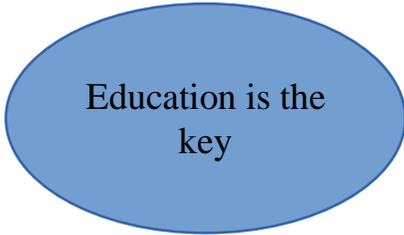


# Assam Education Project

## What is the project and how did The Holy Family parish become involved?

Sixteen years ago a priest came to our parish as a summer visitor. This was Fr. Andreas. Fr. Andreas told us about the problems of the Adivasi. Many of them are Catholics and live in his Diocese of Dibrugarh in the Northern part of Assam. Fr. Andreas explained to us that, after long consideration, his Bishop, Bishop Joseph and himself had reached the conclusion that education, rather than giving food or medicine, is the key to unlocking the vicious circle of poverty and ignorance, in which the Adivasi people are trapped. They had set up a small school and recruited promising young boys from the Adivasi villages with a view to educating them up to the level of the India-wide matriculation exam. We offered to help Fr. Andreas with the project and so began our monthly collections.



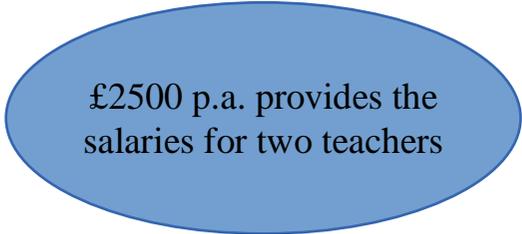
Education is the key

## What is the problem?

The Adivasi are a group of people who were brought from their homeland in Central India to Assam in North East India as tea garden labourers. This took place between the years 1841 and 1960. They are settled in Assam since then and today, they are trapped in the tea garden villages with poor housing facilities, poor diets, lacking medicine and health care and with little or no education and no alternative work opportunities. They are treated by other non-Adivasi people as low class and even Adivasi people think of themselves as somehow inferior. They lack ambition and motivation to improve their status and situation. What is worse, even now, they are still regarded by many as immigrants to the area. They live in extreme poverty with an average daily wage of about 50p. Their houses are owned by the tea plantations and they have them only so long as the family can provide a worker. State education is very limited or too far away from the children's home. Often, what little medicine there is is provided by a few volunteer nuns. There is widespread illness and premature death caused by simple ignorance, by malaria and other preventable diseases.

## What has happened so far?

Over the past 15 years, our parish has very generously contributed about £2,500 annually to support the Education Project. Bishop Joseph has allocated this money to providing the salaries of two teachers with a small surplus used for those of the boys most in need. A rough estimate is that it costs £150 p.a. for each boy's education. Over the years, Fr. Andreas also used some of the money to help several Adivasi girls to attend local fee-paying convent schools. In addition, from time to time, and at Fr. Andreas' suggestion, several parishioners have sponsored individual boys and girls - for example, one was helped to qualify as a teacher and another as a nurse.



£2500 p.a. provides the salaries for two teachers

In 2006, at the instigation of our then Parish Priest and our Justice & Peace group, Fred and Gail Taylor visited Dibrugarh and stayed at Bishop's House, where the school is situated. They took with them a Pledge of Support, signed by over 180 parishioners. They reported back to the parish what they had seen first-hand for themselves. They saw the poverty, ignorance and superstition; the poor housing conditions; the lack of fresh water and electricity and the harsh working conditions of the tea-gardens. They also saw, in some places, the almost non-existent education facilities provided by the state. At the same time they met and spoke with the 75 happy and smiling boys then at Bishop's House and concluded that the money given by the parish was, indeed, going to a worthwhile project. The school goes under the name of Boniface Apostolic Home [BAH] and is not officially recognised as a school - probably because the clergy teachers are paid below the official wage. This means that although the boys are educated at BAH they have to take the National Matriculation exam at a nearby officially recognised school.

In 2012, Fr. Andreas provided his personal evaluation of the project. At that time, over 100 boys from the school had successfully passed the matriculation exam and, of these over 40 have obtained a BA at university. This number may seem small when faced with the millions of Adivasi in Assam. But most of those who graduated are now employed as teachers in schools where other Adivasi children are receiving their schooling. In Fr. Andreas's own words, " *the Project has*

indeed left an indelible mark of lasting impact on the lives of the Adivasi people in the diocese of Dibrugarh, Assam and we can't express this reality of the truth in words even if we want to. At this moment, what we can say is that we appreciate you and admire for your trust in us and the generosity to stand by us towards this herculean task of educating the Adivasi people in Assam. We do believe and hope that you will continue to accompany us in the future towards this journey with the same concern and support.”

of all, the percentage rate of education among the Adivasi people is slowly picking up. There are more and more number of boys and girls are coming up to the level of college studies today than it used to be a few years ago. Secondly, there is also a growing awareness and interest among them to go for some specialization in studies like engineering, computer, social work, law, Civil Service, etc. Taking account of this current wave among the Adivasi people in Assam, it will be helpful to shift in our approach from mass education to some specialized educations which will prepare them not only for better job opportunities and occupations but also to build up in themselves a positive self-image and confidence and in course of time, hopefully, to change the negative attitudes of the other Adivasi people in Assam”



Lasting Impact

We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide Bishop Joseph, and all those directly involved in Assam, in choosing their way forward with this project.

We pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit

## What is the foreseeable future?

We are all aware of the dramatic rise in the wealth and productivity of the Indian nation as a whole. But although in time this may trickle down to the poorer elements, this at the moment is very much confined to a small section of the wealthy and middle-class. The poor in India remain poor and we, as Christians, have the opportunity to help in a direct way by sharing our resources with a small few of them.

The poor in India remain poor but we, as Christians, have the opportunity to help in a direct way

### **Recent developments**

- An annual English Essay competition, in which the boys tell us about their village lives and of their hopes for the future, started successfully in 2015. There are three prizes totaling £50 – donated by parishioners. The boys also receive a prize certificate, specially designed by the Justice & Peace group.
- Fr. Andreas is now in charge of a large, remote parish, close to the Assam border. Fr Cyprian is now our main contact in Dibrugarh. He has been very helpful in confirming receipt of the money we transfer direct to the Diocesan account and in liaising with the headmaster of the school.
- In addition to the Holy Family parish notice board, news and articles in more depth, are now becoming available on the parish web site.

*[If anyone reading this is willing to help with this project, or has ideas relating to it, or wishes to visit Assam personally, then please contact Fred Taylor [342-5922] or any Justice & Peace Group member.]*

Fr. Andreas is aware of an overall improvement in the state provided education. “As I see and foresee today, I propose a change in our approach. This is because there is a change in the outlook of the Adivasi people as regards education. First

Prepared by the Justice & Peace Group, Holy Family Parish, Pensby 2012 (updated 2016).