

Casting Concrete Change

JESUIT SCHOOLS IN INDIA

by George Kearney

You never know what the Jesuits are going to do next,” says Fr. Jack Kenealy, SJ, treasurer of the Patna Diocese, who was assigned to the Jesuit Mission in Patna, India in 1949 as a 22 year-old. “That’s the spirit of the Patna mission; it has been from the beginning. ‘We’ve got nothing to lose. Let’s do it.’”

The Jesuits who first arrived in Patna in 1921 were animated with that spirit. So too were the Chicago Province

Jesuits who have since left home and journeyed thousands of miles to serve in Patna, a city located in Northern India, in the state of Bihar, just south of the border with Nepal.

“People in India know education is the only way,” says Fr. Kenealy, who worked for years as a priest in various rural mission churches. “And the people also know that’s what the Jesuits do, education.”

For 75 years the Jesuits in Northern India have been



Young children from low-income housing visit the Shahabad-Daultpur campus of St. Xavier’s school in Delhi to take advantage of free remedial reading classes.

St. Xavier’s and Khrist Raja, like many other Jesuit schools in India, offer programs to aid the poor, and those who haven’t benefited from the country’s educational gains. The bulletin celebrating Khrist Raja’s 75th anniversary says “Jesuit schools have a definite role to play in the uplift of Indian Society, for Church and education are integrally related.” This is true of Jesuit schools from Patna to Delhi to Bombay.

Khrist Raja was founded 75 years ago as the first school in the Patna province. This chapel is at the heart of the school’s current sprawling campus. Interspersed with groves and flowering gardens, the campus has become an oasis for villagers who visit often to enjoy the serenity. Fr. K.C. Philip, SJ, says this openness, coupled with KR’s integral approach to education and outreach programs, “has a unifying effect on the different groups in the area. It brings together the rich and the poor, the urban and rural.”





Joe Mannaravilil, SJ, region superior of Delhi (right), explains the finer points of the vocational training program to Provincial of Patna, Thomas Anthonysamy, SJ.

The Shahabad-Daultapur campus of St. Xavier's school in Delhi also hosts a unique program designed to present the poor with greater opportunities for education and advancement. George Peter, SJ, directs the Loyola Vocational Institute which offers a vocational training program for 400 unemployed young people, an academic study program for 300 women who have dropped out of school, and an evening remedial program for poverty-stricken children.



These women participate in beauty classes, one of the ten vocational programs offered at Loyola Vocational Institute. "LVI aims at the empowerment of the poor unemployed youth of India," Fr. Peter says, "so they may experience their self-worth and inner freedom as children of God. The emphasis is on empowering women because we believe with Mahatma Gandhi that if we educate a man, we educate an individual only; but if we educate a woman, we educate a family."

doing just that. They've opened scores of schools, helped break down the long-dominant caste system, and extended the privilege of education to women. During those same years the state of education in India has improved dramatically, with literacy rates climbing from less than 10% to more than 50%.

The fact remains, however, that India is a country of over 1 billion people with millions of students. And while there has been marked improvement, conditions haven't improved for all Indians. Many Dalits—people who comprised the lowest castes—still live in poverty. Most of their school-aged children do not have access to adequate schools, or cannot attend them because they must work to support their families.

"Poor kids are our priorities," Fr. Kenealy says, of the children who still don't have access to school. "That's the attitude amongst all the fathers here. It's as if we're in a constant state of flux, trying to adjust to the current situation." Today, throughout India, Jesuits are capitalizing on their past educational success and using the strength of the institutions they've created to benefit those who are currently poor.

This is taking place in the Patna Province at Khrist Raja High School and hundreds of miles to the northwest in

the Delhi Region at the Shahabad-Daultapur campus of St. Xavier's School. Both these schools resemble Jesuit high schools in the United States, large efficient institutions preparing young women and men for higher education and for life as leaders in service. But both schools also employ their campuses to support programs designed to educate and lift up the poorest of the poor, the children who have been and continue to be unable to access quality schools, the students who have seen none of India's educational gains. By educating these young men and women, the Jesuits hope they can begin to cast concrete change for those who've long been cast away by Indian society. ■