

Our visit to RTU

David and Jo Cassidy AFSC

We came out of the airport at Chennai, having spent what seemed like ages getting through immigration, to be greeted by a milling crowd of people, all waving placards with various names on, and a cacophony of noise from car horns, motor cycle hooters, and people shouting, and all this at 2 a.m. in the morning! We were back in India! Later that same day we flew down to Madurai to be met by Brother James with the jeep and from there we were transported to RTU, to be greeted by an excited crowd of mothers and children who escorted us to our accommodation in Anbu Illam (the first of the children's villages) which would be our home for the next 2 weeks.

There were many highlights of our visit, of which these were just some:

Our first visit to the new Children's Village of Sirumalar, which is specifically for those children who have been affected by AIDS – either they are orphans because both parents have died from AIDS or they are HIV+ themselves. There are now 67 HIV+ children and 340 AIDS orphans. In the two weeks since we have been home another 3 HIV+ children have been admitted, and so it goes on – a terrible legacy for these little ones. On a brighter note, we were privileged to be able to hear mass there on Saturday night, said by Father Antony Paulsamy, a Franciscan priest, and an old boy of Brother James from his days at Boys' Town. In fact as Father Antony is resident at Anbu Illam for the time being, he says mass every morning at 6 a.m. in the beautiful new chapel in Sirumalar, and during the day helps out at RTU by teaching English in one of the schools.

On the first Tuesday of our visit we were privileged to be invited to a reception at St Joseph's Boys' Village for the De La Salle Superiors from South East Asia who were in India to discuss the future of the Brothers in those countries. We were able to renew our acquaintance with Brother Mark Murphy and also met other Brothers who we knew by name but had not previ-

ously met, including Brother Aidan Kilty, recently at Oxford.

On Wednesday we visited Jeevan Jyothi Hospice, which is run by the Presentation Sisters, for HIV+ adults and children, and where 7 of the most poorly of the HIV+ children from Sirumalar are being looked after at the moment. The sisters' devotion and care for these most desperately ill people shines through all they do, and we were privileged to be able to visit them again.

On Friday we were guests at the Republic Day Celebration where, together with Brother Lionel and his Director, Gomathymurugan, we took the salute from the children as they marched past, and after that the children from all the RTU schools put on a scintillating display of cultural dances and exercises.

That weekend we went to the furthest Children's Village at Bodi, and then on to the Nirmala Primary School, where, after being noisily greeted by a team of drummers from Michael's Boys' Hostel we were invited to look round all the classrooms and be entertained by the children there.

The following week we were able to see the new St Peter's High School. Our visit coincided with examination time so we couldn't talk to the pupils. Some were in the classrooms, one to every other desk while others were spaced out and overseen in the corridors. This light and airy two storey building has 10 classrooms and shares a meeting hall and playground with the Middle School area. 10 paces from the school two brand new laboratories have been built and very well equipped so that the High School is recognised by the authority. The school is well staffed by professional teachers of a high standard. It was a joy to visit.

One of the highlights of our stay, was when we visited a Dalit village about 10 miles from RTU, where they are replacing village houses. We thought we were just going to see these houses but on our arrival we were greeted by all the

village people, including the children, who had been given a day off school especially for the occasion. These people are the lowest caste in Indian society and are always to be found pushed outside to the outskirts of a village or totally separate. They are the sweepers of Indian society, but in spite of their poverty they gave us a wonderful welcome and put on a cultural show of song and dance for us, which lasted all of an hour.

In conclusion, saying goodbye is always very difficult. In spite of this being our seventh visit to RTU and staying at Anbu Illam – Place of peace and love - we are always conscious of how Brother hates to say goodbye. For the last three visits we have told him we never expected to return. He now laughs at this and doesn't believe us but I had to warn him that there was every probability that we might not. Our goodbyes said, as we drove away in the jeep, I looked through the rear window knowing that I would see the departing figure of Brother who immediately turns away to renew himself in the job which lays ahead. Our

www.rtu.org.uk/