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## OCF student and Berkeley graduate spends 3 months in India

by *Maria Koo*



Ki Sundhur, India (How beautiful, India)

White-knuckled, gripping the edge of my seat like my life depended on it (which in all honesty, it probably did), I sat rigid as the driver, Daniel, calmly steered us down three-pseudo five-lane roads, narrowly escaping head-on collisions and serial pedestrian homicide with a cool mastery that still boggles my mind. I have to admit, I couldn't help but think, "Please God, what have I gotten myself into?"

A little background: the Philanthropic Society of the Orthodox Church in India was established in 1993 by one Fr. Ignatius Sennis and Sr. Nectaria Paradisi, under the guidance of then Metropolitan Nikitas of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Nowadays, Fr. Ignatius is Bishop of Madagascar, and we here in the Bay Area are blessed with our very own hierarch. That means Sister is alone in India. She operates a Society, which manages six schools (five village schools and the newly opened St. Ignatius English Medium High School on the orphanage grounds); eight clinics (six medical, one optometry, and one dental clinic); twelve churches; the clergy and personnel; building, developing and maintaining the Society property; wading through an impossible sea of bureaucracy; the Morning Feeding Program and Lunch Distribution for the poor; the Theotokos Girls' Orphanage; the St. Ignatius Boys' Orphanage; the never-ending list of daily tasks to be done (and a partridge in a pear tree).

The three months spent at this oasis in West Bengal left me in complete awe of this humble, gracious, intelligent woman. Just one facet of the Society is a life commitment for any one person, and yet she takes on the responsibilities required of an army of people. She truly is a warrior in every sense of the word. How else could she battle the local mafia, a fundamentalist Hindu government, and a hostile climate? In doing so, she sacrifices her health, her lifestyle as a nun, and literally her blood, sweat and tears for India.

I know I'm supposed to write about my personal experience, but truly, to take part in the Society is to experience Sister. She is a fearsome force of nature, yet she exudes love and warmth. Her days begin at 4:30 am and end at 4:30 the following morning. Regularly, she is so busy that she forgets to eat or even drink water, and yet with volunteers and guests, she sits, as she did with me for many a meal, with a smile upon her face, taking precious minutes out of her day. While she can look a street thug dead in the face without fear, she melts instantly if one of her children cries... and what children! It's almost too easy to forget about the other humanitarian programs when you meet them. They love Sister as they would their mother, and they warmly accept visitors quickly and completely.

I have one brother, Nicholas, but since this visit, my family has increased by 97 brothers and sisters. They are bright and beautiful and a hope for the future of the Society. While I can't imagine any of my work was terribly beneficial—I taught music, helped with the school opening, and assisted the smallest children with their English—it was the most painful experience to have to leave them behind: Riya who calls me "Onni" (which means Sister in Korean); Jayanti the amazing artist; Rony the ex-gangster baby with a lisp; Puja who struggles with a learning disability but on my last day finally wrote the ABCs by herself... (I would list all of the children, but I don't have the space), and my music students Shrabanti, Rupali, Rupa, Parboti, Aroti, and Jhuma.

Despite the crippling bureaucracy, the stifling heat, the army of mosquitoes, the mercilessly short days, and the insanity of it all—despite all this, it is easy to see why Sister stays: to nurture and love her children.

If you'd like more information about the orphanage or the other programs of the Society, you can check out the PSOC website—which is currently being updated at <http://orthodoxindia.org> or view Christana's film at <http://theluckygirlsmovie.com>