



Neesha and the Tentmakers

The inspirational true
story of a visit to rural
India to see the work of
one of our
great little charities -
Health Help International



A book by
IAN BOUGHTON
based on a trip to see
the work of
Health Help International
in India.

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It is always a great privilege to travel to the other side of the world, but I was a bit puzzled when, a few years ago, Ron Prosser, founder of Health Help International, invited me to be part of a three-man inspection trip to see the charity's work in India.

As the founder and top man, Ron was going out there to check on the work we have been funding and to plan new projects. With him, the Rev. Nigel Douglas was travelling to meet up with Tom Sutherland, a man for whom the word 'legendary' actually applies, to provide some cash and support to the Tentmakers, the group of pastors who do a vast amount of hands-on work in the area.

What on earth was I doing there? All I had done was write newsletters and books to tell people about HHI, and make a few records to sell for the cause.

I was still puzzling it when, on the first of several visits to churches there, I was sitting listening to Nigel preach, and felt Ron nudge me gently. I looked round, and saw him pointing to a Bible verse.

It was Revelation 1:19: 'Write, then, the things that you see...'

What I saw is the work of Tom Sutherland and the Tentmakers among the poor and the sick of India, and I do hope that you will be as thunderstruck with it as I was.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Ian B.', written in a cursive style.

Ian B, Norfolk, 2021

1. The inequalities of India

The height of good manners is that, however bizarre the situation you find yourself in, you act as if nothing is wrong.

Long after my visit to India with Health Help International, I was still marvelling at two distinct demonstrations of superb manners in the space of two days. It began when three of us arrived at Victor Dey's Kuppamudi estate, in the coffee-plantation country district of Calicut, about a third of the way up the west coast of India. The reason we were there was to do with my real job, the magazine we published for the coffee trade, but two notable colleagues in HHI had decided to take a day out and join me for the trip.

One was the Reverend Nigel Douglas, minister of a United Reformed church in Newport, south Wales. Nigel is a smart and generally dapper kind of chap, and so, although after five days in the Indian heat, he had long since discarded his smart blazer and tie in favour of casual sports shirt and slacks, he still looked more or less presentable.

The other was the great Tom Sutherland, the hero of most HHI supporters in England. Now, I have often told our supporters that Tom's work for the poor has involved giving away virtually everything he owns, keeping only two sets of clothes – one for today, one in the wash for tomorrow. As it turned out, I was wrong, having exaggerated Tom's wardrobe by one complete set of clothes. For the entire week I was with him, I saw him only dressed in the same beige shirt and lungi, which is the cloth skirt, knotted at the waist, favoured by most rural south Indians. That lungi has seen its better days, and there is a small hole appearing in the fabric at one point.

The third member of our party was me... and I have never been

smart. Five days in the heat of India had turned my shoulder-length hair even more unkempt than usual, an accident with insect-repellent had produced blue patches on my beige trousers, and I had drawn blood shaving.

Such was the unimpressive trio which tumbled out of Sanjay Cherian's truck, which had taken us high into the mountains to inspect his vast tea and coffee plantations. Sanjay is from the old school of Indian gentleman landowners, and he and his beautiful wife had already received us three scruffs into their home, which I promise you actually did have a real tiger skin on the floor, without turning a hair.

Now, as Sanjay deposited us at Victor's estate, an immaculate servant in crisp white suit strode in stately manner up to the car, bearing with graceful dignity a salver on which three perfect lavender towels waited to calm the brows of these three scruffs. In turn, estate-owner Victor greeted us as if we were visiting diplomats, and hosted with perfect courtesy a buffet lunch at which he, Sanjay, and various assembled family and servants, all turned perfectly blind eyes to our scruffiness and acted as if we were as spotlessly turned-out as they were. Unkempt as we were, we were guests in their world, and treated as such.



Sanjay, gentleman coffee farmer

Later, as we rode the first-class air-conditioned sleeper train south (and don't be impressed at that, because first-class in India is the equivalent of a fifty-year-old London bus) it was Nigel and I

who confessed to each other that we were the ones who had felt distinctly uncomfortable in such elegant company.

But not Tom Sutherland. Both the man with the hole in the lungi, and the landowners with their impeccable manners, turned out to have something in common which I failed to match – the good manners to bridge inequalities of class and privilege.

I didn't have to wait long to learn the lesson. The very next day Tom Sutherland led us into Ward 9 at the Trivandrum General Hospital.

That is the destitutes' ward, and it is one of the most horrifying places you will ever see. I was as uncomfortable in the presence of dirt-poverty as many of us would be, and aware in a guilty way that simply the camera hanging round my neck would have paid to keep the whole ward going for weeks.

But if Tom saw any difference between these people and his hosts of the previous day, he was far too well-mannered to show it. He treated the inmates with matchless care and courtesy.

And anyway, I suspect the subject never occurred to him. Because the great grace of Tom Sutherland is that he simply does not recognise any difference between people – so far as he is concerned, they are all humans, and equally deserving of the same respect and care.

What a man...what a lesson.



2 The Land of the Tentmakers



Tom demonstrates the Indian way of eating... HHI's top man doesn't try it!

Don't try to find your way around in India. They don't have maps – no, not at all! And just to make sure you have no chance of knowing where you are, they keep changing all the place names.

The work we pay for is centred around a group of villages just outside the southern town of Trivandrum, which has been caught up in the latest bizarre Indian bureaucratic urge to change names, and is now Thiravananapuram... not that anyone uses the new name.

Bureaucracy is an occupational hazard in India. We can't really complain – it's our own fault, the legacy of years of over-officious British rule, now taken to ludicrous lengths. At the airport, official after official waits to justify his existence and his salary with the most ridiculous of minor tasks, and each one shows his status by having his own rubber-stamp with his name on. It reminds me of

the old Russian communist system in which, just so that they could claim no unemployment, they would have a dozen people employed in sweeping and cleaning the same few feet of pavement. By the time we are allowed into India, my papers are covered with semi-official stamps, none of which mean a thing.

We are to come up with the same thing when booking rail tickets – to get a ticket, I have to declare my age on an official duplicate form. Why, for heaven's sake? And for how long, in some distant Indian filing cabinets, will local bureaucracy hang on to the valuable information that a slightly elderly British writer once took the night train from Trivandrum to Calicut?

(This does, however, give me one startling pause for thought. While collecting the age information for the tickets, I realise to my horror that my companion Tom, who has given 26 years of his life to the poor of India, is the same age as I am. I wonder just what I have done with my last 26 years, and feel suitably quietened.)

On arrival, we have beaten the airport bureaucrats at last and are allowed to walk into India, where Tom himself shepherds us out of the airport and off to a local coffee house, part of a chain run by unemployed students on a co-operative basis. He observes that Indian cafes have come a long way since a pinch of cocaine was considered a vital ingredient. But for the first time, I get to see how Indians eat, and can't take my eyes off Tom and his lunch.

There are no knives and forks. Food is eaten by the right hand (never use the left, or you will offend the locals, who reserve that hand for using loo paper... not that any of that exists). Tom, who is by now every bit as Indian as he was ever Australian by birth, casually holds his right hand over a mixture of rice and vegetables, and with a gentle caressing motion, gathers and toys with the food until he has formed a small ball of it. This he passes

to his mouth, and starts the process all over again. It really doesn't matter how liquid the food is, the procedure is exactly the same. You end up with rice all over your hand – and in my case, over the table, the floor, and everything else.

I never master this, although the Rev. Nigel is making a fair stab at it within a couple of days. Ron Prosser, the good old British explorer who never leaves the country without a stash of instant soup in his suitcase, steadfastly refuses to go native at all and will only accept anything which can be eaten with a knife and fork.

To the astonishment of the locals, Ron will sit down in any remote rural village and resolutely hope for toast and jam!



3. And then all the lights go out...



Brother Tom, Rev Nigel Douglas, and HHI founder Ron Prosser

It is around half-past seven in the evening as I push open the rough wooden door to my room. I have been in India for perhaps eight hours, and it is already probably three hours since I promised myself that I will never set foot in the place again.

Before setting out, Ron Prosser had warned both the Rev. Nigel Douglas and I that our research trip to India would involve ‘basic accommodation’, but I swear that even Ron, veteran of countless charity trips to India and Africa, turns slightly pale when he sees the place in which we are booked to spend the next nine nights.

In theory, this is a kind of community college, sited in some impossibly remote hillside about half an hour out of Trivandrum, the biggest town in south-west India.

Clearly, the place has once had some money put into it – half a dozen brick buildings have been built, all about a hundred yards' walk from each other in thick woods, with rough but clear paths between them. However, when Ron and I investigate, none of them seem to have been opened for months.

The dormitory block looks wonderful - from the outside.

Once inside, the brickwork turns out to be of a rather individual styling. The bricks are more or less straight, it's true, and in some places the mortar between them has been slapped on fairly generously... but in other places hardly at all. Where the bricks come to a corner, and a British builder would have finished them off neatly, the Indians have just left them to stick out – one move in the wrong direction, and the reward is a crack on the shins.

The toilet facilities are ingenious. A loo and a washbasin are sited in a kind of cubby-hole between each pair of rooms. This little toilet room has two doors, one leading to each bedroom. The clever idea is that whoever goes into the loo simply slips the bolt on the door leading to the neighbouring room – very clever.

It would be practical, if there was running water. Instead, both washbasin and loo are provided with a plastic bucket and a plastic jug. The idea is to slosh jugfuls of water down the loo, in the hope that it will act the same way as a flush.

When the water is on, the buckets can be refilled from a tap at the wall. When the water is off... well, that's a snag.

There are no bedclothes at all. Now, something which is common in many countries near the equator is that the days may be hot, but the nights get appallingly cold. As the human body leaks heat when asleep, a sheet or blanket is needed to equalise the body temperature. The experience of my first cold Indian night in this

hell-hole, with not a single covering to protect me, still haunts me. However, this joyful first night in India is still yet to come when the first horror strikes in the early evening.

I am already a little nervous, never having slept under a mosquito net before. The nets we have brought are designed to be hung like a bell tent from a central point above the bed – but above my bed is a fan, absolutely essential in any Indian room. So my improvised answer has been to sling the net partly from a hook in the wall, partly over my suitcase at the foot of the bed, and partly over a discarded branch which I have picked up to use as a walking-stick.

As I step apprehensively into my room, I groan to see the biggest insect I have ever seen in my life, sitting squarely on my mosquito net. I say a silent prayer of apology for what I propose to do to one of God's creatures, and say aloud: 'right, you're going'.

At this moment, all the lights go out.

Now, something the traveller in India should know is that the electricity has to be conserved so that every one of the three hundred million inhabitants can get a share of it. To try and make things fair, the government introduced a system of compulsory power cuts, and although the locals have fair idea of when they will occur, it is never completely certain. I imagine that some bored official in the electricity board looks at his watch, makes an arbitrary decision and says 'OK, time for Kerala province to go down', and flicks a switch.

It is also worth knowing that the nights in India are dark. Out in the countryside, street lights are unheard-of. And when there isn't a moon, there is absolutely no natural light at all.

So I here I am in the pitch black, quite literally unable to see my hand in front of my face, not knowing which way to turn for the door, and well aware that an evil-looking bug is sitting waiting for me on the bed.

For a moment, I panic. Complete, frantic, blind panic. I know there is a torch somewhere in my kit, but where?

After a moment or two of blind terror, a plan begins to form. In my pocket is my mobile phone, and when you touch a number on the keypad, there is a tiny dull light which illuminates the screen for just a second or two, to help you dial.

I touch a number, and the screen lights up briefly, illuminating an area perhaps two inches in front of it, for perhaps three seconds. It takes ten minutes of these dull flashes to locate my bag, and another few moments to tear it open and feel for my torch.

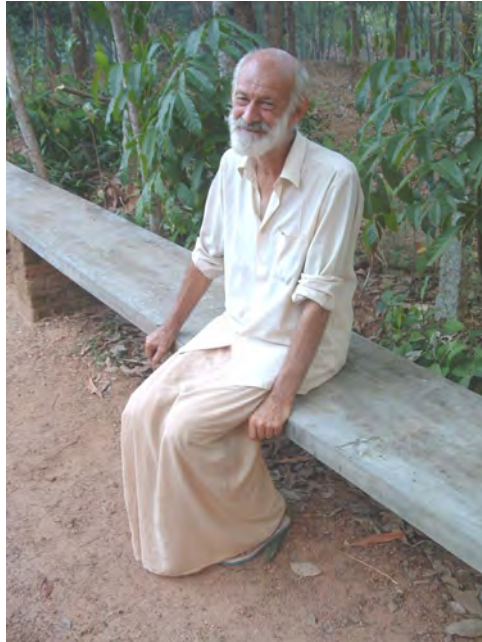
And then I make a run for it.

For the rest of my India trip, bizarre as it may seem to my companions in the daytime sun, my torch is always hanging from my belt!

And for the rest of my trip, whenever I see the way that many of these wonderful people are living, I realise that our community dormitory is, by comparison, sheer luxury.

It's true – you don't realise how people live until you've been there.

4 The lure of the lunghi



A lunghi, as modelled by Brother Tom

Squalor, filth, and some of the nicest people in the world – oh, what a mixture! India is hot, terribly and unbearably hot, and yet without the stink of sweat that marks out somewhere like Hong Kong.

I am flabbergasted at the variety of businesses which are set up in shacks at every roadside, both in town and village. I wonder why on earth someone is displaying a stack of old car tyres, and how they expect to sell them – then I happen to glance at the state of the tyres on our taxi, and it all becomes clear. When something that bald finally gives out, anything else will do to replace it. There is no concept of the western drive-in tyre-fitting business here!

And the names of these shanty-town businesses are impressive. An 'International Technology Centre' may simply be a hole in the wall which can sell you a computer disk. I am astonished one day when driving into a small town, to find an entire store filled with what we in Britain would consider plastic garden chairs – hundreds of them. I am even more staggered when we drove out of the other side of the town to see a second store selling exactly the same. Does anybody buy them?

And when there are roadworks to be done, the men can be seen sitting cross-legged by the side of the road, bending and cutting water pipes by hand, striking them with simple instruments – not even a fretsaw here!

The Indians drive on the left – but that is only when they are not driving on the right. Use of the road is purely a matter of personal preference, and if someone spots a friend over on the right-hand side of the road, he will simply steer over to say hello with absolutely no thought of what may be coming the other way. Those coming the other way will swerve to avoid him, and so it is quite common to have four lanes of traffic going in alternate directions on the same narrow street.

Why are there no collisions? Partly through sheer luck, and partly because the average driving speed is so low – we barely exceed 30mph all the time we are here, and so there is plenty of time to avoid collisions. As a safety convention, every Indian driver toots his horn whenever another car or a pedestrian comes into view. It hasn't occurred to them that if everyone sounds his horn at once, nobody has a clue who is going where.

There are very few vehicles which look younger than forty or fifty years, and the classic taxi design is the Ambassador, which is straight out of 1950s Britain, where the design was obsolete by 1965 – but they're still going in India, with their big bonnets, large

steering wheels, tiny little instrument gauges, and big mock-wood dashboards. Some really are very old, but apparently they made them to the same design up until very recently.

The most common vehicle of all is the auto-rickshaw, a brilliant invention. They swarm through the streets like flies, and are the cheapest taxis in the world.

An 'auto-rick' is essentially a motor-scooter, but with two wheels at the back, turning it into a tricycle. Across the rear wheels is a bench seat, enclosed under a metal awning, but with no side doors. The driver sits in a single seat at the front, and steers the thing with a handlebar arrangement.

The maximum load for an auto-rick is three people, but we manage five – and that is nothing compared to the achievement of various families I see even in the busy streets of Trivandrum. I become quite used to motor-scooters with young ladies in their saris sitting decorously side-saddle on the pillion seat, but at one point I see, in the middle of rush-hour traffic, a motor-bike with an entire family on it. Father is driving, mother is on the pillion, and daughter rides side-saddle behind her. To my horror, at the front, standing upright between his father's legs and holding happily on to the handlebars, is a little boy of about six.

Kerala province is apparently one of the highest-populated regions of India, but it doesn't look like it. The reason for this is that the whole region is rural, but that there is virtually no distinction between the towns and villages – there is rarely more than half a mile between communities, and so the whole region is covered with people, one way or another.

There are utilities and services, of a sort. One day, over a period of several miles, we see deep ditches being dug at the side of the road. No bulldozers or mechanical diggers here – just a

bizarre collection of hand-held tools which seem poorly suited for such a job.

And yet, vast lengths have been completed. We are curious to see men and women working side by side on this back-breaking job, and at first I have the romantic notion that the community is working on its own improvement - I later discover that they are itinerant workers brought in from Tamil Nadu, the neighbouring state. They start at 6am and finish at 7pm, and they are willing to travel and do this job for 35 rupees a metre – that's about 50p a yard.

Oxcarts are still common on the roads – and equally common, at the side of the roads, are tethered cows, which of course are a special animal in India. Dogs run free, everywhere. Women walk with goods on their heads, as they do in Africa.

The women are invariably in the sari. This is so universal that after five days in India, I am mildly shocked to see a schoolgirl in a short grey skirt – I have not seen a woman's knees for a week.

The men adopt two styles. The more 'respectable' professionals, even if they are penniless, wear western-style trousers. A pastor will invariably wear black trousers and white shirt, almost as a uniform.

However, most men will wear the lunghi, a kind of male bath-towel. This is the dress that our friend Tom Sutherland has adopted.

The lunghi is a strip of material perhaps four feet square, and it is folded once, with the fold coming at the knee, making the garment skirt-length. One end is fastened around the waist in a kind of loose knot, and the other end is also drawn up to the waist and simply tucked into that first knot. Good manners say

that when entering someone's house, the second fastening is undone, thus letting the outer material fall to the floor and turning the whole thing into an ankle-length dress.

Practicality says that when nature calls, a quick unfastening of the knot allows for ready relief by the roadside.

This loose knot seems very insecure, and men will be seen constantly tying and re-tying the waistband, almost as a habit. The lunghi is apparently very cool, and although I am tempted to try it every time the Indian sun gets hotter, I never quite summon up the nerve!



5 The best tea in the world



An Indian tea shack - the art is in the pouring

Tea is grown in India. It is one of the best tea-growing countries in the world, and the tea you can drink in India is nothing like the tea you drink in Britain.

Part of the reason for that is the tea itself – without getting too technical about it, the tea leaves which arrive in Britain are neither the best nor the freshest. A lady in the tea trade recently told me that because of the number of middle-men involved between a tea plantation and a supermarket, the tea on the shelves in our high street can be a year old!

There is also a difference in the leaf. Because of the British

insistence on instant tea, we invented the tea-bag. The tea in the tea-bag has gone through a process which tea experts consider sacrilege – it's called CTC, or 'cut, twist, curl', and it means that the tea-leaf has been chopped around so much to get it in the tea-bag, that most of the goodness has gone. (If you're that interested in the scientific details, it's all to do with the size of the leaf and the amount of surface area which comes into contact with the water.)

In India, none of this applies – the tea is real, and fresh, because it is grown here.

We have been in India barely a couple of hours when Ron Prosser and I, having taken our first horrified look at the shambles in which we have been booked to spend the next ten days, escape down a country track in search of... well, in search of anything else. What we find is one of the typical roadside tea-shacks which are to be found throughout rural south-east India. For no reason I could think of, they all look absolutely identical, and for the rest of our trip, we take every excuse to stop at one.

At this one, an elderly lady and man and man sit inside a shack about the size of a garden shed. Beside the shack, a scrawny goat and kid, together with one unhealthy-looking chicken, nose around beneath a dirty washing line. (As I notice this, I reflect with an inner smile that just a few hours in the Indian heat have left me in an equally dirty state!)

These people are char-wallahs, and there are thousands of them running roadside tea stalls across India.

In front of this shack stands what might serve as a kind of counter, with a number of drinking glasses on it – about a third of a pint, I suppose. Behind the counter are two cauldrons, perpetually heating over log fires. One heats water, another

heats milk, and it is the combination of these which is the secret of the amazing drink that these people make.

I spend ages watching these women without ever finding out how exactly they do it, but the key appears to be the mixing of the hot water and hot milk, which are then passed together through a kind of muslin strainer, shaped rather like a sock. Having mixed all three ingredients, the ladies pour the rich, caramel-coloured result into one of the drinking glasses – and then comes the theatrical part.

Holding the full glass as high as her head, the lady will pour it into another glass at waist-height. That is then raised to head-height, and the tea decanted again to the other glass – this will be repeated three or four times, and although the tea travels three or four feet with each decanting, they never spill a drop!

The result is hot, rich, sweet, and immensely refreshing. Such a glass of tea at a roadside shack will cost two rupees – that's perhaps three pence for the best cuppa you could ever hope for!



6 Rare characters and flush toilets



Father Gabriel, who outbid competitors for his hospice by about seven pence!

A great part of our visit to India is taken up in visiting local church fellowships – they want to see us there, they're very proud and happy that we come to see them, and Ron and Nigel both deliver sermon after sermon... and on one occasion, due to a slight misunderstanding, I am introduced as 'Pastor Ian' and end up addressing a congregation (rather well, I thought... or perhaps they were just being polite in their reaction).

One afternoon, we are taken into yet another rural community for yet a church meeting, and the locals generously offer to take us to see a local beauty spot, where a river burbles peacefully down through beautiful woodland. For a few rare moments, I find myself perched alone on a rock with Tom Sutherland as the

others disappear to explore the woods... and in those few precious moments, I get to learn something about the great man himself.

Tom Sutherland is the quietest-spoken man I have ever met. In one-to-one conversation in quiet surroundings, it is just possible to make out what he says – in the company of several people, it is almost impossible. It is probably because of his quiet but commanding and sincere personality that people stop and concentrate on what he says.

Tom has one curious conversational trait which I find charming. He will never answer a question immediately, but will give it the courtesy of thinking about his reply – if I greet him with a cheerful ‘hi, Tom, how are you today?’, he will reflect for a few moments before answering.

He had been training to be a teacher back home in Australia, he told me, when he felt a drive to do something for people in poorer countries, and decided to write a book drawing attention to the world’s poor.

“Some time later, having wasted fourteen years of my life on it, I heard a preacher say that sometimes we have to give things up for God, and that clinched it – I threw it on the fire!”

However, he ran into a pastor from Calcutta, who invited him to take a trip to India and see the work being done by Mother Teresa’s order of sisters. Tom reckoned he could travel over for a few weeks and then return home, but once he arrived, he discovered that so many men had travelled to Calcutta on the same mission, they had decided to start a new order of brothers. Tom just seemed to stay there.

After some years working for Mother Teresa in Calcutta, which is

distinguished by having the biggest recognised slum in the world, he was despatched right across the country to assist in starting the Trppaadam hospice – and he has been in Kerala province ever since. Along the way he has had malaria, hepatitis, and various kinds of unwelcome fever.

And he just keeps going. I believe he is embarrassed by this, but 26 years in Trivandrum has created a certain fame – people in need have heard about this ‘Brother Tom’, and are told that if they look around the hospital, they will find a tall, slightly stooping, white man with a beard... and that he will help them.

*

You do not run a Christian establishment in south India without being a person of very strong character, and just outside the small town of Nedumangad are two more of the great characters of ministry, both of whom have worked alongside Tom over the years.

At Trppaadam hospice, Father Gabriel already has 60 patients in care, and will be doubling that with the building of a new ward.

Gabriel is a wily old bird. With floor-length saffron robes, long white hair and white beard, he looks straight out of the hippie era. His English is extremely good, he laughs a lot, and he mixes genuine care with a healthy cynicism.

The name Trppaadam, he told us, means ‘holy feet’, and refers to his dream thirty years of starting a care home ‘and laying it at the holy feet of the Lord’.

“We need this place because the old tradition of big families living together has broken down. The average family now is one man, one woman and one child, and the care of the older ones has been neglected.”

In 1969, Father Gabriel was searching for likely premises when someone told him of a derelict soap factory which was being put up for auction. Gabriel went and met the auctioneer, who was a Muslim gentleman, and as a result of their meeting waited quietly in the auction until all the bidding seemed to have stopped.

At that point he bid 10 rupees, about 7p, above the last bid, and instantly the auctioneer banged his gavel and declared the sale.

“I think,” Gabriel tells us in the most innocent of tones, “he just didn’t want the Hindus to buy it...!”

He now accepts all castes, and never asks which faith a new patient follows – the main thing, says Gabriel, is that a newcomer needs help, and the carers only ‘impart’ the Christian virtue of compassion. Similarly, the clinic works on a combination of homeopathic, ayurvedic, and herbo-mineral medicines.

His dormitories are dark, and many of the elderly patients are asthmatic, many epileptic, many disturbed, and many have combinations of various complaints. Their days are now fixed in this place, and some of them rarely leave their beds, as they can do nothing else. One man, lying for no apparent reason in the hallway floor, turns out to have arrived there from family in England. I attempt conversation, but the guy is just completely out of it.

How does Gabriel keep the place going?

“I never wanted to just ask for money to run this place,” he tells me. “I wanted to make something and sell it.”

So he mixes the care of the elderly with some interesting commercial self-help work. The philosophy is shown by a sign painted on the workshop wall – ‘every home a temple, every home a workshop’.



The sign in Trppadam hospice/workshop

There is a small but active programme of craftwork, and Nigel and I are fascinated to be given a demonstration of how incense sticks are made. This is a terribly dirty job, and many abandoned old people spend their days making them.

The sticks are coated with incense, and the messiest part of the process is the adding of the perfume. Each scent comes as a kind of watery syrup, which is poured on to a glass-topped work-table. Perhaps two dozen sticks are then rolled back and forth across this syrupy mess for a few minutes, then held out to dry.

Across the other side of the workshop, ladies are tearing pages out of old magazines and using them to construct tubes, which will end up holding a hundred sticks.

There is also supposed to be a business in handmade greetings cards, but Gabriel shrugs and says that when there is no demand for either, his hospice is in serious trouble. Ron instantly places an order for several hundred greetings cards, which can come back to Britain to be sold at perhaps £2 each, thus providing two sources of support – the money for his original order will go to Trppadam, and the profit from sales will support causes as well.

Nigel and I decide to support the incense business, and after a

few minutes' choosing, we find we have picked a vast amount of incense sticks, at a total cost of 160 rupees, which we round up to two hundred, and which is still only about two pounds in English money. I do a little mental arithmetic and am astonished to find that if we were to sell them back at home for a fair price, we would make a profit of around £120.



Father Bernard sets out on his rounds

Another great character is in charge of the Santigeeri Catholic Mission. The name means 'sacred place', and it is run by Father Bernard, a large, bearded, jolly character whose ready and booming laugh conceals what is clearly a steely and determined personality.

Father Bernard controls ten priests spread around the nearby countryside, and has discovered a fine way of getting around his rural flock – in full flowing robes, this priest whizzes round the rural lanes of south India on a motor scooter. He tells me that although Kerala is a Hindu area, there really are families which have Hindus, Catholics, Muslims and Protestants all related to each other and living under the same roof.

I think it was only a courtesy visit that first brought us to Santigeeri, three days into our trip.

We have come from the hell-hole of the dormitory where we are staying, and are now sitting in the cool of the sanctuary, where the central rooms surround a delightful internal pool, with greenery and fountain, as Bernard tells us that the following weekend, a thousand people and the local bishop will arrive for the opening of his new guest block, which has just been built.

However, he remarks, "it has yet to be blessed with the arrival of any guests."

Ron looks at Nigel, and Nigel looks at me, and we all look at Father Bernard.

Thirty seconds later we have arranged to move in, and the next day we settle our bill at the appalling dormitory elsewhere and carry our luggage into the Mission, where Bernard and his team cheerfully connect a series of extension cables over six or seven hundred yards, to bring the first electricity to the guest block.

As Nigel and I settle into adjoining rooms, I hear a whoop of exultation from the reverend.

"What is it?" I yell through the wall.

Back comes a delighted call from Nigel.

"We've got flush toilets!"

7 The bystanders



*The tentmakers' HQ -
'a slum inside a tip'.
But with a telephone!*

In his messages from India to Britain, Tom Sutherland has told me so many tales of the people he works with in India, that I wonder if I will get to meet any of them – and on our first day there, we do.

One occurs in a story written by Tom, which we told on our CD of stories, 'Heroes'. In this true story, a girl who was thought to have an incurable illness was saved through the unhesitating generosity of a shopkeeper – this was Thampy the pharmacist, who put his reputation and his bank balance on the line to obtain medicines which cost more than the girl's family could expect to earn in a lifetime, without any expectation of getting repaid. (His trust served him well – Ron Prosser heard the story and made sure that we sent the money from Britain.)

When I ask Tom to introduce us to this hero, I don't understand the mechanics of the Indian medical system – and to a British

eye, it isn't a 'system' at all. Certainly not in the way that we lucky Brits know it.

Outside the massive teaching hospital in Trivandrum, there is a collection of shops. These are more kiosks than shops, because the counter is always at the front, and so the customer stands outside and asks for what they want, instead of going in and browsing.

Most of the kiosks near a hospital are medical-supplies businesses. At first, I think this a little commercially-heartless and bloodthirsty, before I realise that it fits the local system. The Indian health service does not allow for patients being given their medicines free, which is why relatives of patients have to go to the nearest pharmacists to buy not just the medicines, but any equipment as well. It follows that outside a hospital is a great place to start a chemist's business.

And in the middle of all this, my heart leaps to see the sign 'Thampy Medicals', and I smile to see the typical stock in the glass cases – packs of dried baby milk, fading in the sun, looking as if they have been there for years. To then shake hands with the grinning, bearded man behind the counter is first-hand proof that everyday people can be heroes.

And barely a hundred yards down the dirt road from Thampy, we discover another enterprising and charitable pharmacist.

We turn to George Matthew, the dapper proprietor of Grace Medicals. Conversationally, he happens to mention over lunch in a nearby café that he would like to give up the pharmacy business and go into the kind of direct work that Tom does. What he doesn't mention, and we only learn later from Tom himself, is that we already owe George tens of thousands of rupees. It turns out that Grace Medicals has happily been supplying vast amounts of

medicines on credit, with the security only of Tom's reputation. When George is questioned about this, he calmly replies that he knows that whenever Tom gets money from HHI in Britain, he will come and pay his bill.

George and Thampy are direct competitors, but in their attitude to helping the poorest of the sick, they are honourable partners.

Meanwhile, across the road from the Grace Medicals store, a typical Indian scene is played out. A woman lies collapsed on the pavement. She is in front of both a bank, an auto-rickshaw stand, and a police depot – and not a single one of them takes any notice of her.

Tom, who will never walk past, goes over to speak to her. He reports that she has a drip in her wrist, which suggests she may have walked out of a hospital, and says he will take her back there in a taxi. She refuses, which means there is nothing he can do. He walks back over to me and shrugs: "it sometimes happens."

*

Their base in the town of Trivandrum, the biggest town in south-west Kerala, is a tip. It is, by any standards, a hole. I don't say that to be critical, but in admiration of the conditions in which our friends out there are working.

Rather as in some parts of America, the big shock is the absence of the soft greenery which we are used to in Britain. Part of the reason we can stand busy cities in Britain is that the busy streets occasionally give way to the relief of a green space, or trees, or a park – in Trivandrum there is no relief from the dry, dusty, dirt, the crowds, and the people. In India there just isn't any grass – the dried reddish mud serves as road, pavement, and garden.

There are some very nice houses, it's true – but none of the trim front gardens we are used to at home. The occasional smart house may simply have a brick wall to separate it from the dirt road outside.

In one corner of this hell-hole, the taxi turns off the main street, scales a short and impossibly-steep hill, rough, pitted, pot-holed, and almost too steep to walk. It stops at the head of a lane which, I realise, is actually dirtier than the rest... it's a slum inside a tip.

Down a side lane is a collection of shanties which are either half-built or half-derelict, I can't decide which. This turns out to be Harveypuram, a community founded by Harvey the philanthropist a hundred years ago.

We walk ten yards down the lane, and turn into a rough dirt-floor building with three brick walls and one of concrete block. "That's an improvement since the last time I was here," remarks Ron. "That wall used to be cardboard..."

In the wall is a little booth window, and inside, on a table – a telephone!

This is one of HHI's great contributions to the community. Pastor Sam, who runs the place, explains to me that 360 families live around this building, or perhaps two thousand people. With a stab of conscience and some mental arithmetic, I am embarrassed to realise that with the cash in my pocket, I could feed them all for a day... and that with the amount I owe on my credit cards, I could feed the entire community for a year.

So what is that telephone doing there? It's all about the Indian concept of 'bystanders'. This telephone tells Pastor Sam when one is needed.

Remember that line of pharmacy shops near the hospital? Well, if there are no facilities in a hospital, and if the patient's family has to go and buy whatever medicines are needed... what happens when there is no family?

In an Indian hospital, it is necessary for each patient to have a 'bystander'. The job of this bystander is to watch out for the patient's needs – to buy food and prepare it, or to go out and fetch whatever medicines and equipment the doctors might demand. And in a hospital where the doctors are far too hard-pressed and overworked to keep an eye on every single patient, a bystander goes to chase up medical staff if the patient suffers any kind of relapse.

The problem had been highlighted some weeks previously when a man lay unconscious in the hospital for five days without anyone taking any notice of him. Admirably, a doctor called the newspapers, and there was a scandal. It's not the doctors' fault – they are just too overworked.

So now, if the hospital has a patient who needs a bystander, they ring the pastor.

We are to experience two different 'bystander' situations. On our first visit to the teaching hospital, Tom turns towards a man sitting on the steps. The first thing I notice is that this man has no left foot – the leg just ends in a kind of stump below the ankle. The second thing I notice is the look of blank acceptance in the man's eyes – he is in no position to do anything for himself, and he knows it. Live or die, he has no option but to accept it.

Tom moves rather more quickly than I realised. Almost at once, a young man materialises – this is Dilip, who has been recruited as the 'bystander', and for as long as is necessary, he will sleep near the man in the hospital, prepare the man's food, and look

out for his interests. For this, we will pay him 50 rupees a day, not quite a pound, and his food.

I admire this young man.

The second bystander experience comes from Ron Prosser himself. One day, he is telling us how, on his first visit to India, he had fallen ill and been taken into hospital. As a relatively well-off westerner with ready cash and insurance on his side, he was privileged to have a comfortable room to himself, and was allocated a young chap who kept him company and from whom Ron learned much of the information about the needs of everyday people in India... a first-hand lesson which would eventually lead to the forming of Health Help International.

As he tells the story, Ron stops short. "I've just realised it," he said, with the air of someone who has just discovered a great truth. "That young chap had been put in as my 'bystander' – I never understood that before!"



8 Tentmakers and Untouchables



There is still a ‘caste’ system in India – it’s not supposed to exist, but it does. I am surprised to see, when we pay another visit to the Tentmakers’ shanty in Harveypuram, several very political posters on the walls complaining about the way that the top-caste people have all the best jobs and all the privileges. “Is this the equality we sought for?” asks the poster.

The traditional castes are the priests, the warriors, the merchants, and the workers. Below them come the ‘outcasts’, the Dalits. These are the ones who used to be known as the Untouchables, and the traditional partition still exists – to this day, a Dalit should not let their shadow fall on one of the primary castes.

As we sit down for a typical snack of rice-and-something, I pluck up the courage to ask our interpreter about it. I’m embarrassed,

but he isn't. How come, I wonder, that Dalits could be discriminated against – can he simply not just claim to be a member of one of the acceptable castes?

Not that easy, he answers. There are physical characteristics that Europeans miss – and to a fellow Indian, a Dalit may be recognisable by subtleties of skin colour, physical size, and even curliness of hair.

Here's an interesting thing – Dalits make up a large proportion of the Indian population, and most Indian Christians are from the outcaste sector.

Christians in India are a vast minority. Kerala province itself is 70 per cent Hindu, 20 per cent Muslim, and the rest are Christian. It is said that the other two religions co-exist reasonably, but nobody gets on with the Christians – and someone who converts to Christianity could well lose his job, and almost certainly will have no chance of reaching any public position.

Several of the pastors we meet tell us of a recent story in the news, of an American evangelist who, with the quite remarkable insensitivity of some Christians, travelled to India and started evangelising in public without researching local attitudes. He was beaten up by twenty locals.

Mixed with the anger is a reasonable acceptance of the fact that he should have acted more wisely. I do often despair of some 'evangelists'...

*

Why are these people the Tentmakers? It's a reference from St Paul – in all his travels, he earned no wage as such, and when necessary fell back on his trade to earn a living. He happened to

be skilled in making tents.

Nobody supports the Tentmakers, and they have no wages. So they have to keep themselves going somehow, which is why they rely so much on us in Britain.

Nigel reckons that there must be thousands of tiny churches throughout India, run by people like this – men who travelled to villages where there was no Christian representation, and started trying to help people. They live on what their congregations can give them, which is virtually nothing.

Back at Harveypuram, we listen to the testimonies of twenty-six quite amazing workers. They all speak in their own tongue, but we have a translator.

Several of the pastors did indeed start out on their own, a dangerous move. Typically, Samuel Keraralama tells of belonging to a Hindu family, and turning to become a Christian in 1979, on which a group of Hindus attacked him so badly that the doctors pronounced him dead, and sent him to the mortuary. He was there for three days before he had a vision of a heavenly door opening – he made a sound, and it was realised that he was still alive.

Another, Joss Abraham, reports that becoming a pastor had led to acute financial difficulties, not least in paying for his children's education. So many government schools are closing down due to lack of teachers, the only way to get his kids a decent education is to pay for it. But he has so little that he even sleeps in his own small church hall.

To my surprise, two of the speakers are women – I had thought all the Tentmakers were men. The first is Sandamar, who was the wife of a Tentmaker who died following a snakebite. She cries as

she reports having to care for two children, and having still to find 50,000 rupees (about £650) to pay for her dead husband's treatment. That is, of course, impossible for her.

(It's typical of the Tentmakers that, when her husband was alive and a strong wind blew the roof off their shack, several of their fellow-pastors turned up to repair and replace it.)

Lilistella is another widow of a Tentmaker, pastor Cletus. She has three children, no house, and no income, and now has to live with her late husband's family. The problem here is that poor widows are not welcome additions to an Indian family... just more mouths to feed.

There is some light relief from pastor Radyan, who confesses to being 'a lover of the world', with fourteen children, and a famous criminal. He was convicted of 26 cases of picking pockets, stole wood and made illicit liquor. He worshipped evil spirits, and plotted to kill both his wife and himself, until in prayer he heard the evil spirits saying 'God is coming, so we are leaving'. He believes that God has given him the chance to escape from his old self, and now he takes care of thirty families in his own church – even though it has no roof.

Just think of that for a moment – thirty families! Think of that in your own church hall!

Time and again we hear that the itinerant pastors had nowhere to turn until they came across Pastor Sam, who urged them to join together in the Tentmakers. Pastor Philip reports that the other Tentmakers all came to help him repair his house; when Pastor John says that his house is still uninhabitable, I'm now wondering just how bad it has to be for an Indian to say that.

Pastor Sam himself is a character, with a greater criminal record

event than Radyan. Although his family was religious, Sam was always a rebel – at school, the teacher was angry with him and tore up his homework book, but picked the wrong child’s book. Sam said: “buy a new book for that child tomorrow, or I will beat you” – he was sent to the headmaster, but when he was caned, Sam punched the headmaster in return and walked out of school for good.

By the time he became a Christian, he had 158 criminal cases against him, a spell in prison behind him, and had eloped with his wife by using his housebreaking skills to enter her house and whisk her away.

“I had been thrown out of my family for being a Leftist, and I became so anti-social that even the Leftists kicked me out,” reports Sam dryly. “I was such a good man that eventually my wife left me too!”

One night he couldn’t sleep for wondering what to do. He decided to work for Christ and the poor, threw away all the drugs in his pockets, and when he went out looking to help poor hospital patients, walked straight into Tom Sutherland, and the Tentmakers were born.

Although the Tentmakers now have some security from being together, and this strength of togetherness has led to fifteen other independent pastors asking to join them recently, they are still in a terrible way. Their low-caste backgrounds continually bring them into conflict with authority, and although Sam recalls his own father being asked for his caste and having the nerve to respond: ‘I am of the Kingdom of God!’, the practical realities are difficult.

“All the Tentmakers are poor, and although the Bible tells us that God loves to work with people like us, the inequalities in our

country are clear,” Sam tells me. “A lot of our members are in less than proper housing, and suffer from all kinds of medical conditions. A lot of them have to pay 13 or 22 rupees on the bus just to get to our weekly meetings, and they don’t have this money.

“Although each of us runs a church, our congregations cannot afford to give us anything. And the pastors are so busy working for their members that they have no time to take other jobs.

“In all other denominations, the priests get paid. We have to look to HHI for support.”

We had always thought that their craftwork was bringing them in some money, but they make it quite clear that this is far from enough.

At this point, there is a meaningful pause. The pastors look hopefully at Ron Prosser – Ron Prosser looks thoughtfully back at the pastors. I realise that he has had an idea, and when it comes out, it has a Biblical precedent.

“I’m going to give you a very small mustard seed,” he says. “I’m going to give you each a hundred rupees (just over a pound) and your job is to make it grow.

“You are not to spend it, and you are not to use it for bus fares. You have to come back to Pastor Sam in four weeks and show how you have turned it into 150, or 200 rupees.

“This is not a test, it is an experiment. All the money you make will go to the Tentmakers, but what you will also learn is ideas and knowledge to help you decide what to do next to raise money.”

In all, 22 Tentmakers accept the challenge and the hundred rupees, and they launch into an enthusiastic celebration which involves the frantically-fast rhythmic handclapping which is such a feature of Indian church services.

As I watch them, I realise that what impresses me about the Tentmakers is that they put their good works first, and have faith that through the work they do, their Christian message will come across. What a contrast – here in Britain we have too many people who concentrate too much on flaunting their Christian identity, and never get around to doing the good works.

There is a little more money to be given to the Tentmakers – the Rev. Nigel had undergone a sponsored beard-shave back in Wales, and has promised that some of these funds will be shared among the Tentmakers to help with their day-to-day food and living costs.

As every Tentmaker walks past the British visitors, Nigel slips an envelope across – and I am absolutely sure that when there is a query over whether there are enough envelopes, Pastor Sam quietly passes his back to Nigel.



9. The Persecution of Ashan



To reach our first Indian church service, we climb by a steep path of red mud, between shacks that have no discernible path between them, followed by the curious but friendly gaze of the people who live there.

The single-room building is of corrugated iron, and we follow local custom by taking our shoes off before entering either a church or somebody's home. This is pretty easy for Nigel, who has chosen sandals, but I am wearing heavy walking shoes which take a lot of unlacing, and I am touched by many polite people who tell me not to bother taking them off – it turns out that simply being willing to take them off is enough of a courtesy. I am also intrigued that so many people carry umbrellas – then I realise it's not because of rain, it's to keep the sun off!

At the Assemblies of God church, I see that the girls and women

take one side of the dirt floor, and the men and boys take the other. At the front are all the kids, sitting cross-legged. All the women and girls cover their heads during a service.

There's not a lot of difference between a rural Indian church and one of the British or American Pentecostal churches – there are no musical instruments as such, but maybe one pounding drum to keep a rhythm, and it's amazing what a noise a small Christian congregation can make, just with clapping and singing. There is much shouting of both 'amen!', 'hallelujah!', and the typically-Indian 'stortrum', which roughly translates as 'Praise the Lord'. The very odd thing is that the Indian pastors sound exactly the same as British ones – same tone of voice, same mannerisms and inflections, but in a completely different language.

The delivery of his sermon is very similar to a British Pentecostal church, in that the pastor is not exactly shouting, but certainly telling them what's what.

One lady gets up and speaks, and the pastor quietly translates an amazing story for us. This woman, Ashan, is from the north of Kerala and tells of her experiences as a Christian in a Hindu country. Although I myself am nominally a Christian, I don't like to believe that any religion is 'right' or 'wrong', but I do thoroughly dislike religious discrimination, and Ashan's story is quite horrifying.

These are her very words, as we had them translated for us:

"I was brought up in a Hindu temple, and studied classical music. I used to listen to the radio, and in 1991 I heard the message of God.

"The word of God revealed that I was a sinner, and that I needed

to accept Jesus as my personal saviour. I prayed diligently, and God told me I should go into the world and testify.

“After some days, persons from a hospital ministry came to me and led me to my calling, and I dedicated myself to full-time ministry. This came to the notice of my family, who put me in house jail for seven years. I was offered to a man from the Gulf countries, but when he came I revealed my religion, was rejected, and my brothers put me into hospital for fourteen days.

“They put nails into me, saying ‘this is for Jesus’, and that is why my body is now full of scars.

“My father got epilepsy, and to pay for his treatment, we had to sell our land. After I left hospital, my brother tried to shoot me, and my mother said I should go from there, so although I was just 19 years old, I left home with one dress and a Bible. My family abandoned me.

“I slept many times in bus stations, and for two weeks I slept in the ladies’ waiting room at Madras station. I found work with an orphanage, and a refuge with some women evangelists – God has enabled us, and we have a love for God which sees us through much persecution. We have submitted ourselves to God, and things are going well for us - now we have taken an old home in a dilapidated condition, and we have nine children staying with us.”

Back in England, we hear a lot about religious persecution, but it isn’t real to us – it’s just second-hand, through the papers. I realise that I am in the company of someone who has actually experienced it, to an almost-unbelievable degree.

*

We travel to the house of Pastor Bovas Das by boat. This is

supposed to be a simple ferry journey across a pretty big river, perhaps fifty yards wide, but because we are foreigners in a place where white faces are rarely seen, it is arranged that we should be given a trip half a mile down the river and back again.

The boat is a canoe-like structure, built of planks which do not seem to fit as closely I would have liked. The boatman uses a long pole and a punting action, and we are fascinated to see that on the river bank, women are washing their laundry in the river and beating it against stones.

Is it good manners to take pictures of them? I don't know – but Ron points his video camera at them, and they wave delightedly.

The village in which Bovas lives is of one street, with shacks lining the sides. The pastor's own house is sited behind the first row of shacks, which means he is perhaps fifty yards away from the road. This means nothing to me until, at the end of our visit, I realise that it is black night and I simply cannot see the way up to the road – although I know where the road is, because there are some electric lights there.

Bovas explains calmly that he simply cannot afford to have the electricity laid on, and he accepts good-naturedly that the fifty-yard installation would cost too much for his family to bear.

With some foreboding, I ask him what the cost would be, and he replies 'four thousand rupees'.

That's something under fifty pounds. I actually have it in my pocket.

Back in Britain, I am still wondering to this day if I should simply have handed it over.



Nigel Douglas brings the Welsh flag to rural India

A visiting pastor is a great event for these churches. Nigel Douglas is our travelling reverend, and so is a celebrity called on to address every meeting.

Nigel has been careful to take with him some props for the trip, and uses the same sermon two or three times to great effect. He has brought with him a Welsh flag, and the red dragon fascinates many of the Indians. He has also brought with him a rugby ball, and demonstrates catching the ball – and then tells his listeners about God's 'safe pair of hands'.

Fascinatingly, every time Nigel gives a Bible reference, some member of the congregation will be there in the book almost instantly, reading it out... and more often than not, it is the kids in the front row who beat everyone to it.

For most of our trip, there are Hindu festivals going on. Now, Hindu festivals are loud. Anyone who has ever put up with

neighbours having a loud party will have experienced something similar to a Hindu festival – even in the deserted depths of the most rural countryside, they will have borrowed a loud amplification system from somewhere, and will play incomprehensible music right through the night.

I don't dislike Indian music, and become quite fond of it at three or four in the morning. I also develop a certain respect for those who stay up all night in prayer... until it occurs to me that they have probably gone to bed and left the music playing.

For Christians, however, it is thought tactful to simply stay out of the way, just to avoid trouble. It isn't always possible, and a couple of times our taxis make slow and uncomfortable progress through crowds of celebrating Hindus in obscure little villages, and on one occasion Ron Prosser himself finds himself almost alone in the middle of one celebration.

Unlikely as it sounds, Ron has accepted a trip to a church service on the back seat of a host pastor's motorbike. Our director is a retired gentleman, and motorbikes aren't really his style, but he's game enough to take up the offer. Sure enough, their route leads them straight into the middle of a town square crammed with celebrating Hindus, where it is obvious that an elderly white-haired British gentleman might be seen as something out of place.

Helpfully, his driver turns round with a word of advice.

"If anyone asks you if you're a Christian," he counsels, "say 'no – I'm a tourist!'"

Later, Ron explains that it was not just the invitation to deny his faith which seems odd to him. It is that the driver's motorbike rather gives the game away – emblazoned across the wind-screen is a sign saying 'Jesus saves!'

10 Deep-country fellowships



We are visiting a children's home.

Pastor Sam lines seventeen boys up. It's quickly done, because as always in these places, the children are superbly behaved. Here, there are 42 boys and girls, between about six and eleven years old. All around them are lines hung with washing, and under the washing chatter a collection of geese.

Ron Prosser is ready for situations like this. With the air of a conjuror pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he produces a bag of the kind of boiled-sweet lollipops that are common in British shops. Two of us are deputed to hand them out, which we do with a smile and a handshake for each little child – they shake hands solemnly, but smile readily when we do.

The irrepressible Tom has a plan, too. He separates the girls and the boys, and puts Pastor Tom in charge of one team, and Asha in charge of the other. Tom leads a song based on the alphabet, and in turn, each team leader has to think instantly of a song for

their team to sing. How long can they keep thinking of new songs? Constantly, for at least a half-hour!

Ron has a song, too. It is a remarkable song in sign language, devised as a song for deaf children, and they love it. The geese do not, and kick up a fuss.

Pastor Sam started this place – he was an assistant at another school, and left to begin this new one. Some children are brought to him, some are simply found on the streets. But you would not think them any different from any primary-school class in Britain, lively, chattering away, and very well behaved.

There are ambitious plans – but another building block is already halfway up, and great things are in progress.

*

At Pastor Christopher's place up in the hills, it is incredibly hot, as the seventeen ladies of the embroidery circle show off their superbly-detailed work.

By western standards, this is ridiculously uneconomic – we would assume that, to make any kind of living, it would be necessary for each of them to turn out seven or eight complete jobs a day. But things are different here, and if each piece of work sells for 70 rupees, rather less than a pound, that will be good.

The ladies accept compliments with a gesture which is almost Japanese – they cover their mouths with their hands when they giggle. I realise that some of them have never seen white men before.

In all the places we visit, we are offered refreshment – they

would think it unforgivable not to do so. Usually it is a cold drink, and we are often offered mineral water or Pepsi from what is clearly a bottle bought specially for the occasion. Sometimes it will be glorious big hunks of freshly-cut pineapple, or massive coconuts with straws in them so we can drink the warm and sweet milk (which I acknowledge with a big show of enjoyment – I do hope they never realise that I hate it!) and in some houses we are unexpectedly given what appear to be British biscuits.

Nigel and I wonder what the correct response is. We can't decline, because that would be bad manners; we aren't happy to eat all the food and drink offered to us, because we suspect it has been bought at a price which is difficult for them to afford. We agree that the best thing is to take a few pieces of fruit and a small glass of something, leaving as much as we can in the hope that the family will enjoy it later.

Another puzzle is the constant habit of being asked for our names and addresses. It seems harmless until we realise that there is more to it – it turns out that, having met us, they will think it worth their while writing to us asking for money. And the cost of a letter to England is something they cannot really afford, so we can't be responsible for them spending that. It seems that our best course is to try and avoid actually writing down any addresses.

I realise this too late, of course. Back home, one pastor sends me two begging letters and three e-mails within a fortnight.

*

It is one thing to support appalling hardship from the comfort of Britain, and quite another to come face-to-face with it.

We have been brought by a Tentmaker to see Pravin, a teenage

boy who suffers not only from epilepsy but from the most disfiguring facial problem you could imagine. While very young, a growth appeared on the top of his head, and without treatment the growth expanded, downwards.

The only way I can begin to describe it, in the knowledge that Pravin himself will probably never be able to read this slightly cruel description, is to say it reminds me of lava flowing from a volcano. Think of dropping something soft while cooking, and what happens when it drips and congeals. The growth has developed downwards to cover his forehead, his entire left eye, and now reaches an inch below his nose on one side of his face.

From a distance, it appears that he is wearing an eye-patch, but in fact it is skin tissue, perhaps half an inch deep.

After the Tentmakers got involved, Pravin spent 34 days in hospital for the first part of intensive plastic surgery. They started on the top of his head, where he now has no hair left on one side at all, and the second stage will be even trickier, when they try to remove the growth from over the eye and see whether his sight can be saved.

We are astonished to learn that Pravin started having fits when only a few months old, and his family say the skin condition began to develop very shortly afterwards. That's nearly seventeen years!

I confess that I found it very difficult to look directly at Pravin, and marvelled all the more at the diligence and care of his family, his pastor, and Tom. I didn't even consider taking a picture of him – Ron knows him well, and does so. The Tentmakers, of course, treat Pravin as if he is perfectly normal, and I am humbled by their attitude.

We discover, quite by accident, that although Pravin's family serve us with food and drinks (which we are quietly warned not to touch, because the water is from an untreated source) they themselves have gone without because there is no money.

There is no money because the family's grandmother has died, and custom demands that they will not do any work, which for them is selling tapioca at the roadside, for fourteen days.

As we depart, Ron arranges that several hundred rupees quietly change hands to keep them going.

*



11. Help in the jungle.



Tom and the jungle children

There are main roads in Kerala province, and there are side roads, and it is often hard to tell the difference between them. It is also hard to understand the blind faith by which Indian drivers take their cars into places we Brits would never even attempt.

We have been promised a trip into the jungle at the village of Cherumanchil. Now, this is a real privilege – to be allowed into the jungle needs permission, and somebody has clearly spoken for us.

And so we bounce off in an auto-rickshaw towards some distant point not to be found on any map. The road gives way to a farm track, and the farm track gives way to a lane, and the lane in turn gives way to a kind of rutted path that was barely fit for walking boots. And still our driver carries on.

This path is by no means flat, nor straight. Of the three of us sitting in the back, I am by the left-hand side, and a rickshaw has no doors – so you can imagine the unease with which I look out of the side, on one of the occasions when I dare look at all, to find myself peering down at the ground as the rickshaw takes a corner at around 60 degrees off the vertical. I am so absolutely convinced that the car is about to turn over, there seems no longer any point in being scared.

Tom is taking us to what is effectively the last house before the forest – which, looking at it the other way, is the first step for a health programme reaching into that forest.

The hill people are a people apart, even in this remote country. They do come out of the forest, occasionally – but not very far. They bring their honey, and paper, and firewood just as far as the first markets. They also collect and sell cane and bamboo, both of which end up in furniture. They make a little money by collecting bark and roots for use in ayurveda, which is an extremely complex kind of herbal medicine. It involves over two thousand plants, of which around 500 are regularly used, and one of them, used to equalise blood pressure, is found only in India and is in such worldwide demand that stocks are at crisis level.

Don't run away with the wrong idea, that this is some kind of native mumbo-jumbo. Indian medicine and science has been way ahead of the west for centuries – in 600BC they were aware of both the concept of atomic particles and plastic surgery, made the first scientific analysis of the concept of the alphabet, and by 500BC had worked out the relationship between the movements of the sun and the moon. Just because the majority of the people are poor does not mean that this is not a very intelligent race!

Although the hill people are important in the supply of those

medicinal plants, they themselves remain virtually without any healthcare. In the area we visit, three villages which are invisible in the forest to my eye are home to perhaps 1500 families – but at an average of seven people per family, that is several thousand people for whom the nearest health centre is about eight miles outside the forest. Sick people have to be carried through the forest to somewhere an auto-rickshaw can reach - the point at which we arrived, after what I thought was an impossible journey, is an important point for the villagers of the forest – if they can be brought this far, they have a chance of getting to a hospital.

Tom reckons that a Land Rover could make it up here as an ambulance, and says that as electricity can reach to the edge of the forest, a refrigerator for medicines might be possible.

There is only one nurse, Bhindu, and only one telephone in the area. But she and the local churchman, Pastor George, share an idea that if she can set up a small basic clinic capable of simple medicines and injections, a vast amount of discomfort can be overcome. The most common illnesses are various kinds of fever and dysentery, stomach illnesses and skin problems. There are intestinal worms, and many ear and eye infections – one called 'red eye' can sweep through a community almost instantly, and yet it can be quickly cured with eye-drops.

There is another common fatal illness, remarks Tom to me conversationally. This is an area in which the women do all the work, and many of the men spend their time drinking heavily. They make two kinds of hooch in these parts – one is fermented rice, and the other is a fermentation of parts of the rubber tree. Every so often, there is an accident in the brewing, they end up making what is effectively poison, and men die from it.

In this remote place, Tom's gift for creating self-help groups has

resulted in the formation of a painting club for the women, and we are expected to look at their work.

But will we get a chance to see into the jungle? We are in luck – our rickshaw driver, Sri Mathi (the ‘Sri’ is a term of respect) drops us at the last cottage before the forest, and leads us on foot past a stone cairn which marks the border of the jungle. Foreigners cannot go past this without permission.

At first, the surroundings are those of a British woodland walk – a wide path gently rising to trees on both sides. But by 9.15 am, the sun is already beating down, and Tom has fashioned a towel into a kind of turban to protect his head from the direct heat. We are climbing more and more steeply, and suddenly the trees have closed in on both sides.

We are unlikely to be alone – there are bears in this forest, and at one point the driver and his son point to disturbed earth at the side of the track. An elephant has been here.

At times, they explain, the elephants and men are in competition for the reeds that men cut to sell, and that the animals want for food. Occasionally, elephants go crazy, and occasionally the men do not return home.

As we walk, The only people we meet are two foresters who seem astonished to see us, but give us a polite nod, and go on their way bearing unidentifiable vegetables that look like giant cucumbers, three feet long and six inches around.

There are bizarre relics to be found, even in this forest. I am sure I see lumps of concrete on the path on the lower levels and Ron, shortly before he exercises his right as an elderly British gentleman to sit down and not go any farther, suggests that they have been there as some ill-fated expedition in the days of the Raj.

Nigel and Tom and I climb with out driver perhaps another mile and several hundred feet higher, and find the proof. By the side of the tiny track, and for no apparent reason at all, we find a sturdy single-storey concrete building of European design, which looks as if it might have been built as a customs post. Clearly, it has never ever been used – no windows have been put in, no doors, and clearly nobody has ever lived or worked there. Beautifully made, and simply left. Why?

Nigel discovers an overgrown well beside the building, and drops a rock down through the greenery – to his delight, there is a clear splash from about forty feet down.

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On our return, we find that the ladies of the painting group have gathered to show us their work, and to meet in prayer. I am fascinated to see that even the tiny babies, barely months old, are already wearing ankle bracelets, and one even wears a ring.

The attraction of western pastors is, as always, so strong that Nigel and Ron and Pastor George have to begin working in shifts, but there are just so many people waiting that they eventually give up on individual prayer and start a general service. The lady next in line for an individual prayer before this decision is made looks absolutely disgusted.

And then there is one final disturbing scene. Very late in the meeting, an exceptionally weak and feeble old man arrives, and is helped up for prayer. By himself, he can barely take a step. As Nigel reaches out to touch the man on his forehead, the old man falls backwards, flat out on the floor.

As we are ushered out by the relatives, somebody enquires whether this was the action of the Holy Spirit, as is said to be the

case when people collapse during prayer in the big mass gatherings in the west. I groan inwardly, but say nothing – this was a very old man indeed, who had spent the morning trekking to see us, and by the way he fell, I am half inclined to believe that he is dead.

I seem to be the only one feeling uncomfortable about this as we are parked in the next room and served tea, and I am relieved to hear none of the wailing which accompanies a death in India. When we finally get ready to leave, he has been removed – I hope it was just exhaustion.

A few days later, we drop in at the house of Dr Joe Jacob in Trivandrum, and tell him of our trip. He immediately volunteers to set up a camp meeting, perhaps followed up by a monthly clinic. This, he explains to me, involves spreading the word around the tribal people that on a certain day, the doctors will arrive on the mountain - a couple of weeks in advance is probably enough for word to get right round the various villages.

Meanwhile, a collection of doctors and nurses will have volunteered their time, and through experience they will know to get together a collection of the most likely medicines for what they expect to find, before they set off into the jungle.

This is a more admirable reaction than it sounds – these doctors and nurses are already impossibly rushed off their feet in their own hospital. To volunteer for such an additional project is quite amazing dedication.

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12 Neesha and the destitutes



Believe me, the destitutes' ward of Trivandrum hospital is not a place you wish to enter. If you were to see inside it, you would immediately swear an oath not to ever be found inside such a place – and perhaps more important, to make absolutely sure that neither your family nor your children ever end up in this state.

Think of Charles Dickens and his tales of Victorian workhouses. This is worse.

It is not an easy place for a visitor to find. At the gate in the wall that surrounds Ward 9, there is a guard, and he has no intention of letting any foreigners through – at least, not until he spots Brother Tom, and then we are shown straight through. Yet again, Nigel and I look at each other and realise that our unassuming friend is famous in the nether world of the Indian destitutes.

Even then, access to the ward is barred. The ladies who run the ward are heroes in their own right, travelling in every day for very little pay, and well-fed strangers appearing at their door arouse suspicion – particularly strangers with cameras. The reason is that some time previously, a newspaper had illustrated the state of the wards, and shamed the local government into an immediate improvement of conditions – not a great improvement, it has to be said, and by the time the scandal had passed, the only evidence of improvement was a slice of bread and a cup of tea being served every afternoon. So the sight of my camera causes a commotion, and I tuck it away out of sight.

But again the presence of Brother Tom works its magic, and we are in.

Frankly, I would rather they had kept us out. And I make sure to keep the camera hidden, out of some curious kind of respect for the dignity of the inmates.

This ward is nothing like a British hospital. It is dark, morbidly dark. There is no decoration of any kind, save the occasional pinned-up religious image – I am enchanted to see that a Hindu image sits right next to one of Jesus, which doesn't trouble anybody at all. There are no bedclothes – what I take to be pillows turn out to be the occupants' worldly possessions, rather as a bagwoman would keep everything she owned close to her. There is a curious yet knowing look in the eyes of the inmates, as if they realise they have come to the end of the line, yet still wonder if the sight of an unfamiliar visitor may mean hope.

One visitor unsettles me - I'm often embarrassed by the blind self-righteousness shown by some Christians, and this is one of them.

This is a lady who comes in every day to hand out Christian

tracts. Outside the hospital, someone comments on the great work she is doing, “because she is showing these people in the destitutes’ ward what Jesus has done for them”.

Put like that, I’m surprised she gets out alive.

*

On a side road out of Trivandrum, on a street where nobody seems to go, and where certainly nobody in their right mind ever wants to go, sits the TB hospital.

As with all hospitals, Tom is so well known here that he simply walks in and out where he likes, and we are allowed to follow him straight into the men’s ward. It is dark and gloomy, and there is no relief whatsoever in the dull and uninteresting décor – it reminds me of any British civil-service building of the 1950s.

It must be easy to feel alone in such a place, and so several patients are very ready to talk to visitors and tell their stories. One turns out to be a Bible student, another puts his recent improvement down to constant prayer, and a third, Kumar, gets agreement from several patients when he says that he only got access to good medicines when Brother Tom started visiting, and that Tom has been known to go and collect their medication even at midnight.

Tom quietly comments that he takes no credit at all, and explains to the patients that the money for their care comes from unknown friends in Britain. I realise that it’s an impossible concept for them to grasp – what is really important to these men is that when this tall man with a white beard appears in their room, he brings Hope. That’s all they need to know.

A great problem, Tom tells us, is that many of these patients now

count as MDR, or Multiple Drug Resistant. There is a treatment that can be used, but in Indian terms it is phenomenally expensive, at 400 rupees a day per patient... that's about five pounds.

Ron Prosser later comes up with a plan to give the men some simple work in helping to print some greetings cards – it will raise money towards their medicine.

If I am concerned about the courtesy of a European visitor invading the privacy of sick Indians in their hospital wards, I am even more worried when Tom strides into the women's TB ward. I suppose I'm worried in an old-fashioned way about the propriety of it, but nobody else seems in the least concerned that three strange European men should appear in the middle of a women's dormitory.

This is a similarly dingy ward, although a fraction lighter than the men's. A large open-plan room of about forty feet square, furnished only by four rows of hard wooden beds... and nothing else. About twenty women, with the expression of dull acceptance on their faces which I have come to recognise, sit or lay on some of the beds.

As we walk in, Tom is telling us of one unfortunate family, in which a woman is caring for husband and daughter, who are both in this same hospital with TB.

As I listen to him, my eye is caught by a girl way over the other side of the ward. She seems to be about 13, and is hardly moving or stirring, just staring blankly with that familiar hopeless expression. As I walk into the ward, I catch her eye, smile, and wave – and am rewarded with a dazzling smile and a wave in return.

Nigel and Tom move among some of the beds, offering greetings and prayer, and I quite deliberately manoeuvre our little party over to where this girl lies, with what turns out to be her mother sitting nearby. And it turns out that this is the family in Tom's story, in which the daughter is in one TB ward, and the father in another.

The little girl is Neesha, and as she sits up to receive prayer, I am touched by the way her mother decorously arranges the girl's nightdress over her knees in the presence of strange European men. Mother and daughter arrange shawls over their heads as Nigel prays.

As we leave the ward, I make a point of turning from the doorway to wave to Neesha, receiving another glorious smile in return.

Throughout the rest of my time in India, I am haunted by that smile, and by the thought that while I travel freely, this young girl is a prisoner, confined to a rough hard bed in a dull ward. Even through the journey home, and while I am travelling in Britain, I keep remembering the girl, and hope and pray that she makes it, and gets out of that awful place.

Seven weeks later, I am travelling in the USA when my partner Trudi calls to pass on a message that Tom has thoughtfully sent from India.

Little Neesha did not make it.

In my comfortable hotel room in Massachusetts, I feel helplessly, desperately inadequate. How many more times will we fail these people?



Neesha and the Tentmakers

by Ian Boughton

As we have come to expect from this author, this book is entertaining and lightly-written, with many laughs... and yet it brings to light the astonishing situation of the destitute sick in poorer countries.

Between the laughs, it tells some really disturbing stories -which are all quite true, and though they took place just a few years ago, in 'the recent past', much the same situations still apply today.

The two main stars of this story have recently retired - Ron Prosser, founder of Health Help International, continues to act as Chairman/Patron. The great Tom Sutherland, the hero of many HHI supporters, has returned to his native Australia after well over thirty years serving the dirt-poor of Kerala.

But the work they began still continues, and is just as needed as it ever was. The poor are still poor, the sick are still sick, and HHI is still needed to support ever more cases, many of them as dramatic as the ones in this story.

You can find the most recent stories of HHI's work at www.hhi.org.uk

It is still just as inspirational.

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