



FOUR DAYS IN MAGICAL BIHAR

In November 2012, during our two-week visit to India, my cousin Els and I took the train to Bihar to spend four days with Sr. Crescence and the Bridge Course girls in Bettiah, and to visit some of the new FreeSchools centers • *by Saskia Raevouri*

Photos: Saskia Raevouri and Els Schep



November 8, 2012

We had been traveling in India for over a week when we settled into our seats on the train in Varanasi for the all-afternoon ride to Patna Junction, where Sr. Crescence, her assistant Amit and driver Ganesh would hopefully be waiting to meet us. Our train was several hours late leaving Varanasi, and there was no way to get the message through.

It was an uneventful ride, our compartment filled with sleepy businessmen and male students returning home for the great feast of Deepwali on November 12. Outside, from what we could see through the dirty windows, was the pleasant Indian scenery of farmland and villages we had become familiar with after touring for five days with a car and driver. We had gone from Delhi to various points in Rajasthan, then to Agra and back to Delhi, from where we had taken the overnight train to Varanasi two days earlier.

As the train entered Patna Junction, and while we were maneuvering through the crowded passageway to the exit, two big coo-



Sr. Crescence, me, Amit, and Ganesh

lies in red jackets came barrelling through and headed straight for us.

"You!" said one of them, pointing to me. They grabbed our bags, put them on their heads, and led us out of the train, where Sr. Crescence and the boys had been waiting for us for several hours. After a fond reunion, and after Sr. Crescence had haggled with the coolies about how much to pay them, we marched in single file behind Ganesh through the crowded platforms, all of us holding hands in a chain so as not to be separated, to our waiting vehicle.

By now it was too late for the planned drive to Bettiah so it was decided that we would spend the night at the new Provincialate convent in Patna. Arriving, we were lovingly greeted by the Mother Superior, Sisters and novices. Some I recognized from past visits and others were new to me.

As expected, a grand meal was ready for us in the dining room, after which it was immediately to bed. We were given a sort of guest apartment with a bedroom and living room—very sparse but luxurious compared to some of the other Sacred Heart convents because this one had electricity, a Western toilet and no mosquitoes (although the beds had netting just in case!).

November 9, 2012

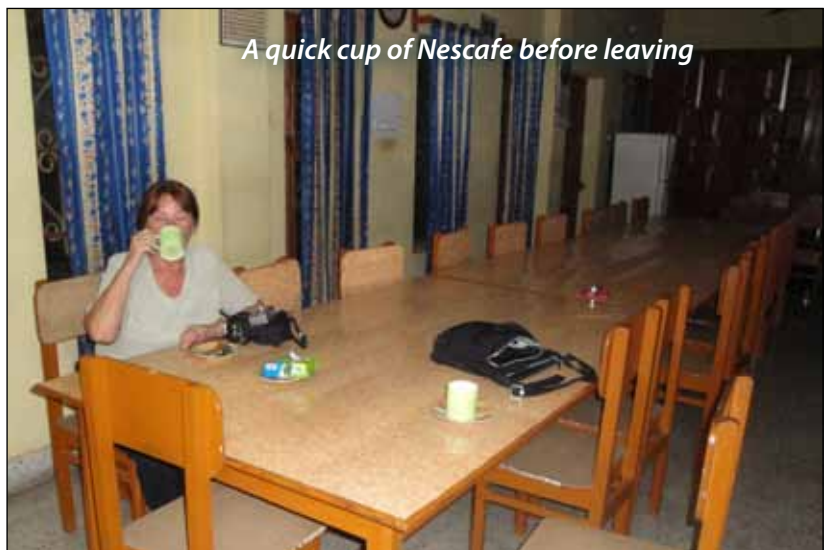
We were up at 4AM to get an early start and beat the traffic for the 214-km drive to Bettiah. We threw on our clothes and



ABOVE AND BELOW: *Sisters and novices of the Provincialate*



The Mother Superior making coffee



A quick cup of Nescafe before leaving



Early morning oxen market

had a hurried cup of Nescafe fixed for us by the new (and very young) Mother Superior, who also packed us a picnic lunch.

It was indeed peaceful and calm in the pre-dawn hours with nobody on the road—even the cows had gone home for the night!

One interesting sight was an early-morning oxen market, where owners and buyers had come from far and wide to trade in the beasts of burden. Some had decorated their animals by painting their humps pink and adorning their heads with crocheted tassels.

A scary thing happened when traffic began to get busy: our horn stopped working! Anyone who has been in a car in India knows that a horn is a necessity! Indian drivers actually listen for horns and react to them, and with everyone passing each other lives are in peril without one! Ganesh was thus handicapped and we felt danger with him silently passing cars instead of beeping his way through. Before all else, we had to stop in the nearest town to have the horn fixed!

Around 8AM we pulled off for a break at a roadside “hotel,” one I had been to several times in the past with Sr. Crescence. There we sat eating our picnic lunch of bread, eggs, cheese spread, tomatoes and cucumbers—fast becoming our staple Indian diet as Els could not handle the local food. The boys shared a restaurant treat which cost around \$1.



How many Indians does it take to fix a broken horn?



Stopping at the roadside "hotel" where we had a picnic breakfast while the boys shared a restaurant treat for \$1



Our first stop was the Sacred Heart convent at Motihari, where the sisters greeted us with more hugs, kisses, food and tea.

Here is where our program began. Motihari is where the FreeSchools started, and it has a growing number of centers. First we met with the Motihari teachers, in one of the convent classrooms. There was singing, speeches (including one that I was called upon to give impromptu and which Sr. Crescence translated and elaborated on for me), and exchanges of gifts. This was followed by picture-taking in the hallways, after which we were given a tour of a boys' version of the Bridge Course: poor but smart village boys were taken in and given a chance to "bridge" the gap to qualify them for entry into regular schools.

At the Motihari convent





The Motihari teachers gathered in one of the classrooms



The boys who are boarding at the convent



Their dormitory room



Lunch with the Sisters at the Motihari convent

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After lunch we all climbed back into the jeep to visit several FreeSchools in the area. At each center we were greeted with applause from the children and given chairs to sit on. By now we knew the procedure: In the front row sat the girls chosen to adorn us with garlands after performing a group welcome song. (These village kids who have no television or other programmed entertainment learn at an early age to create their own magic!) The star pupils in the class were then brought forward to demonstrate their skills, followed by speeches from Sr. Crescence and us (translated by Sr. Crescence, who always embellishes and makes us sound very inspiring!).



School #1







Besides the regular FreeSchools, in the same village as the third school was a tailoring center for the older girls. In a donated building the girls learn basic sewing skills and had many samples displayed on the walls for us to inspect. Before we left they presented us with hand-embroidered pictures to take home with us. El's was given one that said, "Good Night," which she promised to hang above her bed!

It was beginning to get dark when we arrived at the last school, where the kids had been waiting patiently for hours. Sr. Crescence told us that this was one of the most progressive schools, and in a small ceremony she called forth the mother of one of the girls and presented her with a gift for being the most cooperative parent.



From there we drove in the dark to Bet-tiah, a distance of 42 km. Since our first visit in 2006 the roads were much improved as was the vehicle, a much-appreciated gift from Sue and Derek Tennant. In our air-conditioned jeep we didn't notice the pollution at all!

It was like coming home as we were given another warm welcome by the Sisters, novices and other convent help whom I had gotten to know in the past. The Bridge Course girls were excitedly waiting up for us with their teacher/warden Sunita, and flitted around us with loving hugs and squeals of delight. For some of them it was the first time they had actually met blue-eyed foreigners in person, although they had heard a lot about us!

Els and I were assigned separate rooms in the Bridge Course building, hers the floor above mine. After a quick meal in the main dining room and bidding everyone good-night, Els came down to my room and we visited for a few hours, sharing our impressions of what we had experienced so far, a tradition that we maintained for the rest of our stay.

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November 10, 2012

On our way to the dining room for breakfast we bumped into the Bridge Course girls sneaking peeks at us as they performed their morning duties. We were not scheduled to formally meet with them until the next day.

At breakfast we found our old friend Sr. Elise waiting for us. (She had recently been acquitted of charges concerning girls she had protected within the convent walls, one of whom turned against her and accused her of allowing police officers in at night to have their way with the girls—an unthinkable scenario!)

I showed Els the grounds, the buildings, the gardens, the clinic, the cemetery for the Sisters who had served here since the 1920s. On the way we delivered some seed packets from Holland (a gift of our Singapore friend, Margaret) to Sr. Joltsna, who supervises the novices who do much of the gardening.

Across from the Bridge Course building lay a very sick cow, literally skin and bones, shaded with some cloths. Chickens were peck-



The main convent building



The chapel



The Bridge Course building in background



Sr. Joltsna with the seed packets and novices



The convent cow shed



The sick cow



Sr. Crescence and Els with the sick cow "infirmary" on the left



The kitchen that was new in 2010



Sr. Elise

ing at its head and it was lying in its own excrement. This had been one of Sr. Crescence's main milk cows, and she still had hopes that it would recover. (It died a few days later.)

We also took a look at the "new" kitchen, which had had its grand opening on the same day as the Bridge Course building in March 2010. During one of our previous visits Sr. Crescence pointed out that the roof leaked badly, and Sue Tennant had arranged for a grant from the Conrad Hilton Foundation to pay for repairs. The last time we saw the kitchen it was spanking new, brightly painted pink and blue, but now it was dark and gloomy again, covered in soot as they cook with coal.

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The first thing I had noticed about the Bridge Course building the evening before was the "Wall of Fame" with photos of those of us who had recently visited and had helped raise money for building construction and scholarships: Sue Tennant, Geri Johnson, John Lange, Margaret Yeo, Eef Hoedemaker, my sister Linda Praamsma, and me. Since 2010 "our team" had funded three groups of sixteen bright but poor village girls to live and be educated here for one year, preparing them for entry into regular schools.

This was a simple building, but fancy by Bihar standards. The beds (which I had gotten used to) were not much more than wooden planks covered with cloths. I had



The "Wall of Fame" with all of our portraits on display!



ABOVE: The simple door locks. BELOW LEFT: My room with all-purpose clothesline, and [Below right] Els's comfy bed with air mattress.





Stairway to the roof

warned Els, who was afraid she wouldn't be able to sleep, but fortunately we had left behind air mattresses on previous visits, so we put one on her bed and she was happy.

The convent was supplied by a mix of intermittent city electricity and a generator two hours in the evening; for us they would turn on the generator briefly in the morning as well. In my bathroom, which was dark to begin with, there was no working light at all. A cold-water showerhead protruded from the wall, but it was chilly so Sr. Crescence had given me a large electric plunger (which Sue had once brought from Canada) to boil water in a bucket. However, each time I tried it all the fuses blew out leaving me completely in the dark! In the end I simply relied on my trusty Wet Ones to freshen up and saved the electricity for reading and charging batteries.

On our walk we climbed up the stairs to the roof, which has many uses. Here is where the girls dry their wash, for instance. They also sleep up here when it is very hot, which sounds like a good idea until you think of the mosquitoes! (Compared to previous visits, we were only minimally bothered by the pesky critters this time around, which made it a much more pleasant experience!)



ABOVE: The Bridge Course rooftop, and the girls' laundry out to dry



The classroom

One idea that I had had, was to teach the Bridge Course girls how to crochet, and I had brought along some colorful picture books for inspiration as well as a few hooks and a ball of yarn. Sr. Crescence had assured me that supplies were plentiful in Bettiah, so rather than bring them with me from Holland, I decided to wait in order to give the Bettiah shopkeepers some business. My plan was to purchase a hook and ball of wool for each girl, teach them the basics, and perhaps have each of them make a scarf before I left!

Well, that is not what happened. Instead, Sr. Crescence arranged for us to visit several FreeSchools-sponsored tailoring centers in Bettiah! I noticed that on the program about five minutes was allotted later that afternoon for “niddle work by Saskia”!

Stepping in the car for our next round of visits, we were quite a gang: Sr. Crescence, Els, Amit, Ganesh, and me—the five Musketeers zooming from village to village! By now Els was getting used to the crazy driving—dodging cows, rickshaws, pedestrians, horse-and-buggies and overloaded trucks at every turn!

The first center was called Anita Devi in Lal Gar (a district of Bettiah). Today was the grand opening and I was given the honor of cutting the ribbon. This was a very advanced village, according to Sr. Crescence, as the nuns had successfully taught the inhabitants many skills, one of which was to pasteurize their goat milk by boiling it in clay pots nestled inside a covered fire mound.



ABOVE: The milk pasteurizing operation where goat milk is boiled in clay pots, a skill taught the villagers by the nuns.

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From here we drove over to the Mahna Gani district to visit the Amik Kumari Center.

After the ceremonies, we were led around and came upon a large brick house, the most impressive in the village, where the owner was having a bed made outside. This was obviously a man of means, and Sr. Crescence was quick to make his acquaintance and explain why we were in his village. By the time we left he had promised to support the cause by donating the use of his property for Free-Schools activities!



Amik Kumari Center



The bed being made for the man who promised to help

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Sankita Center

The new Sangita Center was the last school we visited, in the Paras Pakadi district.



On the way back to the convent, we stopped off in Bettiah town to buy thank-you gifts for the Bettiah FreeSchool teachers, to be given out at a ceremony planned for the next day in the Bridge Course building. While there, Els and I bought a clock for the Bridge Course dormitory and some other clocks—they were very cheap, made of plastic, but we were lucky to find even these here in Bettiah.

Back at the convent, after lunch, we went over to the Bridge Course for a display of sewing projects hung on the walls for inspection, representing the work of two tailoring centers, Renu Devi and Raj Muni Devi. The students were lined up to welcome us.

In praising their work I would select an item and ask who made it. When I came to some big blue bloomers they all burst out in giggles until one blushing girl owned up. In the end they presented us with handmade tablecloths and floral bouquets after which I awarded them each a diploma.



Els waiting outside the clock shop in Bettiah town



Handmade tablecloths given to us



The two tailoring groups whose work was on display for us to inspect



Handing out diplomas



"Who made these bloomers?"

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Still determined to teach the girls to crochet, after supper I suggested we go into town to the open night market for supplies. Off we went with Sr. Crescence, Els, Sunita, Amit, Ganesh and I. To walk around here is normally very dangerous for foreigners, so Sunita held my hand tight while Sr. Crescence took hold of Els. I found no hooks but ended up buying some yarn anyway.

On the way back we stopped at Sr. Crescence's favorite roadside stall and bought vegetables for all the Bridge Course girls, as the juniors were hosting the seniors the next day.



The night market, where we would never dream of going alone



Sr. Crescence's favorite vegetable stand

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November 11, 2012

On this day the current Bridge Course girls were to entertain the old girls with a meal. Sunita, their jill-of-all-trades, had organized it, and it consisted of rice, vegetables and chapati bread. The girls regularly eat in the annex next door to the Bridge Course, sitting in a circle. Like the nuns, they eat daintily with their hands. Each girl has her own tin plate and mug, but on this day for their guests paper plates and cups were provided.

While this was going on, I conferred in the hallway with Sr. Crescence preparing to interview both sets of girls, the junior or current crop, and the older girls from the two previous years. So far there had been three groups since the program began in 2010. Of the sixteen girls who started with the 2012 group, three had gone back to their villages due to homesickness.



Bridge Course girls and their guests

I had a few questions about the budget and wondered what was being spent on salaries. Sunita, I learned, makes 2,800 rupees per month plus a food allowance of 900. In dollars it adds up to less than \$65 per month. For that, she lives with the girls 24 hours a day (has her own room), eats with them, teaches them (Hindi, English, maths and general science), and protects them as their warden and all-around mother figure.

Amit, who works for both FreeSchools and the Bridge Course, makes 4,000 rupees plus 450 for food and 400 for petrol for his motorcycle, adding up to around \$85 a month. His duties include handling correspondence (Sr. Crescence is almost blind and cannot do her own), organizing visits to the schools, helping Sunita, preparing reports, and (when we are there) acting as a guide and all-around very helpful host. Sr. Crescence treats him like a son and often slips him a few extra rupees then sighs that he is bleeding her dry!

Ganesh the driver earns 4,000 plus 450 for food, thus around \$75 a month. He is certainly worth every penny, as having a good driver is a necessity in these parts and not everyone can maneuver Indian roads and traffic comfortably. Ganesh is excellent and every day we put our lives in his hands!

Pankaj is a part-time (two hours per day) staff member who teaches Hindi, English, maths, social science (history, geography, civics), everyday science, computer theory, general knowledge, and morals and etiquette. For this he gets 2,000 plus 450 for food (\$42).

Sr. Crescence herself receives an honorarium of 1,200 a month (around \$20). The Sacred Heart Sisters are self-supporting and receive nothing from the Church, so this pittance goes towards her own living expenses.

Adding these figures up and multiplying by 12, I get a total of \$3,444.00, approximately half of what we raise for the annual scholarships of \$7,000.00! The balance is for 16 girls' food, clothing, utilities, shared cook, school supplies, building maintenance, and outside bookkeeping/tax services—as well as other expenses detailed elsewhere.



Conferring with Sr. Crescence prior to interviewing the girls



Sunita



Amit



Ganesh



Pankaj

2012 Bridge Course Girls



Nisha



Priya



Brijanka



Ranju



Anita



Gunja



Nitu



Rani



Usha



Nitu



Nisha



Api



Saloni

For our interview with the junior girls we prepared the following questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What are your father's/mother's/brother's/sister's names?
4. What is the name of your village?
5. What is your teacher's name?
6. Do you like to study here?
7. Why do you like it?
8. What is your favorite subject?
9. What is your goal?

The main idea behind these questions was to have a little dialogue with each girl. The general responses were that they loved their teacher Sunita, the schoolwork, the discipline (regular hours which they don't get at home), and making new friends. Their goals were to be either a teacher, a doctor or a police inspector, reflecting occupations they are most familiar with from their village life.

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For the senior girls who had gone on to secondary education we asked the following:

1. What is your name?
2. What is the name of your village?
3. At which school are you now studying?
4. What is your favorite subject?
5. Do you believe the Bridge Course has changed your life?
6. Do you believe it is important for the girls in your village to have this chance?
7. How can you help your village?
8. If parents are unwilling to allow their girls to participate, how can you help to convince them?
9. How can you impress the parents that education is important?
10. What is your goal?

I regret to say that I did not take down their responses, which were translated for us from Hindi by Sr. Crescence. In general they found it very important to help their less-enlightened villagers by stressing the value of education. All of the girls wanted a career, and most emphatically did not want to be married and have babies until they were much older!



Interviewing Nisha Kumari



A mix of girls old and new up on the roof



Senior girls waiting to be interviewed



The older Bridge Course girls participated in a picture competition, in which each girl was given a poster and asked to describe not only what they saw but also what thoughts the images conjured up in their imaginations. Madhuri Kumari was the winner.

After the interviews, the older girls went into the classroom for the picture competition, after which the winner, Madhuri Kumari, was presented with a gift. Madhuri is now in the 8th class at Muktinath Secondary School, and according to Sr. Crescence is the top achiever of the senior Bridge Course girls.

By now all the Bettiah teachers had also arrived, and were seated in the hallway for



ABOVE and Below: Senior girls and FreeSchool teachers line the hall



Madhuri Kumari, the top achiever of all the senior girls, receives her gift





Sr. Crescence receives a gift from us



speeches and to receive their gifts, the clocks we had purchased the day before. We also presented Sr. Crescence with a gadget that she—practical as ever—had chosen herself (I cannot remember what it was!) and gave the junior girls their wall clock. Els and I received armloads of presents—difficult to take home with today's luggage restrictions but we packed them anyway.

As this was our last evening, after supper in the dining room we were treated to a program of music by the novices (with Sr. Crescence playing conga drums!) and dance by the Bridge Course girls, organized and choreographed by Sunita, whose versatility amazed

us. In addition to all of her other duties, she sewed all of their costumes and applied their make-up!

The big highlight of the evening was when Sr. Crescence had Els and me dress as nuns. (She had been planning this surprise for days!) When the girls' program was over, she and Sr. Elise took us into their private quarters where they fashioned some extra habits over our clothes, and when we made our grand entrance into the dining room the laughter and applause was endless! Sr. Crescence laughed hardest of all, and the Bridge Course girls couldn't stop giggling. This experience really seemed to bond us all together, and made us feel that we were truly members of this little family of souls gathered in a remote convent in a well-nigh forgotten part of the world.



Bridge Course girls perform for us



Sr. Crescence on drums with the novices

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November 12, 2012

During breakfast I was unexpectedly approached by Sr. Sarita, a teacher in the Sacred Heart formal school, who informed me that the regular convent classes were assembled outside and waiting for me to give my speech. *What?* Sr. Crescence had forgotten to mention this to me, and I was thoroughly unprepared! Sr. Sarita shrugged off my protests, took us by the hands and led us out to the courtyard where we were faced with an audience of at least 300 uniformed students standing in class formation, who broke out in thunderous applause when we took the stage. (Els tried taking a picture but discovered that our batteries were dead—on both cameras—so we have no record of this event.) We were presented with the traditional garland and song, after which I spoke in platitudes about studying hard if they wanted to achieve anything in life. It was translated by Sr. Sarita who went on for five minutes, bringing on a roaring ovation at the finish.

With that we loaded up the jeep, and with Sunita and the Bridge Course girls lined up outside waving us a tearful goodbye, we took off on another wild ride from Bettiah to Patna. Els was thoroughly acclimatized by now and insisted on sitting up front to film the scary but fascinating adventure on my iPad! At the Motihari convent we stopped for tea. With no time left to visit



Two new nuns join the convent!

the main convent in Patna (where the sisters had prepared another meal for us), Sr. Emma and Sr. Madhura came out to the airport to wish us a fond farewell, bringing the food with them, which we shared picnic-style.

Flying back to Delhi, we marveled at the four days of Bihar magic we had experienced—the Sisters, their teams, the children, and the work to make the world a better place—work that we are so fortunate to be a part of! ■



Sr. Emma and Sr. Madura with us at the airport

SASKIA RAEVOURI has been involved with FreeSchools World Literacy since 2006, when she accompanied FSWL-Canada president Sue Tennant to Bihar for the first time—"a life-changing experience." Since then she has returned three times, once more with Sue, twice with Dr. John Lange, once with FSWL-USA president Geri Johnson and other supporters, and most recently with her cousin, Els Schep. Retired from a lifetime in the animated cartoon industry, she now heads up a desktop publishing company with her husband, Matthew Block, dividing their time between Holland and Nevada. Most importantly, she works to raise money for FreeSchools and the Bridge Course programs. For more field reports and for donations, please visit her website, www.ServiceToHumanity.org.


www.ServiceToHumanity.org

We are currently raising \$10,000 for the 2013-14 expanded Bridge Course program and \$5,000 toward the building addition. Contact Saskia.Raevouri@gmail.com to be added to the mailing list. More details on www.ServiceToHumanity.org.


www.FreeSchools.org