



# Bihar Revisited 2010

*Geri Johnson, Dr. John Lange, Margaret Yeo, Linda Praamsma and Saskia Raevouri travel to Bihar in India in March 2010 for the opening of the Bridge Course Dormitory and to visit the FreeSchools* BY SASKIA RAEVOURI



TOP, L-R: Linda Praamsma, Saskia Raevouri, John Lange, Margaret Yeo and Geri Johnson, in the train from Delhi to Bettiah. ABOVE: Geri negotiating with the coolies carrying our bags on their heads. BELOW: The Bettiah railway station.



**THIS** was to be my third visit to see the work of Sr. Crescence and the Fakirana Sisters Society in the remote regions of Bihar, India; for Geri and John it was their second trip and for Margaret and Linda their first. My main purpose this time was to be present at the opening of the Bridge Course dormitory, a building for which we had raised the money the year before. This was to house a program called Bridge Course for Poorest Girls, the fulfillment of a lifetime dream for Sr. Crescence. Below is my diary:

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## Friday, March 19

Linda and I had been in New Delhi for a week when John, Geri and Margaret met up with us at the Ajanta Hotel on the evening of March 18. We spent the morning getting acquainted, catching up and packing, and right after lunch we loaded our bags into two taxis for New Delhi Railway Station for our overnight trip to Bettiah.

Geri and Margaret were carrying two extra large suitcases with donated clothes for children, so we needed several coolies to get us to our train through the overcrowded platforms. Our first class compartment (under \$50) was surprisingly cozy and comfortable, and the food excellent and plentiful! In future this is the only way I will travel from Delhi to Bettiah!

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**Saturday, March 20**

We arrived very early in the morning in Bettiah and were met by Sr. Crescence and her driver, in a brand new Mahindra jeep, the gift of John and Sue Tennant. There was warm reunion with the Sisters and staff of Sacred Heart Convent and we met Roxie Overaker, a student volunteer who had been working with Sr. Crescence for about a month. Linda and I were assigned one of the rooms in the guest quarters, Geri and Margaret the other, and John was housed in the new dormitory building.



*TOP: Arriving at the convent. ABOVE: Roxie Overaker, the student volunteer. LEFT: Taking a tour of the new Bridge Course Dormitory. Taking a tour of the new Bridge Course Dormitory Building. BELOW: Harivatika FreeSchool. BOTTOM: Vanhoeck Convent FreeSchool.*

After a meal in the main dining room, we took a tour of the new Bridge Course dormitory as well as the recently renovated convent kitchen (paid for by the Hilton Foundation). The Bridge Course was a dream of Sr. Crescence that she first told me about in 2006, and in the meantime we raised the money to complete it and now we were here for the inauguration [Read The Bridge Course Dormitory Project]

Following Sr. Crescence’s tightly planned schedule, immediately afterwards we climbed into Sr. Crescence’s new air-conditioned vehicle and visited some of the FreeSchools in Bettiah, first Hariwatika (see Geri Johnson’s report, Harivatika School) and later two Vanhoeck Convent Sadan schools.



During afternoon tea with the Vanhoeck Sisters we learned that the ten girls who had been boarding there last year in an experimental Bridge Course program had been returned to their villages after all had come down with measles. Let's hope this fate does not befall our new program at Sacred Heart!

Returning to our headquarters we relaxed, ate another meal and tried to ward off the mosquitoes. Compared to previous visits it was not too hot, so our lack of electricity for all-night fans was not missed!



*TOP: Breakfast in the main dining room. ABOVE: Geri and I pose with the scholarship students on the roof of the new Bridge Course dormitory. RIGHT: The first Motihari FreeSchool student, who is now ready to go on to higher education. BELOW: Geri interviewing some of the girls. BELOW RIGHT: Sr. Crescence and I interviewing the others.*



### Sunday, March 21

First we gathered for breakfast, which is always a great way to start the day at the convent, to exchange plans and ideas. The Sisters and their kitchen help always spoil us with such Western items as eggs, toast, cheese, fresh fruit and other delicacies which they normally don't eat!

The morning program was divided: Geri, Margaret and I remained at the convent where Sr. Crescence had arranged for all the scholarship children/young adults to be presented to us in the Bridge Course building. For several years Robert Coenraads, president of FreeSchools Australia, together with several other Australians, had been sponsoring most of these children, some of whom are now old enough to move on to higher education, while I and some others have sponsored the rest. These children, including some boys, are mainly related the Sisters and convent workers, all are Catholic, and not connected to those girls who will be chosen from the poorest vil-

lages, according to their abilities, to live in the Bridge Course Dormitory.

Meanwhile, that same morning, Dr. John, together with Linda and a medical team of Sisters, took off in one of the jeeps for the nearby



town of Sugauli, where a Medical Camp for Children had been arranged.

Our interviews over, we took the new jeep to Sugauli where we met Dr. John, Linda and the others for lunch, including Sr. Ambrose who runs the Sugauli convent.

On the grounds stood a brand new building for medical and rehabilitative purposes, funded by the Dutch Foundation Lilianefonds, a charity that helps handicapped children worldwide. Here is where John conducted his medical camp, and by the time we arrived he had once again handled several hundred little patients in just a few hours.



*TOP: The new building. INSET: Sister Ambrose. FARLEFT: Children waiting to be examined. LEFT: Dr. John checking a young patient. Note medicines waiting to be prescribed on the table in back*

As before we met the handicapped children who board here, and I promised Sr. Ambrose I would raise some money for her to take in several more girls—\$20 a month is all she would need per girl, she said.

Next was a visit to one of the four Sugauli FreeSchools. The children were not there but came quickly after being alerted that we had arrived.

This was the same building we visited in 2006, willed to the SSH order by a man who had passed away. Sr. Crescence said that the Sisters had lived here for a while and used it as their headquarters. Now it was in a state of disrepair and we all thought it would be wonderful to raise the money to fix it up, giving the Sisters another location to carry on their work. This was tabled for future discussion!



*The poor children of Sugauli*



*The donated fixer-upper*

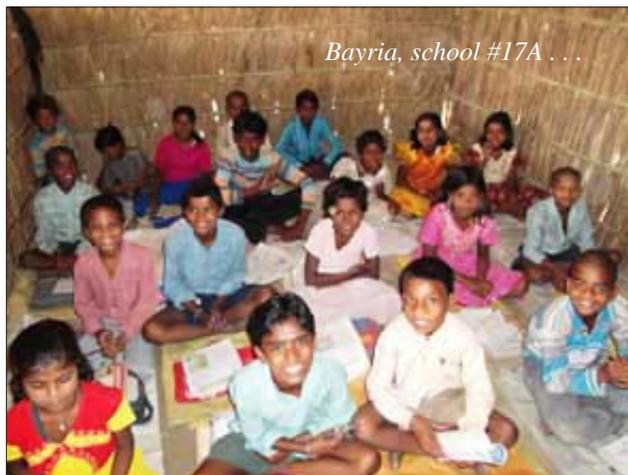
*TOP RIGHT: Reunion with our old friends, the Motihari Sisters. RIGHT: BELOW: Supervisor Harisankar (front) with social workers from his team.*



**Monday, March 22**

While Linda went into Bettiah to film Sr. Elise receiving an award, Geri, Margaret, Amit (Sr. Crescence’s assistant) and I went to visit some FreeSchools in Motihari. Sr. Crescence stayed behind to help prepare for the Grand Opening Ceremony of the Bridge Course Building, scheduled for later that day.

After a reunion with the Sisters at the Motihari convent we visited five schools, the first three in Bayria Center (see also Geri Johnson's report, Bayria School). The women of this village, having seen the FreeSchools in the nearby Dharmuha Center, invited supervisor Harisankar to start a similar center in their village of Bayria, which did not have a school. Harisankar informed them that this work could be done only if the villagers themselves contributed some form of labor and materials, and they agreed. Donations came in the form of land, bamboo and labor, while FreeSchools provided the funds for three classes and teachers. The villagers are now hoping to convert these schools to a formal school, classes 1st-5th.



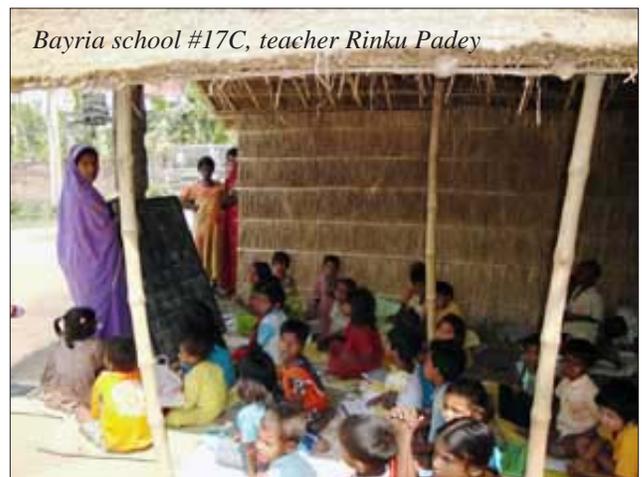
*Bayria, school #17A . . .*



*. . . and teacher Indal Kumar*



*Bayria, school 17B, teacher Rekha Kumari*



*Bayria school #17C, teacher Rinku Padey*

From Bayria we drove to nearby Bankat Center, where we visited School #14A, and from there to Bariyarpur, where school #11B was held on a donated porch with teacher Shwani Acharya, one of the first teachers to volunteer in the early days, still working with the poorest of the poor.



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After lunch with the Sisters at St, Mary's, we drove back to Bettiah to prepare for the Bridge Course opening festivities. (Read my account, The Bridge Course Dormitory Project.)

Early in the evening the invited guests began to arrive: the Bishop of Bettiah Henry Thakur, Mother Superior, Mother General, and many others.

After a ribbon-cutting ceremony (John and I together doing the snipping), we followed the priest around as he blessed each room with a sprinkling of holy water, after which we were led into the main hall where guests sat on folding chairs and where a stage with microphones were set up for speeches (see Sr. Elise's assistant's report of this event.)



ABOVE: Bariyarpur 11B with teacher Shwani Acharya.  
LEFT: School #14A, with teacher Rinju Kumari.

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ABOVE: Dr. John and I cutting the ribbon.  
BELOW RIGHT: Contrary to what the sign says, I did not support this project alone! I had the help of many generous friends who pitched in with their donations!  
BELOW LEFT: The Bishop of Bettiah with Sr. Rosita, Sr. Crescence, Sr. Madhu, and Sr. Emma



## Tuesday, March 23

This morning we were asked to step outside the convent gates where a busload of kids being sponsored by a Dutch charity, Stichting Kinderpostzegels, wanted to meet us. These children had been rescued from child labor situations, were now attending school and being treated to a day tour. This is another aspect of the work being done by the Fakirana Sisters together with other charities.

We then jumped back in the jeep to see several more Bettiah schools:



*TOP RIGHT: The children rescued from child labor.  
ABOVE: BariTola #1C, teacher Rambha Devi.  
MIDDLE RIGHT : KuwarTola #3A, teacher Sristi Kumari.  
BOTTOM RIGHT: KuwarTola #3B, teacher Subhdra Devi.  
BELOW LEFT: Geri was a big hit at all the schools where she taught the students an interactive English song.*



After lunch we drove back to Motihari to see several more schools. At the last one, Bariyarpur 10A, the teacher Pankaj Kumari brought forth a little girl suffering from AIDS and hoped that we could find a way to support the work being done by the Sisters to help these types of children, of which there are many.

These schools bordered on St. Francis Church, where we had afternoon tea with the two priests. After that we returned for yet *another* tea with the Sisters of St. Mary's before driving back to Bettiah.



ABOVE: The first school (whose name I did not catch).

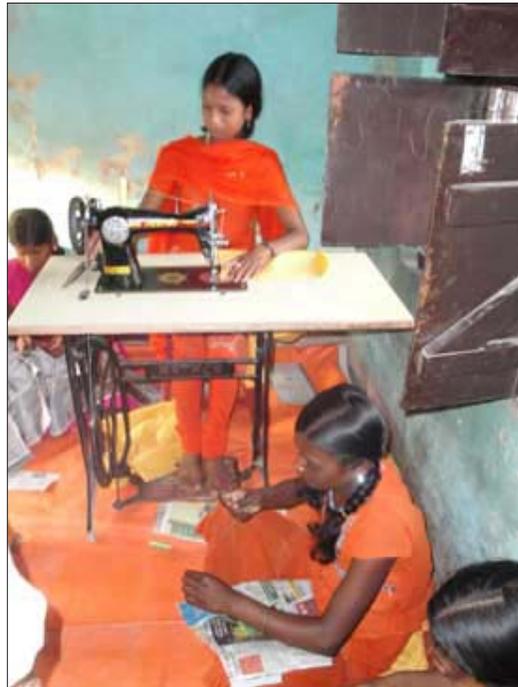
TOP LEFT: Bariyarpur #10A, teacher Pankaj Kumari.

LEFT MIDDLE: The little girl with AIDS.

BELOW: School 10B Tailoring, Sonaliki Kumari, teacher.



The little girl with AIDS



Afternoon tea with the priests of St. Francis Church



A second afternoon tea with the Sisters of St. Mary's!

**Wednesday, March 24**

This day we spent at the convent, figuring out details of the Bridge Course Program, listening to Sr. Crescence’s concerns, taking pictures, and catching up on email. In the afternoon the novices treated us to a musical performance.

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**Thursday, March 25**

Immediately after breakfast Dr. John, Linda and I took off with Sr. Elise for the second Medical Camp, in a nearby village.

Many groups of children came from schools under the direction of Sr. Elise, and came in a variety of ages, from very young to teenage girls many of whom were married. Common ailments included malnourishment, intestinal problems due to lack of clean drinking water, and infections from walking barefoot among piles of cow dung. A few were suspected of having tuberculosis. The older girls all seemed to have menstrual-related complaints. While Sr. Elise diagnosed, Dr. John prescribed the medicines, which were being dispensed at a table across the way.



*Geri and Sr. Crescence discuss the various programs.*



*ABOVE: Sr. Elise diagnoses and Dr. John prescribes medicine. TOP LEFT: Children waiting in line to see the doctor. BOTTOM LEFT: Our welcome at the Medical Camp included a red dot on our foreheads, which did not dry and ended up all over my face! BOTTOM RIGHT: Sr. Elise mentioned that it is not uncommon for schoolgirls like these to be married.*





*The Sisters at our farewell dinner reminded me of the Last Supper!*

This was to be our last night in Bettiah, and the convent staff put on a big feast in our honor, which included a farewell performance by the novices, after which we had a last meal together.

Then it was back to our mosquito-ridden rooms to pack for the long drive to Patna the next day!

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### Friday, March 26

After breakfast we loaded up the two jeeps, took some more pictures and left for the all-day drive to Patna. The roads were much improved since my last visit in 2007, so it didn't seem so bad, and for the first time I was in a vehicle with air conditioning and shock absorbers! Geri, Margaret and Roxie were in a lesser vehicle and I know how they were suffering as we had on our previous visits! The Sisters and other locals are made of tougher stuff and never seem to notice the heat and pollution.

Along the way traffic slowed down when a man with an elephant blocking a large truck, on the other side of the road, would not budge until the driver paid him. As we took pictures the truckdriver handed him some money, and the elephant was guided away to let the truck by. Then the elephant was led across the street where



*Farewell shot before departing for Patna*

his owner parked him right in front of our other vehicle, containing Geri, Margaret and Roxie inside! At first we thought it was funny, but Sr. Crescence was terrified! She dug out all her coins

and gave them to Amit, in order to negotiate a deal with the man. Sr. Crescence told us that elephants can be dangerous, that the man could order it to sit on top of a car that does not pay up—or pay enough!



ABOVE: The truck driver gets out to pay the owner of the elephant, after which he is allowed to continue. LEFT: From inside our jeep we watch the elephant being led across the street where he squarely blocks our other vehicle. LEFT BELOW: The owner makes his demands. BELOW: Amit negotiates with a handful of coins and we are allowed to pass.



Arriving near Patna by late afternoon, we first paid a visit to a brand new convent, Provincial House, built with funds donated by European charities. After another singing and dancing performance, we toured the rooms followed by a large meal in the new dining room.

From there it was on to the main Patna convent. Here, after a reunion with our old friends the Patna Sisters, yet another meal was awaiting us! This time Linda and I shared a room with Roxie, and we stayed up late exchanging stories as we fought off the mosquitoes. It was also possible for us to briefly get online and see what had been happening in the world while we had been virtually cut off from civilization!



*These future nuns not only sing but dance as well!*

### Saturday, March 27

After yet another hearty breakfast we made the rounds of saying goodbye to everyone, and just as we were about to leave for the airport we were told that yet another meal waited for us—lunch! The hospitality of these Sisters knows no bounds!

We look forward to our next visit and hope those of you reading this will contribute to their work of helping to make our planet a better place to live—for everyone!



#### **READ ALSO:**

- A Life-Changing Experience** by Saskia Raevouri (2006)
- Journey to Bihar** by Saskia Raevouri (2007)
- The Bridge Course Dormitory** by Saskia Raevouri (2007-2010)
- Report from Bihar** by Geri Johnson (2009)
- The Tricycle Wheelchair Project** by Saskia Raevouri (2007-2009)
- Harivatika School** by Geri Johnson (2010)
- Bairiya School** by Geri Johnson (2010)
- Bihar Revisited** by Saskia Raevouri (2010)
- Sugauli Disabled Girls Project** by Saskia Raevouri (2010)
- Bridge Course Report** by Saskia Raevouri (2010-2011)

