. On Saturday, Hindus all over the world celebrated the start of their new year with a festival called Ugadhi. As the majority of the young people at both our centres are Hindu they were allowed to go home to celebrate it with their families, leaving only the Christians, Muslims and those with no homes to go to (Pat and I!) at the centre – which meant that by the time Friday afternoon came, there were only 19 Young People left, with Br Rojan, Pat, myself and Anesh Master as the rest of the staff also went home. It was very strange to have the centre so quiet, although it's been nice to be able to spend time with just the few of them that are there because all we've done is played board games

and football and cricket and mess around and practise my Mehindi (henna) design skills on their hands which has been quite nice as it's impossible to do when they're all there: once one has it done they all want it, and when there are 100+ of them it gets a little out of hand. 20 is manageable though!

And actually on Saturday we had major excitement. The temperature has become positively scorching now and will remain so for at least the next month and a half, but on Saturday we were given a short relief from the heat, as it was quite cloudy when we woke up. We were playing cricket (badly in my case) and I had just commented to Pat about a particular cloud, saying that if we were in England I would say it's about to rain when it did – proper, pelting-it-down rain for about 20 minutes! We all got so excited by it that we started dancing around, and I got everyone singing 'Singing in the Rain' in the rain with Pat filming it on his camera. It was very funny and very bizarre to actually feel happy that it was raining instead of the usual weariness I feel when it rains in England. We had another two good bursts later on in the afternoon too, one of which I missed because Rojan and I were cleaning out the storeroom with a couple of Young People, and the other one of which prompted a game of tag all round the playground. It is very difficult to run in wet flip-flops so I soon abandoned them and ran barefoot, way easier.

One bad thing about the rain though is that it seems to have brought the mosquitoes back, or possibly it is the flying ants which are now biting me to death again. Grrrr.

Yesterday we came to Suprabha where the number of children left is about the same. We all went for Kannada mass at the big church in Davangere because the bishop came to say a special one for the Pope. And today Pat and I were extra adventurous as we tried a different route to the Internet cafe – and were successful! Go us!

Still thinking about you all and missing custard. . .

A huge thunderstorm

I'm a mum!

Ok, ok, not an actual mother I'll admit – there's nothing I've been hiding from you all, don't worry – but I am now a surrogate mum to a baby squirrel (well, what Indians call a squirrel anyway, it's more like a chipmunk to me) which a couple of our kids found fallen out of its tree after our HUGE thunderstorm on Tuesday.

It was a very impressive storm actually. The rain lashed down for about an hour and a half and the thunder and lightening lasted all night – we even had some purple lightening. We also had no electricity. Because we're out in the sticks they turn off the current while it's raining, so that made it very exciting. I thought that Pat's room and mine and the chapel were going to flood at one point – even though we're on the first floor? because they open onto an outdoor veranda and the rain was blowing in from behind making a lovely river snaking its way across the floor, so I spent a lot of time making sure it went down the drain pipe and not under our doors! The rains don't start properly until June but apparently these mid-summer rains are usual so we expect another one at least before the rains come properly.

Anyway, the next morning the three young people knocked on my door and handed me a baby chipmunk which they found on the road and had obviously been knocked out of its tree by the storm and was a little dazed. And since then I have been feeding it milk using a water dropper and generally being its mum! The Kannada word for squirrel/chipmunk is 'halehlu' and when it's said it sounded kinda like 'Ollie' so that has stuck as his name. He is so cute and runs up and down all over me as I walk around – very cool if a bit distracting for the kids who are now calling him 'nanna papu' (my baby).

A not so great thing about the rain was that the next evening, because it was so humid, we had literally thousands of flying bugs, mainly ants, buzzing round the lights. So many in fact that the young people couldn't study and we had to turn off all the lights and de-camp to the playground and play games until they all dispersed. There were dead bodies and wings everywhere, truly gross.

Last week I forgot to write about a couple of things I should have mentioned.

The first is that everyone who guessed at the colour of my sari guessed correctly – it is indeed pink, with a purple and gold border. As if I could have chosen anything else. . .

And also – Pat finally had a haircut!! And he had the honour of actually having a 'Holy Haircut' – Fr Joy turned into a barber for the event! Apparently as a brother he used to cut other students' and aspirants' hair, and I have to say – and Pat agrees – that he did do a good job, despite it being 3 years since he last cut anyone's hair. Pat is still talking to Joy anyway so that's got to be a good sign.

Almost all the Young People who went home for the Ugadhi festival are back now, and we also have a number of past students, who were here either last year or earlier, who now attend school, back with us. Normal schools have broken up for the summer holidays so those students who don't have homes to go to, or can't go to, come back to us for two months until school restarts and they go back to their hostels. It is very strange to think that we only have about a months and a half left with the current batch – at the end of May they will all move on to schools. Even more scary is that, when I looked at the calendar the other day, I calculated that we have only 12 weeks left here – when you put it like that it doesn't seem long at all – I can't believe how quickly its going!!

Squirrels, snakes and storms

Bellegineh wandranegallu (good morning) everybody!

To get the sad news out of the way first. . . It is my distressing duty to report that my baby squirrel released himself back into the wild during the week. I am choosing to see this as a sign of the wonderful care that I gave – that he recuperated so quickly and felt able to escape out of my window – rather than yet another unfortunate event involving myself and small animals. Ah well, he was lovely while he lasted.

Noor Fathima thought he was back the other day when we found a squirrel trapped in the chapel, but it was a fully-grown one. No idea how it had got in there because none of the windows were open, but I got it out eventually.

This week I had yet another interesting culinary experience – I ate snake! I feel somewhat of a traitor to my own pet snake Caspi, so am just hoping he doesn't read this. However, snakes here are not something to be admired, as the majority of them are poisonous, so the policy is 'if you see one, kill it?' This is exactly what a couple of the boys did on Thursday and rather than leave the body to rot, Rojan fried it up for lunch as a special dish. It was quite tasty, but sadly it was the spices that we could taste more than the flesh, so I'm not sure of the exact flavour it had on its own. It probably tasted like chicken.

I tell you, if you fancy lots of holidays, Hinduism is the way forward. There seems to be a festival every month at least and so, on religious grounds, you can take a holiday. As well as the big festivals, like Shivuratri, Holi and Ugadhi which are celebrated by all

Hindus and so are public holidays, each village also has its own loyalties to particular gods and so has its own festivals throughout the year as well. This week Dinesh and Sudha (two of the residential teachers at our centre who, contrary to my prior belief, are not true brother and sister but are in fact cousins) took Pat and me to their 'village' on Wednesday to see their homes, meet their families, and experience a real Hindu festival. I say 'village' because it seemed way bigger than a typical village to me – it has four schools, one of which is a Pre-University College (equivalent of 6th form) which I would not imagine a village to have. It was really nice to see a typical Indian village/town though and go to an Indian family home. They were a lot larger than I expected but then I realised it was because many branches of the same families live under the same roof; mother, father, sons, daughters, respective husbands, wives and mothers-in-law and, of course, children. The only problem was that we kept getting fed! We were given an absolutely massive breakfast at Dinesh's house – three courses plus a side dish, and they would have given us a fourth if we hadn't insisted that we were full – then I went with Sudha to visit the houses of the friends she has had ever since she was a child, and they too all gave us tea and tried to give us more food, only for us to return to Sudha's house for lunch! I slightly earned that because I sat with the women making haulige – the sweet that I helped the boys make at Ugadhi – only slightly different this time because they were small and folded over into the shape of a Cornish pastry rather than being round and flat. These were fried to make them crispy instead of just cooked flat. While we did this Pat went with Dinesh to visit their family farm which grows tobacco.

I'm not sure of which god the festival was for because I still find the names unpronounceable, but in the morning his statue was brought from the temple amid much noise, crowds, colour and banging of drums. When it was transferred onto the wheeled chariot to be paraded around the town, firstly rice was thrown onto it, and then whole bananas were thrown! In the evening the statue was carried again, this time to a huge pile of thorns which was prepared during the afternoon. Indian thorns are not like English ones. They are about an inch long (2.5 cm for you decimalised people) and are very, very hard – they get used as sewing needles and you can pierce ears with them. (That's all I'm saying.) The tradition at this festival is for the men to walk over this huge pile of thorny branches – huge meaning taller than a grown person and about as long and wide as three people lying end to end – totally barefoot. On that day apparently you can do this and never be hurt. On any other day even

standing on one is very painful – and I can vouch for that. I watched in a sort of disbelief, as it appeared to be true. I have removed these thorns from kids feet and it is not a happy thing – they don't just go in sideways through the first few layers of skin but straight into your foot for about half an inch, meaning that it bleeds a hell of a lot – but the men who walked over the pile seemed to be coming off the other end unscathed. Dinesh said that he himself did it when he was younger and you do not get hurt. I didn't fancy putting it to the test though. . .

On our way home we had yet another thunderstorm. This seems to have been the pattern this week, roasting hot during the day, wind gets up about 4.30, lightning in the distance and a bit of rain which sometimes lasts but more often than not is just a light shower, followed by a pleasant cool evening with maybe a little more rain. It still remains warm though, and I have now started sleeping outside to combat the 'waking-in-the-middle-of-the-night-cos-it's-so-hot-even-though-the-window-is-open-and-the-fan-is-on' syndrome. We save on the electricity bill as well!

On Friday Pat became 21 years old. HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Rojan and I had organised the Young People to each do a small piece of artwork which I then put onto one big card for them to present to him at breakfast after they had sung Happy Birthday in both English and Kannada. In the evening we had fried fish as a special treat and also gave out sweets. However, Fr Joy has been away this week on retreat so we are having another celebration on Tuesday when he returns.

At the end of the week we will be joining with other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Davangere to take part in an anti-child-labour day rally. It should be interesting!

Two celebrations

Well, the rains appear to have stopped – for now! Back to scorching temperatures all day long, nothing but sunshine. . . Ah, it's a hard life!

We had a second celebration for Pat's birthday this week when Fr Joy had returned from retreat so that both he and Fr Kuriakose could come over to our centre for the celebrations. The children love it when we celebrate birthdays, mainly because on the day that we put on a programme they get out of doing evening study, but also because they get special food – they got fried fish and sweets on his

actual birthday and then we gave them all cake on Wednesday at the evening programme. They were very happy! (and so was I!)

The weighing scales that Pat and I occasionally use are not so happy though. Despite being in a developing country, we are both managing to put on weight! The Indians are taking this as a good sign because it means they're feeding us well so at least they are happy. I find it quite amusing that the young people are now cuddling Pat's belly and calling him 'duma' – it means fat!

I have been an almost private tutor during the last week. Three of the boys who go to school are back with us full time while the schools are on holiday, so rather than them joining in the regular classes Rojan and I have been giving them separate lessons; a class of three, way to go!

On Saturday we took part in a big function for Anti Child Labour Day. The symbolism behind this event was that of 'the children have been at these centres for a year, and now we are handing them back to you, the parents, to continue the good work and take on the responsibility of making sure your child gets an education'. Sadly the rally on the streets of Davangere was cancelled but we transferred all of our children from both centres – using the jeep and a mini bus and several trips – to another Child Labour Centre in Davangere 'Belaku' run by the Police. One other centre run by an NGO was also there but I never found out the name.

In preparation for this one of the Masters, Anesh, had been asked to make posters depicting child labourers becoming school-goers and I offered to help. The first two we finished with not much fuss but the last one became rather interesting because by the time we started it was evening and then at 7.30 the power cut out! And we needed to have it finished that night – having left it to the last minute in true Indian style – so it became 'painting by candlelight' which is a rather interesting experience when you can't even tell what colour you have managed to mix so have no idea whether it is correct or not! I was given the middle sheet of three to complete and when the current finally came back at 10.30pm and we put them all together... let's just say there were a few adjustments we had to make!!

That night I also had my first encounter with a scorpion. It was scuttling round the stairs and I was rather glad that the lights were back on by then because it could have been quite nasty – especially as the young people go around barefoot and by that time a lot of them were already asleep outside on the floor. I alerted the older boys who were still up to it and they promptly found a stick and

dealt with it in the way that all dangerous creatures are dealt with round here.

The function itself was rather hot, even though it was taking place outside under marquees. For the children it was quite long, as we had many guests who gave speeches, but in between the children performed their items, so we had dances and songs. Our boys performed the dances that we've been practising for the past few weeks. They did really well, especially considering that we had to make a few last minute changes to the routines. The formations of the dances changed and so did the people doing them. The girls did not perform after all, so that dance changed dramatically, and one of the old pupils who is here for the holidays was drafted into the other dance at the last minute to replace a boy who is at home. It all helps keep us on our toes!

After the function had finished there was a meeting for the parents to give them more instruction about what their role and responsibility is from now on.

This will be the last function of the year for the young people. From now on it is serious study time for the exams they will take in just a few short weeks time, after which they will be moving out into schools. It is going to be very strange to see them go. It feels like we have such a short time left with them.

Belligey Wandranegallu

Greetings one and all! Once again a full and fulfilling week.

I forgot to say last week that when we arrived at 'Belaku' for the function last Saturday there were a couple of hours to spare before the programme actually started and people were just getting things ready, so Sudha, the residential female teacher at Sujoyothi, two of the girls, Prema and Lakshmi, and I took the opportunity to visit the Hindu temple that was just down the road – the first time I have been inside one! It was quite a large one as it was intended not just for the worship of one god but of five. There was a decorated tower for each on the roof of the building marking the position inside the building of each of the statues.

I have to say that it is nice to be in a society which not only appreciates the value of religion and beliefs, but also considers their practice a normal part of everyday existence. There is a temple or place of worship on almost every street and it is common to see

people performing 'puja' (prayer) even at the side of the road, by a tree, or in the middle of a scrap of wasteland. Every shop you enter will have pictures of the god or gods that the owner worships, autorickshaws are decorated with the names and pictures of gods and even in buses, and on lorries you will see framed pictures decorated with fresh flowers. When I see the young people in our own centres pray, their seriousness and concentration put me to shame – they sit cross legged, straight backed with hands joined firmly together, and their eyes remain firmly closed until their prayer is properly ended. It is very inspirational.

I'm not really sure what happened on Tuesday and Wednesday because Pat and I have both been a bit ill. I don't think we had the same thing though, because I was better by Thursday whereas Pat is still suffering slightly from cold-type symptoms and over-sensitive senses. Actually I attribute my speedy recovery to the arrival and consumption of a sorely missed foodstuff. Knowing my desperation, my Mum had sent in the post for me four packets of instant CUSTARD! Yey! Great excitement. I immediately went to make some up and had to search for a spoon with which to consume it – I decided that eating custard with fingers was going just a bit too far. I also gave it to the rest of the staff – who did actually eat it with their fingers – and it received a resounding nod of approval. However, Pat declined to take any and is still sniffing, which to me is further proof if proof were needed of the wondrous healing and medicinal properties of a bowl of hot custard. Case closed!

However I now have cravings for fish fingers and cheese. Sadly I think these are even less post-able than bacon butties. . .

And once I was better, I seem to have gone to the other extreme and become 'Dr Rachel' – I have removed countless thorns from feet and bandaged and put cream on an extraordinary number of cuts and grazes during the last week; once one or two genuine cases are attended to everyone else with the tiniest cut wants to get in on the action. They all know by now that I'm a soft touch and will go gently, although I become slightly sceptical when they've just been running around playing football or similar then come to me 'limping' claiming they have a terrible pain in their foot. It's weird how kids seem to get thorns in their feet just before morning and evening jobs start. . .

One evening this week we all watched a recording of a programme that was made earlier in the year (before Pat and I arrived) about the Child Labour Centres in Davangere – featuring our very own staff and students! I got as excited as the kids watching it trying to spot

places and faces we recognised!

Actually, it became a bit of a media heavy week – even my picture made it into the paper! Ok, I admit I wasn't actually the focus of the article, I wasn't even mentioned in fact, but it was still quite exciting. The reason was that on Friday we at Sujoyothi hosted a programme for the purposes of training the newly elected and re-elected members of the local gram panchayat – the village government. There were elections in March and these functions are part of the 'community awareness' part of our project/mission, the idea of which is to raise awareness and understanding at this basic, grass roots level of government about child labour and child labourers so that they take responsibility for it also. It seemed to be quite a successful day; the young people contributed a couple of dances to the programme to provide light relief and two of our young people stood up and told their stories. One of these stories, from a girl called Mumata, made it as the opening lines of an article about the function in our English language newspaper, and we also made it into two local Kannada papers – my face was seen at the back of a shot of the attendees listening to one of the speakers. Man, I'm such a media star. . .

A major achievement I made that day was that I managed to put my sari on all by myself!! Totally unassisted and alone! I felt very chuffed with myself. . .

On the food front this week, I have been having lessons about how to make 'ragi balls' which the young people get four times a week in the evenings. I tell you, when you're just learning there is a great potential to burn your hand. And yesterday I helped make idli's for breakfast, which we ate with coconut chutney. Mmmm. . . now I really will miss that when I come home.

Lots of study is on the card for the kids this week, as next week their important, external set exams begin. And pretty soon after that they will all start leaving us! It will be very strange. . .

Rain Dances, Bus Journeys, Moving On?

Well, just when I was thinking that we hadn't had any rain for a while and that the grass and greenery which sprung up after the first lot to make the place virtually unrecognisable from the sandy, dusty place we arrived at was starting to wither and die away again, we had yet another ginormous thunderstorm on Thursday just to

prove me wrong. This time it only lasted the evening but it was accompanied by a driving wind which made the rain appear like fog at some points. Again it arrived during the middle of afternoon games, and again it was the football which kept going throughout. Just like England eh? Some of the young people who weren't interested in the football however found an empty plastic oil bottle and a stick and turned it into a drum to accompany our 'rain dances' – splashing about in the puddles. So much fun, even if you do get filthy. My Savio training kicked in when they started kicking the muddy water at each other though – no one else seemed bothered, not even the masters, but I still couldn't help feeling that someone could end up in tears. . .

On Friday I went for the first time to the 'hospital' in the village – what they call the hospital, we would call a doctors surgery. Before you all start worrying it wasn't for me, I was accompanying Garwamma who had bad stomach pain. It was a very peculiar experience. No need of an appointment, just turn up and wait. The biggest shock for me was seeing a metal bed taking up most of the 'waiting room' – an area outside the office which was pretty much open air cos there was no glass at the windows, only metal grids – with an old woman lying on it with a drip attached into her hand. Not much privacy around it seems. It seemed also that the doctor is also a pharmacist, as Gawamma came out with a handful of tablets; no hassle of having to take your prescription to the chemist then!

Yesterday I finally got round to making a concerted effort to learn the 'Our Father' in Kannada. The young people say it before every meal and at night prayer and I have had a rough idea of the sounds of the words but after four months here I decided it was about time I knew it properly. 'Better late than never' as my life's motto appears to be. . .

This morning we came to Davangere on the bus. And by that I mean literally ON the bus – the top of it! Despite our best laid plans to come in early so we could do our shopping and still have plenty of time in the internet cafe, the buses decided to conspire against us and two came within two minutes of each other but five minutes earlier than they should have so we weren't at the 'bus stop'. The next one was an express bus and doesn't stop in our village; the next one was jam-packed and didn't stop either. So it when the next one came almost an hour later, we – and all the other villagers who were waiting and getting as frustrated as us – were determined to get on it despite the fact that it too was pretty much full to bursting. We decided the best option was to try travelling on the roof – our first

time! I have wanted to do it for ages, but I think that actually it is not allowed, so if there is no need it doesn't happen and so far we've always managed to get inside. It was actually really pleasant up there, surrounded by surprised and amused locals – I don't think it is common more a woman to be up on the roof (I was the only one – its usually only men), never mind a white woman – the breeze was very good, much better than being cramped inside, and it wasn't as bumpy as I expected. The only hazards were having to watch your head for low-hanging branches of the trees which line the roads and the occasional telephone wire or electricity cable which stretched across the road a little too low hanging for comfort! Other than that, all good and yet another amusing experience to add to our list!

The focus for the Young People this week has been on their studies, as on Monday they start their final exams which will take place all week. They are really important for them as they mark the climax of a year of hard work. I keep hearing different things about what will happen afterwards but some or all of the following may occur, although not necessarily in this order!

- There will be a final parents day which will probably be the last time that all the children are together. I am hoping that we can turn it into a bit more of a final celebration for them all, to celebrate all they have achieved and been through during the year, but we shall have to wait and see.
- The children who have families will be allowed to take a week's leave, then they should all return to collect their certificates which will gain them entry into their schools from next academic year, which in India starts at the beginning of July. The ones who do not have or cannot return to their families will stay with us at the centres.
- As soon as the exams are over the staff start looking for places in hostels in which to place each of the young people. As far as I can work out these work like halls of residence at universities – they are where the children will live and from there they go out to school each day. I think as many as possible are encouraged to go out from home, but it is not guaranteed that the parents will ensure their children go to school, so in those cases or where it is in doubt the children will go to hostels.
- And pretty much as soon as they have been given a hostel place they leave us for good! It will be a very strange next few weeks I imagine, once they start to leave. They may return but never

all at the same time, they will come and go in dribs and drabs. I will be very sad to see them go, but it will be even harder to leave the ones who remain at the centres behind when it is us that are leaving them!

Ah well, I will just make the most of the time that I do have left with them.

Seven Weeks Left

This week we passed the 'four month' mark. I know I keep saying it but time really is flying by, too fast for my liking actually! Before I know it I'll be sinking my teeth into the pork pie I keep fantasizing about. . .

This week has been the hottest and stickiest I think we've had so far. The storm last week is responsible for the humidity factor; usually it is a fairly dry heat which I don't find too difficult to cope with especially as we can just spend the hottest parts of the day in the shade of the buildings, which doesn't do my tan any favours but my skin will thank me in the long-run. (I'm not getting nearly as brown as you are all imagining, although I did get an actual tan-line on my arms on Tuesday from standing out in the sun taking photographs. I have managed to avoid them so far by wearing sleeves of different lengths). It has thankfully cooled down a bit today due to yet another storm last night. The young people make me laugh – if it is even remotely cool e.g. first thing in the morning, or there is a bit of cloud cover, or it's a bit windy, they will put on woolly jumpers and hats! It is a very incongruous sight to me, as I am wandering around wearing as few layers as possible and still being hot!

For some peculiar reason, Sudha and I decided it would be a good idea to start getting up at 5.30 am to do early morning yoga sessions. I think I may just have had a bang on the head, or possibly it's the fault of the impending full moon, which seems to send people a little crazy. . . We did get up on Monday (and I got the early-rising kids joining in my pre-yoga stretching session on the balcony!) but sadly Sudha has not been well for the rest of the week so she hasn't been up to doing it. Shame!

This week has been 'exam week' for the young people. As I think I explained last week, it is on the basis of the results of these exams that they will get their certificates saying which standard (class) they can go into when they start school at the beginning of July so there

was much study and revision taking place, especially by the older students who often stayed up much later into the night to do extra studies (I mean 10.30 to 11 pm). Monday was Kannada exam for all, Tuesday was English for the three older classes, (Just for the laugh I decided to take two of the English papers myself to see how I would do! As I write I haven't actually had my marks back, but I feel I am at a disadvantage as a large chunk of the marks are on questions based on texts that the young people have studied in detail but I have only had minimal dealings with, from taking substitute lessons and helping with study work etc. However, I am pretty certain I got the essential grammatical and vocab questions right, so that's the most important thing, yeah?), Wednesday was Hindi again for the three older classes, Thursday was Maths for all, Friday was Social for the three older classes and Saturday (yesterday) was Science for everyone.

There was great rejoicing and celebration as that last exam finished! The young people were rewarded with the afternoon off to play games and watch television – an activity that has been prohibited during the last week so that there could be no distraction from studies. And also the staff and Fr Kuriakose began to meet with the children individually to start deciding which hostels they will go to next year. When they leave us we will not lose all contact: many regularly come back and visit of their own accord during holiday times etc, but also we have a team of field workers whose job it is to go out and do follow-up of past pupils to ensure that they are still going to school, etc.

New things this week:

- Gawamma taught me how to make jasmine flowers into the chains you often see Indian women wearing in their hair. They smell so gorgeous and it's lovely to get wafts of the scent every time you shake your head. They're a bit fiddly to get the hang of cos I kept trapping the petals in the thread but I got better on the second night when we joined forces and made one huge chain together.
- On Friday I added 'hairdressing' to my list of acquired skills when Sudha requested me to trim her hair as part of her beauty preparations for the marriage party of one of her childhood friends which she has gone to this weekend (a girl whose house I visited when Sudha and Dinesh took us to their village). I also decorated her hand with mehendi, as I now know to correctly spell it, based on a design from one of the books

of mehandi designs that I bought last week. I was beginning to run out of ideas, but now I've got three books full – think they'll last me a while!

- We went into Davangere on Wednesday as we had some shopping and sorting out to do and we went for uutha (lunch) in an Indian 'cafe' for the first time! We have been warned from various people about the perils of eating food which you haven't seen being prepared etc, etc so I wasn't sure how my stomach would cope but so far I have experienced no ill effects. And it was great; all we had to do is order three 'meals' and we got a plate with five separate dishes on it containing curd (which was lovely and cold), buttermilk, sambar, dahl based curry (lentil) and vegetable curry, plus a sidedish, pickle and salt. A red-hot-just-out-of-the-pan chappatti came first, which is like the starter and you eat the sidedish with it, followed by a dish of rice each to take with the curries. Three of these plus five drinks came to 82 Rupees – one whole English Pound! I love India. . .
- And very new this week is a calf that was born at the farm! By chance I went down on Thursday, accompanying a visiting priest, to find that it had been born only two hours previously, and it was just taking its first look at the world and making its first tottering steps as we arrived. It is very beautiful and kept falling over frequently, but at two hours old I don't think I was up to much walking so I'm not criticising!

On the cards for the coming week are a daytrip to Hampi on Monday, apparently a very beautiful and historical place, with all the children for one giant picnic, Parent's day on Tuesday and then the Young people start to leave for their weeks holiday. After that we are not really sure what will happen. They must come back to get their certificates but it will probably not all be at the same time. As ever, flexibility is the key. We shall have to wait and see how things pan out. . .

Busy, busy, busy!

Despite us being now well and truly into the 'countdown to home time' we have had yet another week of new and interesting experiences.

In celebration of the end of exams, and to mark the end of the year, on Monday we all went on a day trip to Hampi, which is a very beautiful and historical place three hours away from Davangere. Taking a bus borrowed from the Don Bosco school in Chitradurga and Fr Joy's jeep, we managed to squeeze all 110 Young People plus 8 staff and 2 drivers into them and despite it being only 5.30am we were very much hyped up and so the bus (which is where I travelled) was full of noise and excitement in the way only school trips are – we had people up and dancing in the aisles to the movie songs that got blasted out as we bounced along the roads; ever tried to dance when the floor is changing height? This led to a very sore head in my case, as I was tall enough to keep hitting the roof. . .

We arrived at the Don Bosco house in Hospet, which is the town next to Hampi, in time to eat the breakfast we took with us and then we set off for the sightseeing itself. Hampi used to be a very big and beautiful city until it got raided and ransacked by. . . some people who didn't like it? (Can you tell I haven't read my guidebook properly yet?!) Now what is left are many beautiful ruins still with carvings on, and some temples and underground places are still fairly intact, set in rolling hilly landscape scattered with large boulders which makes for some fantastic scenery. We took ourselves on a mini sort of tour visiting the different temple sites and taking photos of the kids sitting on carved elephants and the like – much amusement. Ooh, ooh, and we saw our first real life elephant since we arrived in India!!! And I got blessed by it! It was in the entrance to the first place we visited, and for the princely sum of 1 Rupee, which it took from you in its trunk and gave to its keeper, it then placed its trunk on your head in a blessing. Very cool and provided a good laugh for the kids to see too.

Yet again I was unimpressed by the blatant money-grabbing scam against foreigners by the entry fees. This place was even worse than when we went to visit the fort at Chitradurga – two of the places we went to wanted to charge the equivalent of US\$5 for anyone who wasn't Indian to get in. This works out at 10Rs for Indians and 300Rs for us! I decided on principle not to go into those places and instead looked after the bus and the kids who had decided not to join the main group, either cos they felt sick or were just too hot and tired – it was amazing what difference going even just that little bit north made to the temperature.

After lunch, for which we went back to DB Hospet, we visited the 'dam' although it seemed a little redundant as there was barely any water to speak of, which I found quite worrying; and I got shouted at by a scary army guy for taking a photograph and he almost took my

camera off me – apparently for security reasons cos the dam could be of strategic importance and I could have been a spy. I could have understood if I'd taken a photo of the dam itself, but as it happened it was of a group of kids, and it was in the opposite direction of the dam, so it wasn't even in the background! Ah well. . .

Next to the dam were some nice gardens, which felt very English as we walked through them with the manicured lawns and low hedges and rose bushes. The monkeys running around made an interesting incongruity though. . . There was also a deer park and aquarium to see and when we tired of those we played football, until Joy organised the children into teams for some very noisy good-natured competitive party games. We made for some very amusing entertainment for the onlookers, who crowded round to watch us singing and dancing, but the young people never got shy or embarrassed – they loved it! And at least we will have helped to spread the name of Don Bosco, especially with all the people who would come and ask Pat and I where we are from and why we are here; with the Young People on such good form as they were I think we were a good advertisement!! We stayed in the park to watch the 'Musical Dancing Fountain' after the sunset, when the fountain 'danced' in different patterns lit with different coloured lights to songs that were played over speakers to the audience – including, rather bizarrely, 'Barbie Girl' by Aqua!

The journey home was a bit of a contrast to the morning's liveliness, with everyone trying to find a space to curl up and fall asleep, including the aisle, under the seats, on friends' laps. . . I myself managed to doze amid a pile of kids used me as a convenient pillow.

We arrived home at 11.30pm to eat a very quick and quiet supper before collapsing into bed – a very long, but fun-filled day.

No rest for the wicked though, the next day was Parents' Day so it was up bright and early as usual to get everything ready and prepared. The purpose, as it was the last parents' day for this batch of children, was to inform the parents of their responsibilities from now on, and also for the staff and Father Kuriakose to meet with the parents and children individually to discuss each child's needs – i.e. would they be able to go to school from their homes (which they try to get as many as possible to do), or do they need to be placed into hostels. And once that had been decided, they all started leaving for their week's holiday. The new school year starts actually today so it was very strange to see them go, we know that some of them will return in during the next week or so to collect certificates finalise

hostel arrangements etc, but we are not certain which ones and there are some we may not see again. All who are left at the centres now are those with no homes and those who do not want to go home, at Sujyothi about 15 boys, at Suprabha about 10 girls and three boys.

So, just like it was at Ugadi, it has felt a bit empty this week. It potentially could have dragged and got boring, but as it was we have found plenty to do; as always there is football, Karam board, chess and beloved cricket to play and films to be watched (when there is electricity!), I have made chapattis, been a watchman down on the farm with the boys and cleaning out the hut, playing top trumps and made kites, but I was also surprised by the enthusiasm which my colouring books were received. I was given a set before I came to India and almost as a sidethought I got them out on Wednesday when I was suffering from a cold and was trying to think of something gentle and quiet to fill the time. I was very humbled by how absorbed the boys became by them – and they are spread of quite an age range. I suppose the simple truth is that they've just had very limited opportunities to just sit and colour and so something which for me seems so simple and basic they found real pleasure in. I honestly thought they'd get bored after the first one or two, but they have just kept going and going. (Thank you to the people who provided them – you know who you are!).

This week Sujyothi has also been getting a spruce up in the same style as Suprabha got last month – we now have lovely blue study halls and cream corridors, looking much smarter.

We had a power cut on Thursday during a dust storm which came over and turned all the air orange, which was quite exciting to see, and I got bit by an ant, which is not unusual, but this was a particularly vicious one and I actually bled! First time that has happened! I am just thankful however that there was no power cut on Saturday night as we had a huge black scorpion, about three times the size of the one I saw previously, scurrying round the corridor, which was swiftly 'dealt with' but could have been quite a different story if there had been no light to see it by.

During the day on Saturday I opened 'Rachel's Mehandi Parlour' in preparation for a marriage that we all got invited to! Ramesh, one of the masters at Sujyothi, got married in the village and in true Indian style we only got the invites the week before (they are given so close to the date so that people don't forget!). Very scarily I ended up with the responsibility of finishing off Ramesh's mehandi when the girl who started it had to leave – I felt very responsible as he was

the bridegroom and it so should look the best! But on completion of his all the other masters also decided they wanted it (they're as bad as the young people!) so I spent the rest of the day drawing and decorating hands and wrists and had a very stiff neck and saw thumb by the end of the day.

So then yesterday morning we went to the marriage which I was very excited about! It was a very colourful and noisy event but also I found it very odd as it was not like other marriages I have been to where everyone stops and watches as the marriage rites are performed; here everyone kept bustling around and you couldn't hear what the priest was saying for the loud movie music that was blaring out. After the marriage rite itself, which involved much blessings from friends and family members and was specifically in the Lambani tradition, which is the culture and language of the local rural area, the bride and groom went back into the house (the wedding was conducted under a marquee set up outside the house) to get changed into more new clothes and then they came back out to receive gifts. We then went for lunch, which was lovely but you had to eat very speedily as there were several sittings of people to get through. Then we took our leave as Pat and I wanted to come into Davangere and Dinesh and Kallathi also took leave for a few days to go home and see their families.

We found the situation at Suprabha similar to that of Sujyothi: only a very few young people left, which is very odd but it does allow you to spend more time with and pay attention to the few who are there, instead of always having your attention being dragged in twelve different directions at once.

And then last night we were unexpectedly invited to go to the funfair, which we saw being put up during the first month we were here but have never visited. Jomon and his family (the man who sponsored ice cream for all the children at Don Bosco day) who are friends of Joy and Kuriakose invited us to go with them so off we went! Very good laugh.

And that was our week! I have no idea what's happening in this one. We shall wait and see. . .

Where is the time going?

Happy Sunday all!

We had a very quiet start to this week, because of the majority of children having gone home for their holiday. As I think I said last

week, the only ones who remained were those with no homes to go to, or who didn't want to go home, and included a few pupils from previous years who spend their holidays back with us until their school hostels (which I think work a little like university halls of residence but with the major difference of splitting up the children into different corridors according to their castes! Some hostels will only take children of specific castes) open again. It was nice to be able to spend time quality time with the few who remained, especially as sometimes they may be the ones who wouldn't necessarily seek you out to talk to you e.g. the quieter, shyer, or more reserved ones. I spent a lot of time playing Karam board (which is vaguely like pool, but you sit on the floor round the square board and flick the 'striker' (think white ball, but a disc) across it to try and hit the other discs into the pockets in the corners, white are 10 points, black are 5) and have improved from being dismal to just disappointing (the young people sometimes feel so sorry for me that they attempt to give me some of their own discs so I don't end up with nothing!). I did manage to get the coveted red disc for the first time in all the time I've been here, the trick with that one being you have to get a second disc in straight after it in order to keep it. The Colouring Club continued to flourish, we spent some time each evening weeding the land between the coconut trees in preparation for the first rains of the monsoon, after which they will be planted, and one evening I introduced them to the delight of Disney's 'Aladdin' which I sent off for from an offer on the back of a cornflakes packet.

From about Wednesday the Young People slowly began to trickle back to the centre and by Friday there were enough to resume a normal timetable (although we are still waiting for many to return even now – it's the same thing as happened at Ugadi festival; you give them three days leave and they come back two weeks later!), with adjustments made to the classes to allow for the fact that, based on the results of their exams, 80% of the students moved up a class! (Great excitement as people crowded round the results sheets pinned to the notice board.) And now they have started trickling off for good again, to hostels, Don Bosco houses. . . a few have already left for good, but it seems that this week will see a bigger exodus, especially Monday and Tuesday, but half the time they don't seem sure when they are leaving so I'm not really sure either.

The weather this week has been cooler (compared to what we've been used to) as the monsoon season kicks in. we had a mini shower on Friday – different rain from previously, no thunder and lightening – but this morning has seen the true beginning I think;

constant rain for basically the whole morning, which meant that as we did our weekly shopping trip this morning, pat and I got mud splattered all over our backs, especially me 'cos I was wearing flip-flops, which flicks it up the back of my trousers beautifully. Lovely.

Oh, and I ate a whole mango all in one go this week. I'm not claiming to have eaten much mango during my life, being the fruit-hater that I am/was(?!), but out of what I have it was the best tasting and juiciest. What a difference five months makes, eh?

Teacher, Hairdresser, Artist, Farmer

Hello all – the briefest of brief emails, as I have, as usual, run out of time at the internet caff. We need to go do some shopping and get back to the centre because of the major staff shortage as manpower is taken up trying to sort out applications and admissions for the young people into hostels and schools – a very long and arduous process, involving much form filling and getting of caste certificates, etc, etc?

Hence my range of job titles:

- Teacher – done lots of 'teaching' this week. (Well, playing hang-man and other word games in an attempt to teach vocabulary – works very well – I hardly got any points off 'em at all, quite embarrassing really!)
- Hairdresser – both Gawramma and Geetha (the two women who work in the kitchen) asked me to trim their hair this week – not entirely sure why they thought I was qualified to do it but I did my best?
- Artist – have been busy with doing mehindi designs and making flower chains for the girls this week as well as helping Anesh to make another huge poster for a function we took all the children to (anti-child labour day rally, walking through the streets of Davangere, during which my photograph was taken and is now in today's paper, very embarrassing especially as I have just been recognised from it by a bloke in the internet cafe (not that there are many other white girls wandering around Davangere).).
- Farmer – have spent much time with the young people helping out on the farm this week, preparing the land for being planted

– weeding it and spreading cow dung and the like. The most exciting part was helping to make the manure pile from old maize stalks and earth/cow dung, which had to be jumped upon to press it down – felt like a bouncy castle – so much fun, even if I did get very filthy and smelly!!!

This weekend we have started to say our goodbyes – to the parish priests in Davangere and the nuns at the convent who have all been very nice to us – as next weekend we shall be leaving Davangere for good! We will spend the last three weeks travelling round other Don Bosco houses in Kerala, our neighbouring state, and then ending up in Bangalore to leave for home on 9th July – so I am not sure when I will next get chance to e-mail.

I hope you all keep well though in the intervening period. Sorry this has been so short!!

An ending, but not quite the end

Hello all!

It seems like an awfully long time and yet no time at all since I last e-mailed you! My last mail was two weeks ago on the 13th, and such a lot has happened since then so this is probably going to be a long one, so feel free to skim read!

I spent the last week of our time at the project mainly having to sort out and clean up my room, and do all the last minute jobs like washing and finishing off things that I hadn't done in the previous five months, like making ABC posters for the study hall.

The electrician had been during the day on Monday and so consequently there was no electricity in half the building during the evening. Not entirely sure how he achieved that, but of course the half without power included my own room and Pat's, and also the chapel, which made having evening Mass very interesting – by the light of two candles!

On Tuesday we went coconut harvesting from all our trees. I tried my hand at pulling them down, using a huge long bamboo cane with a scythe/sickle attached to the top. It's blummin harder than it looks I can tell you – I could barely lift the cane it was that heavy, never mind manoeuvre it to cut the coconuts down. I managed about three and then handed it back over to the experts!

Throughout the week, various young people left in dribs and drabs, until by Wednesday there were only two girls left among the 60 or so boys. It was decided to move them to Suprabha, the other centre, where the majority are girls, and that this year Sujyothi will become 'boys only'. A few new children appeared at Sujyothi also – well I say new, they were new to Pat and me, but I think that some of them at least were old faces who had returned until their hostels re-opened.

That week saw the end of Pat and I's 'Spot the White People' competition (we were only counting the people we saw in and around Davangere, nowhere else), and he just pipped me in the final days as we had one white English lad visit us briefly while doing research for a gap year company, and Pat saw him first. So the final score was 3-2 to him – we spotted a grand total of 5 white people in five months!!

On Friday we spent our last night at Sujyothi. We weren't leaving till the afternoon of the next day but by that evening I had already packed my bags. How impressive is that?! For anyone who has ever had the misfortune of witnessing/experiencing my 'last-minute' method of packing, you will realise just how great an achievement that was.

That evening we were invited to have supper with the family who look after the farm. It will be their son's marriage on the 30th and since we can't make it they invited us to have a combination early wedding celebration and goodbye meal.

And on Saturday (18th) we said Goodbye to Sujyothi for the final time. It was a very strange feeling. We have so many good friends there now, and I will miss the young people a lot – their smiles, care, friendship, energy. It still hasn't really sunk in I think, that we will never see the majority of them again. Maybe if we had come straight home from leaving them it would have been harder, but as it was, we had quite a joy-filled end to our time there, with the children preparing a programme of songs and dances, skits and speeches thanking us for what we'd done, which they put on for us in the afternoon just before we left.

And so passed our last week at Sujyothi.

This subsequent week has been rather different in tone and content, as it had been arranged for us to go on a mini tour of Kerala, our neighbouring state on the south west coast of India. We landed first back at the BREADS offices in Bangalore (where we had spent our first night in India) and met Fr. George who has been looking after us and who had organised our tour. After a quick re-arranging

of bags we headed straight back out and got onto a bus which would take us to our first destination, Trichur. However, this was no ordinary bus. This bus is the closest thing that us Muggles are ever likely to get to the Knight Bus (you enlightened souls who have read Harry Potter will know what I'm talking about (incidentally, how excited am I getting about the imminent release of the next book?!)). On each side of the aisle were berths that were beds – it was a sleeper bus! Very, very cool and fairly comfortable – even Pat just about fitted on. So we spent the night travelling over to Trichur and awoke in the morning in Kerala, which is totally different to Karnataka in many, many ways but the first impression you get is that it is so green! Thanks to the guaranteed yearly heavy monsoons, which we experienced the full force of for the first half of the week, at least forcing us to buy umbrellas, (Kerala is the first to get it so gets the best of the rain) the state is thick with coconut trees, rubber plants and cashew trees, all of which are major industries, as well as other vegetation.

After a quick wash and breakfast at the Don Bosco house and school there we set off to visit the Kalamandalum centre, an institute for instruction in the traditional folk arts of Kerala, including Kathakali, a dance based performance art; and various different percussion instruments used for temple orchestration and Kathakali accompaniment, as well as make-up and costume making. The boys arrive at the age of 13 and it takes them right through their high school years in a very strict, disciplined regime (they start training at 4am – ouch!). It was very interesting and afterwards there was lunch included for which we were taken to a nearby resort, the poshest place that we had been to at that point. I talk about this only because of a person I met while we were there. There was a white bloke sitting at a nearby table in an otherwise deserted restaurant. He came up to talk to us, and after discovering that not only was he English, but also a fellow Yorkshireman. but it doesn't end there; his home town was also Sheffield and upon further enquiry it turned out he lived in Beauchief (for those of you who don't know where I live it's the area adjacent to my own, Woodseats) and if that wasn't enough, he went to Abbey Lane Primary School, which is just at the end of my road! I still can't get over it – you travel halfway around the world to bump into a retired guy who knows exactly the road where you live. How small is this world?!

We travelled by train and spent that night in Aluva at the Salesian Post-novitiate college, where there is also a parish and a youth centre and then the next day travelled by (normal!) bus to Cochin. There is one Italian volunteer there at the moment so she became

our guide for the day and took us out to Fort Cochin and to a beach that would have been really nice had it not been chucking it down with rain. We returned back in order to have a shower before we went for supper with the boys at Sneha Bhavan, one of the centres in that street children project where boys aged up to 14 live and have schooling until they progress to the next centre from where they go out to school. The next day we visited the other centres in the city, including a school, parish and youth centre all on one site and a printing press and cultural centre at another. From there we were picked up by our very own Fr Joy who took us back to his home that evening to experience real home-made Keralan food, cooked magnificently by his mother who insisted on feeding us till I thought I was going to burst!

After an 'interesting' journey the next day in a borrowed car we arrived at Kovalam where the Salesians have a technical institute for training skilled but disadvantaged boys in carpentry, electronics and computers. We stayed one night there and got taken to a beach. This time it wasn't raining but sadly we weren't allowed to swim as the monsoons make the seas very rough and dangerous so the red flags were up.

On Friday we got picked up by a different Fr Kuriakose to the one we have just spent five months with, who works in the only project that Salesians have working with the fishing community. The works of the project seemed very varied, from training and literacy programmes, to house building, nursery school, provision store, monitoring self-help groups and so much more. He then took us to his Uncle's resort in the back waters of Kerala where we had a magnificent lunch that included tapioca – a widely eaten dish over here, not unlike potato, v tasty – and then a boat ride out onto the waters. We had been deprived of one earlier in the week 'cos of the bad weather, but by this time the sun was playing nicely, as it continued to do for the majority of the next three days also. That evening we got another bus and landed in Trivandrum, the nice, short, easy-to-pronounce version of the name of the State Capital. We spent the next two days there and visited firstly the zoo, where we saw tigers amongst other things which made Patrick very happy, also the planetarium, several beaches – but we still weren't allowed to swim :(– and the other centres belonging to the project we were staying at.

On our final night there we decided to experience an Indian movie theatre, something I have wanted to do for ages. Patrick wasn't up for watching a Hindi or Malayalam film, so we went for 'Kung Fu Hustle' which was slightly surreal, but quite funny. The cinema itself however had different entrances for people of different castes,

ie the expensive seats got a separate entrance from the two lower price band seats. And inside it felt more like a slightly downtrodden theatre – the seats were on three levels like the circle, stalls and balcony in an old proscenium arch theatre. And it is the first time I have been to the cinema and had the audience clap when the show started!! Very amusing.

And so, very briefly (or not so briefly depending on your point of view!), that was our week in Kerala. We returned back to Bangalore, where I am now, overnight on a sleeper train this time (nowhere near as grand as The Ghana though Grandma!), and have spent the day washing clothes. Oh for a washing machine. . .

Hope I haven't bored you all too much and that you have all kept well and happy! It won't be too long till I see you all again – yey!!!

Mixed Feelings

Hello all! I thought I would make good use of the three hours I have to kill between flight in Colombo Airport to update you with all the goings on of my final days in India, although it will cost me an arm and a leg in comparison to the rates I was paying in Davangere, given that they're now charging me in dollars not rupees, so will try to type quick. . . ha.

The day after I sent that last mail Pat and I visited Mysore on like a day package tour thing. It was really nice to do some sightseeing in Karnataka for a change, given that all the touristy things we'd done by that point were in Kerala! It was a bit of a whirlwind tour however, with not really enough time to take everything in properly and be able to appreciate it to its full extent – especially Mysore Palace which is particularly spectacular and warrants probably a whole day of attention to itself alone. Oh well, yet another reason to come back to India some day!

The following day we had a meeting with Fr George Mathew and Raji of BREADS, the organisation which has been looking after us out here, and the other volunteers who are currently out at different projects in the province. There were six of us in total – three German lads, one Scotsman and Pat and I, and it was great but very strange to be amongst so many white faces again! It's the largest number I've been among for many months!! The meeting was basically an evaluation of our placements and a chance to discuss ways of improving the experience for future volunteers.

The day after, we all took a trip to the project at Ajjanahalli, about 60km from Bangalore and where Nicky, the Scots lad, has been for his month's placement, and where I spent my final week. The project there is for street children that are picked up in Bangalore and need to be kept out of the city as it is kinda in the middle of nowhere – like Alurhatti is – and the surroundings are beautiful, very different to Davangere. The landscape is much greener and with hills and large rocks rising out of it making it look very sculptured and not a million miles different from what we saw at Hampi when we went on the picnic. There is also another volunteer there at the moment, a German girl called Sarah. It was really nice to be in the company of two different westerners for the week, we had some really good laughs!

The set up in Ajjanahalli is that the majority of boys there go out to the local school every day between 9.30 and 10 pm for their normal studies. The newer boys who have not yet been fully integrated for whatever reason have classes in the centre itself. So during the daytime it is actually pretty quiet there! I spent a lot of time with the sick kids that week, playing ludo, top trumps and the like (you'd never guess some of them were sick. . .) and I am very surprised that I haven't come down with something myself, although there is still time? I'm probably just incubating it. . . as Sarah, who is mainly responsible for making sure the kids get their medicines etc, put it, we'll probably get something that doesn't even have a name in Europe! Ah well, it's all in a good cause.

We also got to go to the circus last Saturday! That was an interesting experience – although I was impressed that the majority of acts involved only human skills and talents (only a few involving animals right at the end (dogs, camels and goats (!?!)). The first two performances involved girls who could not have been more than ten years old – argh! child labour, child labour!!! Apparently its a very difficult situation to control though, cos the circus families are all moving around together so say they can't leave the children in one place (i.e. to attend school) and be separated from them, so they get involved in the show by performing. It's very difficult to get one's head around – there is no easy solution, and at least seeing the circus provided me with perfect material for giving a 'Goodnight' to the boys the following evening!

I had been asked by the Fathers there to make an 'English Preparation' before I left, so I made my tried and tested fried egg and chips on Wednesday for lunch with the help of, and much to the delight of, my European colleagues who had been hankering after some non-rice based meals!

I returned to Bangalore on Thursday and saw about the London Bomb attacks on the TV. They got full coverage on all the Indian news channels too and in all the newspapers the next day. I hope that no one on this mailing list has been affected and that all your friends and loved ones are also all safe.

The next day, yesterday (Friday), I also received more sad news as I learnt that Fr Pat Kenna had died suddenly of a heart attack during the afternoon. For those of you who don't know, Fr Pat was the priest who accompanied Patrick and myself out to India in January. He really helped us by sharing his experience and knowledge and advice both during the journey and via e-mails when he returned home, as he had lived in India before and I was very much looking forward to meeting him upon my return to share my own experiences with him. He was 49 years old.

Yesterday evening, as a thank you to Fr George and Raji for looking after me, we went to the cinema where we watched a Tamil movie. Only in India could one film plot involve a love storyline, the male half of which has multiple personality disorder, one of the personalities of which being a murderer, and unconnected song and dance routines set in Holland. Good movie. . .

And that's me. I spent Saturday packing my bags up finally for one last time and trying to squeeze it all in. How I managed to get away with checking in 37.5kg of hold luggage in Bangalore, when you are only meant to have 20kg, I'll never know. . . perhaps they are feeling generous.

I am very, very excited to be coming home, although also very sorry that I had to leave such a wonderful country and wonderful people and friends after what, in the end, feels like such a short time here. I have no doubt whatsoever though that I will be back one day.

I will probably e-mail you all one last time from home, just to round things off and tell you how it feels to come back to a western way of living after so long away.

Honey I'm home!

Hello everyone!

To reassure those of you with whom I haven't been in contact yet, I got home safe and sound on Sunday 10th July, as planned. I was greeted at the airport by my Mum, Dad and Sister and the first thing we did was to stop at a service station on the way back

up to Sheffield and have full English breakfasts! Bacon – hurrah!!! Although I had had one pre-return practice at eating with a knife and fork again (in Ajjanahalli, when I made egg and chips) it was still a very strange sensation to be lifting my food to my mouth using my left hand instead of my right!

(Among the other foods I have enjoyed re-discovering during the last ten days have been lettuce, fish fingers, gravy (woohoo!), pork pie, scotch eggs, yoghurt, tinned salmon, new potatoes, jacket potatoes, CHEESE, roast chicken with bread sauce (mmmmm. . .), and much, much more besides. To my relief I am not finding it difficult to drink tea without sugar. I think it's cos Indian tea is made so differently that it becomes necessary to add sugar. I'm glad I will not get rotten teeth though. . .

It felt lovely to return home, and although a few things have changed – new windows in our house, a couple of new shops opened down the road – there hasn't been as much change as I may have expected. It felt very odd listening to the radio again (Chris Moyles – yey!) and hearing songs I've never heard before, although it wasn't as bad as I expected cos they still play quite a lot that were out before I left. Maybe I've expected things to change more than they have?

It takes a bit of getting used to the fact that I am now once again surrounded by white people! I think that in spending so much time in the company of Indians, it becomes as easy to distinguish their characteristics and features as it is to do it for white people with whom, before January, I have spent the majority of my life surrounded by – not exclusively, but mainly. For want of a better phrase, I have learnt to see their faces, not just the fact that they are Indian, if you can understand what I mean.

I am really enjoying the freedom of my western lifestyle again. By this I really mean the freedom from restrictions that were imposed upon me firstly as a woman, and secondly as a foreigner in India. I now appreciate much more how fortunate I am to be living in a society where women have equal status to that of men, where I can sit wherever I like in church, where the only restrictions on what I can and can't wear are my own imagination and sense of decency(!), where I can go out with my male friends and not have everyone who sees us automatically assume that we're married, where it is not strange not to know when you are getting married, and the suggestion that it might not happen will not be greeted with shock! I appreciate being able to walk down the street without the curious stares because I am no longer different, and being able to go out

on my own at a moment's notice. I understood and appreciated the limitations that were posed by those with responsibility for my safety and well-being while I was out there, but that did not stop me being frustrated at times!

I have found it quite easy, perhaps too easy, to slip back into old routines and old ways of doing things. In many ways this has helped my 're-entry' process to, so far, go quite smoothly – although there are aspects of life out there that I do miss I am, for the moment, very happy to be home. However I am finding it too easy to slip back into bad old habits too, and I am not continuing with as many aspects of my 'India' routine as I promised myself I would try to do. I am hoping that this is just the re-adjusting stage and that I will be able to pick these up once again in due course. There are, however, little things I have noticed myself doing that were habits I picked up in India – the way I brush my teeth is one silly example, and the way I wash my plate. I have done quite well in continuing to get up early so I get more accomplished in the mornings, which gives a much greater feeling of satisfaction.

Having said all this, the experience has totally and unequivocally been worthwhile. I have learnt so much, about India, about myself. . . As soon as I get some money, I'm going back.

If I haven't caught up with you yet, then I hope I do so very soon. Until then have a fantastic summer.

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