

Journey to Bihar 2007

Sue Tennant, Saskia Raevouri, Dr. John Lange and John Tennant visit the FreeSchools in Bihar
Reported by Saskia Raevouri

1. Delhi to Patna to Bettiah

October 26

The night before, **Dr. John Lange and I** had flown in to Delhi from Amsterdam. **Sue Tennant and her son John** were already waiting for us at the Ajanta Hotel, so that we could travel together to visit the FreeSchools in Bihar, founded Sr. Crescence of the Sacred Heart Sisters. (For a background on this story, please read about our 2006 visit: *FreeSchools—a Life-Changing Experience* as well as *The Mission and History of the Sacred Heart Sisters.*)

Sue, Dr. John and I share the belief that spirituality combined with education will lead to planetary progress, and we are committed to helping Sr. Crescence and her team bring about literacy and upliftment to the deprived lower caste society in Bihar, India. What good is it for us to be living in light and life when pockets of human beings are still illiterate, living without electricity and suffering from polio? The locals do all the work, and it is our job to provide them with the means.

When we visited in 2006 there were 29 schools, and now there are approximately 40, thanks in large part to heartfelt donations from generous friends. This time we were given a widened picture of the work being done by the nuns, whom I regard as a superior group of teachers and leaders planted in the midst of uncivilized chaos.

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The four of us spent the day together in Delhi, recovering from jet lag and visiting our new friends at **ISPCK** (Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), with whom Sue and I had become acquainted the year before in connection with ISPCK's publishing Urantia Foundation's Indian printing of the Urantia Book. Not only does ISPCK publish and distribute Christian literature, but as an organization they have started their own free schools and women's empowerment programs, and have adopted an entire village on the outskirts of Delhi, which Sue and I saw in 2006. The director, **Rev. Dr. Ashish Amos**, and his assistant **Ella Sonawane** were very interested in FreeSchools World Literacy and Sue has begun finding ways of partnering with them.



Saskia Raevouri and John Lange in Amsterdam



Sue and son John Tennant waiting in Delhi



Sue Tennant, John Lange, Ella Sonawane, Saskia Raevouri, Rev. Ashish Amos

October 27

On the morning of the 27th, we were up at four a.m. and took a taxi through the empty streets of Delhi for our 6:30 a.m. flight to Patna. Even the cows in the streets had gone home for the night! Waiting at the Delhi airport we had a full breakfast, and were surprised that they served us another full breakfast on the one-hour flight!

In Patna we were met by **Sr. Crescence** and the same white Mahindra jeep and driver, **Manager**, from the year before. Sue and son John sat up front; John, Sr. Crescence and I in back, as we started on our day-long journey to our headquarters, the Sacred Heart Convent



Sue bright and sparkly with our luggage at the airport in Delhi



[Above] Crossing the Ganges. Note the cow sleeping in the middle of the road, a common sight in India.



*[Above] Our flight map
[Left] Sr. Crescence*

It took us the entire day to drive from Patna to Bettiah.

in Bettiah where Sr. Crescence is the Superior.

After the dusty, crowded streets of Patna and crossing the Ganges River, and drove on until we reached a convention/retreat center for media and jour-



Our third breakfast of the day—and it was not even 10 a.m.!



nalism students, run by the Catholic Diocese. Here we were lovingly served yet another full breakfast—our third before 10 a.m.!—of omelets, toast, tea and fruit. We also were given a tour of the grounds, which included a sound studio with computerized duplicating hardware that seemed a few decades behind to us, and especially to John Tennant, who is a professional sound man in the U.S.!

From there we headed towards Bettiah, bumping and grinding our way through Muzzafarpur and in-between towns and villages. Evidence of the devastating



Typical street scenes viewed from inside the jeep;



monsoons which had recently turned Bihar into a flood zone was everywhere along the way. Their flimsy grass huts were washed away and crops destroyed, leaving many families homeless and jobless. Families were seen still camped out in makeshift dwellings along the road, the highest point in the area.

Along the way Dr. John, still jet-lagged, alternated between dozing off and waking up to comment on the sights, which took us back farther and farther in time with each new village, with cows, goats, dogs, oxen, colorful locals, naked children, grass huts, hundreds of



[above] Displaced families with nowhere to live; [Top right] Flood waters still receding; [Right] destroyed crops showing how high the water rose



rickshaws and every type of garbage lining the roadway. Over and over he exclaimed, “I love this!”

We stopped first for tea at a roadside eatery, but even seasoned travelers like us dared not use the toilet, which, apart from being filthy, had no door! Groups of men sitting around could look straight in and this was too much. Instead we ventured on for a pit stop at St. Mary’s Convent School in Motihari, run by Sacred Heart Sisters.

After a reunion and a cup of tea with the Sisters, we drove on for many more hours to Bettiah. The distance is not so great, but the congested, potholed roads are so bad that it takes a long time to go just a few miles. Finally, it



[Above] At the roadside eatery; [Right] Tea at St. Mary’s; [Below] John with our driver, Manager



was well after 9 p.m. when we arrived at the gates of the walled convent in Bettiah, where a welcome brigade of Sisters and novices were waiting in the dark with lanterns, in their nightclothes, to greet us like old friends. We were assigned our old rooms and they turned on the generator especially for us—quite a luxury in these parts! The Sisters also had a meal waiting for us. It felt so calm and safe to be back behind those convent walls! It was an early night for all!



[Left] Sue’s bed (mine is on the other side of the divide); [Above] John T. and John L. slept here

2. Sunday Morning at the Convent

October 28

Breakfast was in the guest dining room, and as usual a host of Sisters and novices lovingly prepared the food



Sue and I have a breakfast meeting with Sr. Crescence

and and waited on us.

After breakfast Sr. Crescence gave us a tour of the convent, including the kitchen. The roof had sustained

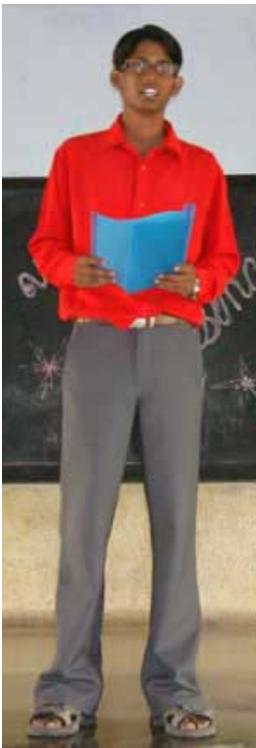


[Above] Inspecting the damaged kitchen roof, with flood waters still visible in the background; [Left] Where dishes are washed; [Above right] Sue taking a picture of the kitchen ceiling, damaged during the recent monsoon; [Right] coal used for cooking.



[Above] the guest dining room; [Below] our kitchen crew and a 90-year-old retired Sister who came to say hello.





severe damage during the monsoon.

After lunch we were treated to a Welcome concert of dance and music at the convent. The performers were exceptional students from very poor families, some of whom were being sponsored by Robert Coenraads (President of the Australian branch of FSWL) and his daughters, others were selected by Sr. Crescence for future sponsorship, and one boy was brought forth as a successful product of the very first free school started by Sr. Crescence. Most of their parents were along to meet us, dressed in their Sun-



The scholarship students perform for us



3. The Dormitory Project

October 28

After the concert, Sister Crescence took us to the existing structure on the convent grounds which she has had dreams of renovating for years, as a dormitory for girls. The more she told us of her plan to take in fifteen or more of the brightest girls from the FreeSchools background and educate them within the convent walls, the more I began to compare the work of the Sisters in Bihar to the Urantia Book's account of our early planetary history, when superhuman leaders and their staff came to educate the primitive races:

[They] ... knew better than to undertake the sudden transformation, or the en masse uplifting, of the primitive races of that day. They well understood the slow evolution of the human species, and they wisely refrained from any radical attempts at modifying man's mode of life on earth.

Each of the ten planetary commissions set about slowly and naturally to advance the interests intrusted to them. Their plan consisted in attracting the best minds of the surrounding tribes and, after training them, sending them back to their people as emissaries of social uplift. [p. 749]

So, after being trained in the convent, these



girls would then be returned to their villages in a better position to help it progress. They would also form bonds with each other, leading to high-level interaction between villages.

Finding her plans right in line with the best wisdom, in 2007 we gave Sr. Crescence the money to get started on this project, and I am hoping to raise another \$10,000 to complete the work. [Note November 2010: funds have been raised and building is now complete! Read *The Dormitory Project* and *The Bridge Course Opening* for detailed accounts.]



Sr. Crescence tells Mark her ideas and plans for the dormitory

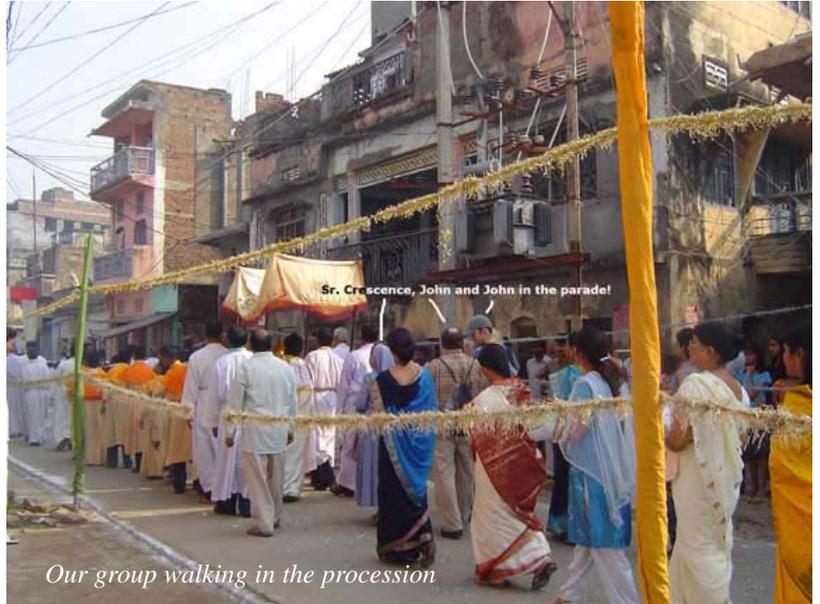
4. The Afternoon in Bettiah Town

In the afternoon, Sr. Crescence played a trick on us. We had unwittingly booked our trip during a week of major Catholic festivities and holidays, and she invited us into Bettiah town to watch a Catholic procession. Of course we agreed, and as soon as we stepped out of the jeep at the Bishop's compound, we were ushered into the procession itself—as honored guests!

I had stepped out of the procession for a moment to take this picture showing our boys in the line-up.

It was good to see all the Hindus and Muslims out to greet the Catholics as they came by. Bettiah is a town known for its religious tolerance. The Bishop, Victor Henry Thakur, whom we had met the year before, has made it his mission to bring about unity and by building "a bridge of solidarity" between the three religions in the region, described in this article about his work.

As we approached the Cathedral, it became apparent that we were not only expected to enter along with the rest of the procession, but to occupy prime seats! People who were already seated were shoo'ed away to make room for us, which embarrassed us but Sr. Crescence thought nothing of it. We were surrounded by many different orders of nuns, including several from Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity (one of whom leaned over and whispered to me, "Come to our home." It was startling to see how many Catholics there were in Bettiah, basically a Hindu town!



Our group walking in the procession



Inside the cathedral





* * *

Afterwards we walked around and explored the streets of Bettiah. It was like being in the Wild West!



[Above] Garbage floating through the streets. [Below] No need to worry about high gas prices here!



[Above] Music blared from this cart being pushed, as the man walking in front collected money for the family of someone who had died.



5. The Sugauli Convent and FreeSchool

October 29, morning

This morning we drove over the bumpy road from Bettiah to Sugauli, 23 km away, to the Sacred Heart Convent for Handicapped Children. In this town there are four FreeSchools and one tailoring school. (Earlier this year Sr. Crescence had devised a numbering system for the growing number of schools, and these are Schools# 8A-B-C; 9A-B).

Sr. Crescence had invited all the parents to bring their children to the convent for a “Health Camp for Children,” that a visiting American doctor would examine them, diagnose minor ailments, and that the Sisters would dispense medicine. Word had also been sent to the surrounding villages, since giving medical help is often a first step in breaking down the fears and suspicions of the primitive villagers, giving the nuns an “in” to providing further help, such as literacy education.



[Above left] Approaching the convent. [Above right] The convent in Sugauli

[Below] Some of the FreeSchool children live in this village, down the road from the convent





After our initial greetings, the nuns brought the children to order and we were treated to a performance, followed by the traditional ceremony of garland bestowal. It was heartwarming to see so many handicapped children joining in the singing and dancing. After the ceremony pictures were taken with the FreeSchools banner Sue had brought along. (Not all children from the five schools were present.)



[Above] A choir of boys, most of whom are polio victims, and who board at the convent. [Below] A welcoming song.



[Left] A group of curious children outside the convent gate. Maybe next time we will see them in school? [Right] Saskia with Sr. Ambrose, who heads up the Sugauli convent



6. The Tricycle Wheelchairs

Also waiting in the courtyard were three handicapped kids with their new tricycle wheelchairs. After visiting this convent in 2006 (see *FreeSchools—A Life-Changing Experience*), I could not get these disabled children out of my mind. Sr. Ambrose, who is in charge of the Sugali convent, told me that they could use at least fifteen of these tricycle wheelchairs (pictured at right), but only had one. In 2007 I raised the money to purchase three more, and Sr. Ambrose had the recipients waiting for us when we arrived.

These tricycle wheelchairs are especially built in India to get around on bad Indian roads, and cost around US\$125 each. They are made by a man in Patna, and as a side benefit, it gives him a chance to earn something to support his family in this poverty-stricken area of the world. [Note: Since my plea \$1500 has been raised and these wheelchairs have been built; see *The Tricycle Wheelchair Project*.]

These handicapped children are hit double. Born into a lower caste family automatically places them at the very bottom of the underprivileged list, but when they arrive with birth defects, their own families often regard them with superstition. And for girls born with deformities it is even worse, as they are almost treated as pariahs for placing a curse on the family. This is why the work of these Sisters is so important in this part of the world, providing a haven of love and security for these otherwise throwaway children. To look into their eyes you will see that mentally they are just as sound, and have just as good a chance of becoming worthy and accomplished citizens as any of their more perfectly formed peers.



[Above] This young man, a regular at the convent, would not be able to get around without his homemade tricycle wheelchair

7. Dr. John's Medical Camp for Children

After the welcome ceremony and garland bestowing, Sue and I were invited to cut the ribbon for the official opening of the Medical Camp for Children. John would be seeing his patients in the entry hall of the convent. John took his place, stethoscope around his neck, and began seeing one child at a time while others lined up outside waiting their turn. Each child had his name and medical complaint written on a slip of paper, which was handed to Sr. Sarita, who was sitting next to Dr. John. (We had brought Sr. Sarita, who has nursing credentials and speaks English, along with us from the Bettiah convent.) After Sr. Sarita translated the complaint into English, Dr. John would examine the child, make a diagnosis, tell Sr. Sarita in English, and she would write a prescription for medicine. The child would then take the prescription to be dispensed by other Sisters in a small room off the hall.

John had earlier confessed that, as a U.S. urologist with no experience diagnosing tropical and other exotic ailments, he might not be equal to the task, but he soon found out that there was nothing to be nervous about. These kids all seemed to be suffering from the usual childhood ailments. Some were wheezing and others pointed to areas on their bodies where they had chronic pain. Dr. John also indicated to Sr. Sarita when a child needed follow-up, as several appeared to have more serious symptoms—further tests might reveal diarrhea, cholera or other flood-related conditions. To our surprise, not many seemed undernourished.

It was great to see the handicapped boys who board at the convent acting as leaders to keep the children in order. One of the Sisters told me that she secretly snuck some bottles of tonic (one of the medicines being prescribed) into their room, for being such good helpers!

For many hours John saw one patient after another, not even stopping once for a break. As word spread throughout the area by patients returning to their homes, more and more children appeared on the convent steps for healing by the American doctor.

Dr. John was so inspired by this day, where he saw hundreds of patients, that he plans in the future to organize a fully-equipped mobile medical unit to diagnose and treat illness in the outlying villages where the nuns work, and take time from his urology practice in Arkansas to make regular visits to Bihar!



Saskia and Sue cutting the ribbon



Dr. John examining a patient while Sr. Sarita writes the prescription



Medicine being dispensed

8. The Sugauli Formal School

October 29, morning

The Sugauli convent also conducts, for paying children, regular classes called “formal” schools (free schools are called “non-formal” schools). The cost of sponsoring a child to attend this school, including uniforms and books, is close to \$80 a year. This income provides the convent with a means of existence. As I mentioned in my article last year, the nuns won't accept money from the Indian government because of the rampant corruption, bribes to be paid often being as high as 30%. It would be unthinkable for these Sisters, who do all their work in the name of Jesus, to consort with this type of evil. In addition, not much filters down from the Catholic Church treasury to them, and this is why they depend so much on help from European charities and spiritually motivated people like us.

All the handicapped boys who board at the convent attend these classes, and (as I understand it) their board and school costs are covered by the



Dutch charity Lilianefonds, who also pay for the surgeries for these unfortunate children.

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Just before we arrived, Bihar had experienced a devastating monsoon, and many villagers were left homeless. The school in Sugauli was inundated, with water waist-high, as the pictures below show.

[Left] The school building during the recent monsoon, and [right] on the day we saw it, water damage still visible.



9. The Bettiah Convent Dispensary and Hospital

October 29, afternoon

After lunch upstairs with the Sisters at the Sugauli convent, we returned to Bettiah. As usual, the nuns prepared western food for us, such as chicken with potatoes and cauliflower, while they themselves ate spicy Indian food. They did not believe us when we said we loved spicy food, and refused to prepare it for us or even to let us taste it, certain that it would make us sick!

* * *

On the drive back, Sr. Sarita told John the sad story of the dispensary and hospital on the SSH Bettiah convent grounds, which was temporarily closed down to patients (I was not able to understand the reason why). As soon as we arrived she gave us a tour of the facility, which also included an AIDS clinic.



Operating table

I must admit that I would not want surgery performed on me, on that operating table! When I mentioned to Sr. Sarita that it must be quite old, she replied, "Oh, no. It is new. We have just received it."

After this tour Dr. John was on fire with ideas for returning to Bihar, to help get the hospital into the 21st century!

* * *

After our evening meal we visited for a while in our quarters, discussing our day in Sugauli and the future possibilities for helping the Sisters with their work, until the electricity went off at 9 p.m. While the locals considered this wintertime, with temperatures much lower than in summer, for us it was unbearably hot without an overhead fan and it was impossible to sleep. Thank God I had brought



Beds in the ward



Medicinal supplies

along a tiny battery-operated travel fan, which Sue and I alternately used to aim at our faces. We tried reading under our mosquito nets with camping lanterns, and when those batteries died we resorted to flashlights until they ran out, and finally, when all of our battery power was exhausted, we drifted in and out of sleep until it was time to get up.

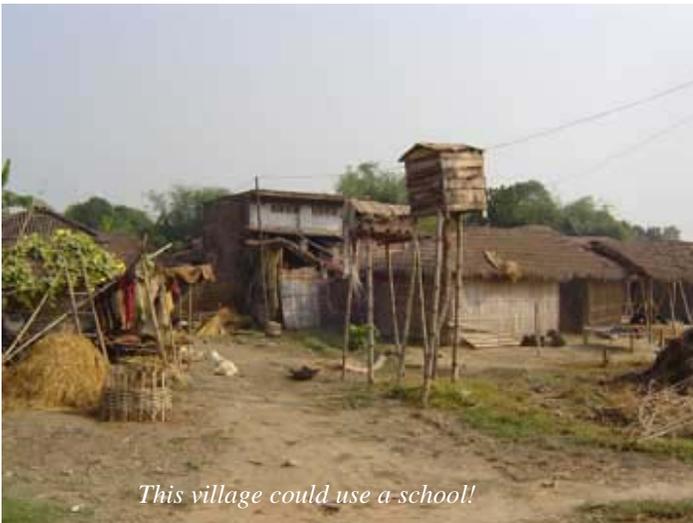


10. Detour to Motihari

October 30, morning

On this morning, six of us including our driver, Manager, crowded into the jeep to visit the FreeSchools in Motihari, a short distance as the crow

flies but an obstacle course over land. Partway we found ourselves at a standstill behind a long row of commercial trucks and assorted other vehicles, their drivers standing about on the road talking to each other. Manager went over to see what was going on,



This village could use a school!



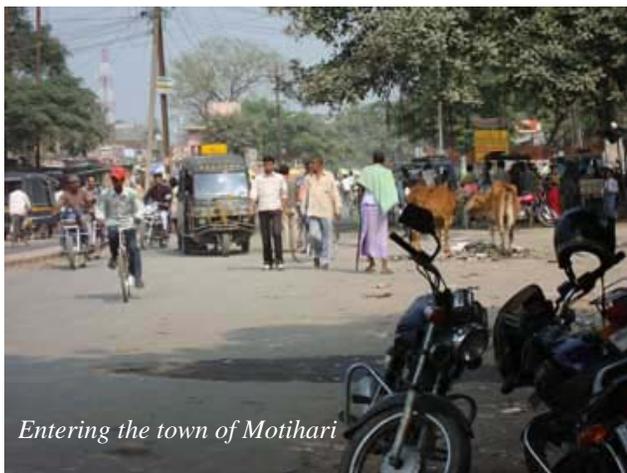
and came back with the news that a fatal accident had occurred farther up the road very early in the morning, and a police investigation was going on indefinitely. With eight groups of schoolchildren waiting for us in Motihari, Manager was instructed to turn around and take a different route.

The detour took us through a village that had not yet experienced the civilizing influence of the nuns, and the difference was obvious to us.

A village like this will not yet allow the Sisters to come and help them or teach them, and until an “in” can be found—usually through offering medical help—the nuns must leave them alone. A village like this will not yet allow the Sisters to come and help them or teach them, and until an “in” can be found—usually through offering medical help—the nuns must leave them alone.

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Everything is relative! Getting closer to Motihari, the scenery almost becomes civilized!



Entering the town of Motihari



Motihari fruit vendor

11. The Motihari FreeSchools

October 30, morning

This morning we saw the FreeSchools in Motihari, where Sr. Crescence had started with one school around ten years earlier when she resided at the convent there. When we visited in 2006 there were at total of 29 FreeSchools—in Bettiah, Motihari, Muzzafarpur and Patna (one, in Sathi, had been discontinued as it was too difficult for supervisors to travel back and forth). Now, in 2007, there were 38, including three tailoring schools funded by donations for treadle sewing machines from the

FSWL group in Australia, headed by Robert Coenraads, who had visited the schools with Mark Bloomfield in the very early days.

On this morning we saw several, some for the second time. Regarding the numbering system, it had been confusing for us when Sr. Crescence told us one name for a school in 2006, then a different name when we visited again in 2007. Also, a school held on a porch in 2006 could now be conducted in another part of the village in a back yard, with a different teacher, so we devised a system to keep them straight.



17A-B. Bariaya, around 100 children, teachers Indal Kumar and Reka Kumari, classes conducted 7-9 mornings. This school did not exist last year, and was started after a request by the villagers who heard about the FreeSchool in the neighboring village. The women joined together and organized the men to build a schoolroom on land donated by a villager.



16A-B-C. Dharmuha, teachers Suganti Devi and Rimku Devi. When we arrived, the children, some of them refugees from Bangladesh, crossed over a long, rickety bridge to meet us on the other side. School 16C is a tailoring school.



15. Chandraiya, teacher Shyama Devi. School two months old, villagers say they will find a building.



14B. Harijan Tola, teacher Summi Kumari.



Saskia handing the traditional scarf to teacher Summi Kumari.



14A. Bankat, teacher Rinju.



Rinju.



14C. Musahar Tola, teacher Ranjana.



Teacher Ranjana



In Mushar Tola I found my new poster girl, a child who would probably never attend school if not for the work of the Sisters.



13A. Malah Tola, teacher Regina Ekka (visited in 2006)



John handing the traditional scarf to Regina Ekka



13B. Tali



teacher Manjusha



St. Mary's, the Motihari convent school

After this whirlwind of schools, it was time for lunch at the Motihari convent—a farewell lunch, it turned out, for John Tennant. Much as he wanted to stay, he had to take advantage of hitching a ride with a driver down to Patna, to catch a flight to meet his girlfriend waiting in another part of India. He hadn't realized that transportation in these parts was not always available!



John Tennant receiving a farewell scarf



John Lange with the Motihari Sisters



12. The Children's Cultural Program

October 30, afternoon

Sr. Crescence did not always make it clear in advance what we would be doing, or I'm sure we would have put on our Sunday best this day! She had mentioned something about a "cultural program" but this meant little to us. Having visited the newer Motihari FreeSchools in the morning, and after lunch at the Motihari convent, we were driven over to one of the schools we had visited in 2006 (#10A) run by a brother and sister in their two-room family home, which at the time looked like the picture on the right.



Now, the property had been transformed into an outdoor theatre with seating (on the ground!) for hundreds! It took us a while to realize it was the same place! This is the town where Sr. Crescence started with one school in the 1990s and where the schools are now firmly established.

The students from seven FreeSchools (10A-B-C, 11A-B, 12A-B), most of which we had visited in 2006, combined to put on a great show for us, and the welcome we received was truly humbling! Flower petals were strewn before us as we entered the makeshift theater, and no sooner were we ushered into the seats of honor than tea, garlands and gift baskets were bestowed upon us.





The girls from the tailoring school made the costumes and stage decorations



There were some super talented stand-up comics and dancers!



Bollywood here we come!

The program opened with singing and dancing by the girls from schools 10B (girls) and 10C (tailoring) schools, these being the older girls from the original FreeSchools being given the chance for further education. The show also featured a score of comics and dancers, all FreeSchool students. These future stars will need to be literate in order to read scripts and sign contracts!

The audience, made up of FreeSchool students, watched in rapt attention and the kids laughed their heads off at the antics of their classmates! Sr. Crescence explained that most of these children live in grass huts without electricity or television, have no movie theatres in their town, and because they love to perform, they perform for each other!

At the end of the program, Sue, John and I were called onstage to receive a formal thank you for supporting the schools and the gift of a tradi-

tional scarf from Sr. Crescence. (We have no photos of this as all of our cameras' battery power gave out at the same time!)

We were touched beyond words at the planning, hard work and love that had gone into this presentation for us. That these precious human beings are considered low caste "untouchables," not worthy of an education or basic human rights, is heartbreaking.



13. Sr. Elise's Medicinal Herb Garden

October 31, morning

After breakfast, Sr. Elise, who heads up several other Sacred Heart/Fakirana Sisters Society educational programs, gave us a tour of her medicinal herb garden on the convent grounds. In India these therapeutic plants, which include basil, turmeric, aloe, sandalwood and many others, have been known since ancient times as *Ayurveda*, as effective agents in treating a many ailments, including heart conditions, infections, skin disorders, colds and fevers, and many others, and have no side effects.

Sr. Elise and her garden crew cultivate the plants, and inside the convent clinic they are processed by a method known as decoction—boiling various parts of the plants, including stems, leaves, roots, bark, to extract oils, organic compounds and other chemical substances. These concentrated materials are then bottled and dispensed. The leaves are used for medicinal teas. Sr. Elise brings cuttings to the villages where she teaches the women to grow and produce their own healing medicines from these herbs.

After showing us the herb garden and clinic, Sr. Elise gave us a short tour around the convent grounds.



This woman in green works exclusively in the herb garden



Ox power is used to plough the grounds



Chair matting is another skill taught at the convent



The entrance to the clinic



The clinic also deals with AIDS prevention and domestic violence education



Sr. Elise with some of the medicines produced from her herb garden



Detailed records are kept



The Sacred Heart Sisters, who have been serving this region since the 1920s, are laid to rest in this section of the convent grounds



A small staff manages the clinic

14. The Bettiah FreeSchools

October 31, morning

Today we visited schools in the Bettiah area.



3B. Kurmi Tola. teacher Rambha Devi, next to a small lake beside the walls of a Hindu temple. We were told that in bad weather they were allowed to have the class inside the temple.



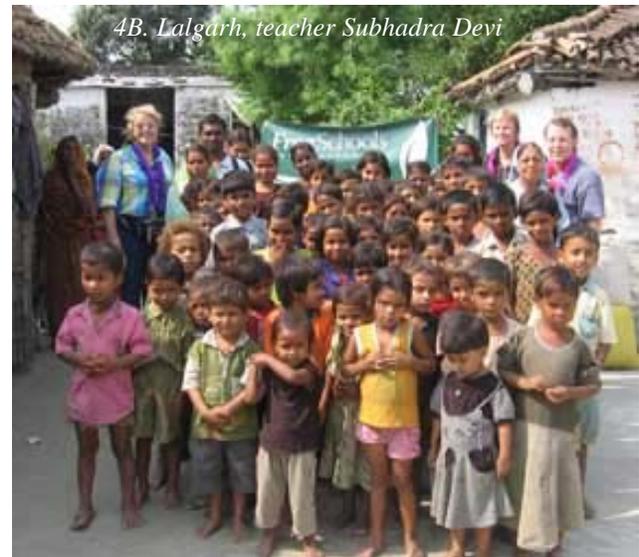
4A. Lalgarh, teacher Rajani Kumari



1A-1B. Vanhoeck Convent, teachers Sr. Sujala and Sr. Shikha.



3A. Barahri Tola, teacher Vandana Kumari. This class is conducted in the protected yard of a villager who has donated the space.



4B. Lalgarh, teacher Subhadra Devi



This convent is in the center of Bettiah town, and classes are conducted after the regular classes. Tea and biscuits afterwards with Sr. Crescence and the Sacred Heart Sisters of Vanhoeck convent. . . . To these Sisters, Dr. John was nothing less than a rock star!

15. Life in Bettiah

October 31, afternoon

On our way to visit the schools we passed through the town of Bettiah, and below are some typical scenes of main thoroughfares



Jeeps, horses and rickshaws are common methods of getting around in this part of the world. Unless a man learns to read and write, he can look forward to a lifetime as a rickshaw driver.



Only those who know how to read, write and count are able to own, manage or work in one of these shops!

16. More Bettiah FreeSchools

November 1

Today we visited more schools in the Bettiah area. As we were ready to drive off Sr. Elise joined us. She had arranged for us to see many of her programs as well, making it a jumble of free schools, tailoring schools and womens' empowerment groups, with garlands and cups of tea awaiting us at every stop. Sr. Crescence and Sr. Elise share a healthy competition in the doing of good works, and that is not a bad thing!

It took us a while to sort out which schools were Sr. Crescence's and which were Sr. Elise's, whose work is covered next. Below are the FreeSchools led by Sr. Crescence:



Neenwalia mothers



School #5 Neenwalia, teacher Dinesh Kumar



School #7A Chanainband Tailoring School, with John handing the scarf to teacher Shyama Devi





School #7B
Chanainband, teacher
Rameshwari



Rameshwari with one of her illiterate kinswomen



Sitting on our "seats of honor"



School #2A Sacred Heart Bettiah, teacher Sahnaz



School #2C. Sacred Heart Bettiah, teacher Sr. Cornelia

Walking back to our quarters the novices came out to greet us . . .The Sacred Heart novices—our future Sr. Crescences!



17. The Work of Sr. Elise

October 31-November 1

Last year we had seen exclusively the FreeSchools, but this year Sr. Elise came along and included some of her women's empowerment programs in the tour, giving us an enlarged picture of how the literacy classes are loosely connected to the other work being done by the convent. Sr. Elise because is well-funded by big European charities, and has a staff of 30 social workers as well as two big jeeps. (The jeep and driver we had been enjoying were on loan from Sr. Elise, we found out, and when we are not visiting Sr. Crescence gets around on the back of a motorcycle!)

With her health and AIDS clinics, maternity care, domestic violence help, literacy, skill-producing, and herb and horticulture programs, Sr. Elise is well known to all the village men and women in the area, who refer to her as "The Mother Teresa of West Champaran." At every stop along the way, as our jeep pulled up and we stepped out, swarms of women would gather around Sr. Elise, all talking at once and pulling on the sleeves of her habit. We couldn't understand what they were saying, but it was obvious they regarded her as a savior of sorts.

Along the way we stopped to meet a girl who had been unable to walk, who had spent her life crawling along the ground until Sr. Elise's group took her in and saw to it that she had surgery.

At Nawchavi, one of tailoring centers, not only did they bestow garlands, gifts and cups of tea on us, but they painted our foreheads with red dye that wouldn't dry! This traditional treat for honored guests left us with red smears all over our faces and clothes!



The crippled girl we stopped to meet along the way



Tara Akhashar, a typical village where Sr. Elise has educational programs.

In this particular village, which also had a FreeSchool, Sr. Elise showed us the remains of what had once been a thriving Community Center, where she handed out medicine and gave other help to the villagers. She claimed that the recent monsoons had caused all this damage, which seemed hard to believe. Dr. John immediately went into fixer-upper mode and swore to come back and help get this building restored!



Nawchavi tailoring center



The fixer-upper community center

18. A Very Progressive Village

November 1

The village below is one where Sr. Elise and her team have made much progress, and she was eager to show us the possibilities. Immediately we noticed that the village was very clean, that everyone seemed to be employed in some skill such as thrashing grain or knitting sweaters. The cow dung had been carefully preserved to dry out on the rooftops for cooking fuel.

It was indeed a spectacular sight when a group of women approached in a long file, carrying their notebooks, to show us how they had progressed. These same women, who in the past would have spent their lives as illiterate childbearers, crouched on the ground, now stood tall and proud. Now they were learning to read and write, and assume leadership roles in their village.



The village men crowd around to watch

19. Escape to Patna

November 2

Originally we had planned to leave Bettiah for our return to Patna after breakfast on November 2, but during dinner the evening before Sr. Crescence received word that a major strike was planned that day for the entire state of Bihar, and all the roads, bridges, and major thoroughfares leading in or out of Patna would be closed. They also hinted that our lives might be in danger, and to avoid trouble we should be prepared to leave the convent in the middle of the night! Not really understanding what was going on, and having been warned that this was not a safe part of the world for us, we didn't sleep a wink and were packed and ready by 3 a.m. for the long and dangerous ride to Patna.

We learned that our driver, Manager, had fallen off his bicycle on the way home the evening before and had broken his foot, and a substitute driver had to be found in the middle of the night. Besides the driver and the three of us, there was Sr. Elise, an assistant, a novice who was being transferred to Patna, and all of our baggage. Sr. Crescence had been anxious to accompany us but had to stay behind because our jeep was full. As it was, the novice had to sit on my lap for the entire 8-hour ride!

Never had we see the roads so empty! We were able to speed through the villages without obstacles at every turn. Even the cows had gone home for the night. Around 5 a.m., still dark, we began to notice small groups of women emerging from the villages and walking alongside the road. When we asked what they were doing, Sr. Elise said, "They are going to the toilet."

We noticed no signs of trouble until around

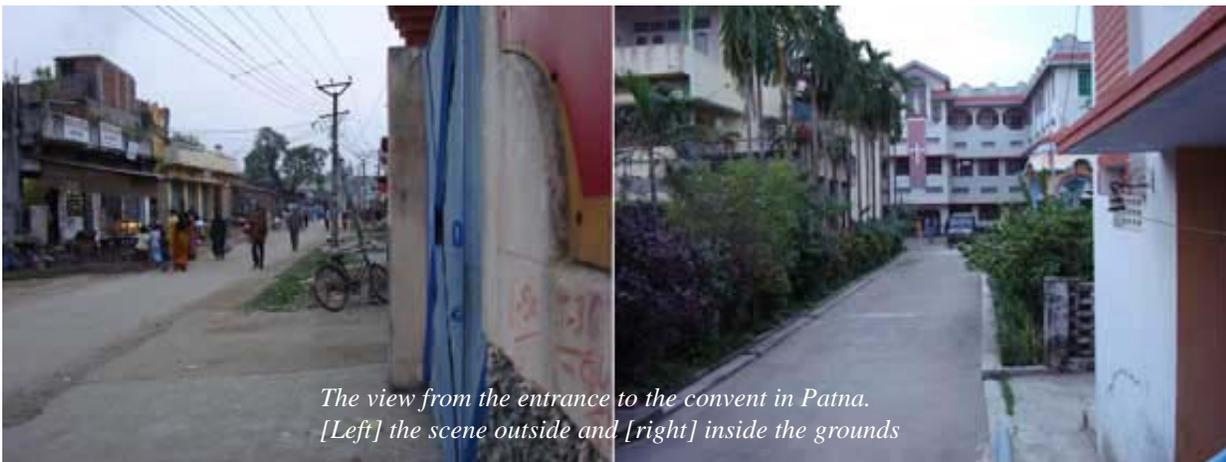


Sr. Crescence (left) with novices and convent workers come to bid us farewell

nine in the morning, when we approached a long line of vehicles stopped at a bridge that had been barricaded by tree branches. Officials were stationed in front, allowing no traffic through. Sr. Elise confidently ordered our driver to go around until we were at the head of the line. She then got out of the jeep and walk quickly over to the guards, and we watched her waving her arms and pointing in our direction. John, who was fast asleep in the back seat with his mouth wide open, had no idea this was going on! In amazement we watched the guards remove the tree branches as Sr. Elise made her way back to the jeep. She told the driver to go ahead, and as we drove over the bridge we looked back and saw the guards replacing the branches.

"What did you say?" We asked her.

"I told them I had a sick man in the back seat who needed to get to the hospital in Patna," she replied, "and two Western women who needed to catch a flight, and they let us through." She added, "We have nothing to worry about. We are all doing good work and God will take care of us!"



*The view from the entrance to the convent in Patna.
[Left] the scene outside and [right] inside the grounds*



* * *

It was with relief that we arrived at the convent late in the morning. As usual we were given a royal welcome and given rooms for the day, since our flights were not until later that evening.

First we were given a Welcome Breakfast, with singing by the novices. Then, after a nap and a chance to freshen up, we were treated to a Welcome Lunch in an upstairs dining area by a different group of Sisters. They would have given us a Welcome Dinner as well had we stayed longer!

We spent the day visiting with the Sisters talking about the work we were all doing together. It happened to be All Souls Day, and not being Catholic ourselves this meant nothing to us. As it grew dark a group of Sisters stole away and John accompanied them. He came back a little later, saying, "You have got to come with me to see the most spectacular scene!" He led me around the side of the convent grounds, and there was indeed a beau-



The graveyard decorated for All Souls Day

tiful sight—all the graves had been decorated and lit up, in memory of the loved ones buried there.

At 9:30 p.m. we all flew to Delhi on the same plane. Sue connected immediately with her flight to Toronto while John and I spent a few more days in Delhi before returning to our respective homes.



Before leaving Patna, a picture with our driver, Sr. Elise, her assistant, and three Sacred Heart Patna Sisters