

A Story of Growth: Thelpara
A Growing Assumption School

3rd January 2015. Calicut International Airport. It is noisy, colourful, and about 25 degrees warmer than the city I left behind 12 hours earlier. As I am driven through a kaleidoscope of villages and towns, green starts to become the predominant colour. I can recognise bananas and coconut palms, but for the rest I'm pretty much ignorant. After nearly two hours, we pass through another cluster of houses and tiny



shops and start to climb. Sister Alphonse, superior of the Thelpara community of Assumption sisters, tells me that we are arriving. I look around me expectantly: trees line the narrow road, but there is no sign of a school. Another kilometre further on, we emerge into sunshine. There it is! Dominating the surroundings, a large, two-storey white building stands proudly behind the big gate. The inscription reads 'Assumption Public School'. I have arrived.

Two months on, I have left again. From birth to death we are changing, but at some moments it happens faster than others. An experience such as these two months in Thelpara has such a tremendous impact that it cannot be adequately captured in a few hundred words. Nevertheless, this is my task.

While Assumption sisters have been based on the Thelpara compound for about 30 years, the school is a new venture. From tiny beginnings only three or four years ago, it now boasts around 140 pupils aged between 4 and 12. This academic year has been the first in the new school building. The children are proud to study in such a fine structure, with its spacious classrooms and big staircases. To Western eyes, this grandeur contrasts unexpectedly with a degree of incompleteness and improvisation. At present the electricity supply is adequate to supply only a few of the rooms; the library is empty save a small cupboard of books, most of them not particularly suitable for children; the I.T. room boasts four computers. There is no internet access and no photocopier. However, construction work, which had been put on hold due to lack of funds, is under way again. Next academic year, the further end of the block should be in use, with additional classrooms, an infirmary, boys' toilets, and an audio-visual room with video projector. At a pace to be dictated by pupil admissions, there are plans to increase the first building to four storeys, add another block with laboratories and a proper assembly hall, and build a hostel for girls. The endeavour is all the more impressive when you know that the main means of increasing pupil numbers is through the sisters' visits at the weekend to families living in the catchment area. There are hopes to have all classes from Lower Kindergarten – LKG – (age 4) to 6th standard (age 12-13) running next year.



The greater number of classes for slightly older children will certainly make the task of future volunteers easier. During my experience I had contact with all five classes currently in operation, but communication with the little ones was decidedly challenging. It is an English Medium School; lessons are conducted primarily in English, and from Class 1 upwards (age 6) the children are expected to speak only in English while at school, even with their peers at break and lunchtime. Nevertheless, these children live in a rural area where the native language, Malayalam, is used almost exclusively for spoken communication. They usually arrive in LKG with no English. Add to that the difference in accent between British and Indian English, and you have a recipe for lack of understanding! With the two Kindergarten classes, my input was limited to teaching action songs, with a real teacher there to maintain some semblance of order. By 2nd Standard, the children's English is reaching functional level, and may have been improved at least a little by the classes they had with me. However, it was the lessons with Class 5 which I enjoyed the most. These children all transferred from different schools at the beginning of the academic year, resulting in a small and mixed ability group. Although I doubt that they made impressive strides in their grammatical accuracy during my stay, they were certainly enriched by meeting and talking to somebody from a very different culture.



I, too, was touched by the lives of the children. They have the same hopes and dreams as any others, but with very limited prospects compared with so many British youngsters. With rubber prices at an all-time low, it is increasingly difficult to make a living as a farmer. There are opportunities in labouring and auto-rickshaw driving, and work in shops and offices a bus journey away. However, it is a life of insecurity and precarity for many. The people are resourceful; they keep bees and sell the honey, grow their own fruit and vegetables, collect what nature provides freely. Some,

who have done well for themselves as teachers and doctors, have been able to build large, well-equipped houses. While others have homes which are more modest but still quite adequate, there are some who have little more than a room or two. For India, this is a middle-class area, with none of the abject poverty portrayed on our television screens. Nevertheless, I met a good number of families who have, by English standards, almost nothing. This did not prevent them from offering hospitality far beyond their means, with a generosity astonishing in its lack of ostentation as well as its liberality. Despite in some cases having been all but unable to communicate with me due to the language barrier, the lay staff at the school took me into their hearts and were genuinely saddened by my departure. I was given a send-off after two months more emotional than I would expect after two years in England!



I could write about so many aspects of my experience. There is the beauty of the area, which is outstanding. Imagine a backdrop of low mountains clothed in forest, home to elephants and tarantulas, surrounding a colonised area of rubber plantation, coconut palms, bananas, and flowers in profusion. There is the isolation and strong cultural identity; I was the first Westerner some of the local people had spoken to, and I never saw another white face there. Norms concerning appropriate dress and segregation of men and women are conservative in comparison with those in the West, but there is no feeling of rigidity. There is the food, which would deserve a book-length treatment. I will mention only the obligatory coconut (incorporated in every dish, savoury or sweet), papaya, and unimaginably delicious small bananas. There are the practicalities of living with an intermittent electricity supply, almost non-existent internet connection and no refuse collection. There is the life of the school, which dominates the attention of the sisters.

Every establishment celebrates its existence annually with a programme performed by the children, elaborate in scale and detail. Most of my stay was coloured by an intense concentration on preparations for this Anniversary Day, with levels of stress reaching epic proportions by the time of the grand event! Trained by me, a briefly-formed school choir sang two prayer songs rather badly, and with help from one of the sisters I drilled a group of LKG children to sing 'The Wheels on the Bus' reasonably well. But I was most proud of the four children who performed a short drama



under my direction. From initial indistinct articulation, they reached an impressive level of pronunciation and delivered their performance with expression and actions to match. It helped that one of them was a natural actor. He was also, as I could see from other programmes in which he participated, a talented dancer. It is the lack of opportunities for children like this to develop their potential which I find so difficult to accept.

Yes, there are many things I could write about, and my desire to do so is a sign of how this vibrant, welcoming, frustrating place has captivated me. The community is waiting for more people to be entranced...