

TOS Bhubaneswar/Odisha India knows the meaning of service

By Nancy Secrest, TOS International Secretary

(It is ironic that all the places I (Nancy Secrest, TOS International Secretary) visited in February were damaged in the recent cyclone that swept through the Odisha region. You will find an appeal for funds to help with their repair in another part of this e-newsletter. All are worthy of our help.)

What do an old age home, an orphanage for girls, vocational training and a home for destitute women have in common? The loving support of the TOS Bhubaneswar/Odisha Region in India. Led by Deepa Padhi, who is also the Vice-President of the Theosophical Society, the dynamic individuals who make up these groups have their fingers in many pies. Their leading endeavour in the past few years has been to awaken individuals, families, companies and government to the human rights issue that is Women's Empowerment. Their efforts along those lines began with billboards drawing attention to the plight of women who suffer violence at home and in the streets, and discrimination in the workplace. Their efforts included street plays, signature campaigns and a journal of articles that culminated in the book, *Yes, She Can!* Now the National TOS in India has adopted Women's Empowerment as its primary program, and the work goes on.



In February 2019, I visited Bhubaneswar to meet its TS/TOS members and visit some of the programs sponsored by this vibrant group. Our first stop was at the training centre where women from the poorest neighbourhoods are taught various sewing and tailoring skills. Actually, this is a mobile centre that travels from 'slum' to 'slum' to go where they are needed. The women learn

on new sewing machines that were funded by the TOS in New Zealand. The programs in Bhubaneswar are well known throughout the TOS world with help coming from several countries. Displayed on tables were kurtas, children's clothing, purses, carry bags and other items made by the first graduating class. I was honoured to present the certificates of completion to the women of this first class, and to meet those enrolled in the second. Programs such as this are so vitally important. They give women who are living tough lives a sense of purpose and accomplishment while teaching a practical skill with which they can help add to the family's income and increase their standard of living, even if just a little. Mothers learning a new skill also sets a good example for children, especially girls, letting them know that there are opportunities out there for women. This is a small step from which many others can follow.



We visited the Mission Ashra home for destitute women where the local TOS runs medical camps periodically throughout the year and gives other support. The day we visited there were five doctors from various disciplines giving free check-ups to the home's 256 residents. Free follow-up is given if needed.



The facility is large, clean and inviting. Its interior walls are covered with tribal art, giving a beautiful setting and perhaps a feeling of home to many of the women there. The facility takes in women who have nowhere else to go. Some were victims of rape or domestic violence. Others are mentally ill and still others have simply been abandoned by their families. Those who can, learn crafts, which are then sold to visitors. I brought back some decorative pen/pencil holders as gifts for co-workers and a wall hanging made of woven bamboo depicting a jungle scene. Deepa and I enjoyed talking with some of the women. They seem happy and well cared for.

A visit to a children's home for girls was also on our list. We were taken on a tour of the building while waiting for the girls to return from school that day. The dormitory rooms are large with four bunkbeds in each and study desks plus plenty of open space in between. Besides the requisite kitchen and dining facilities, there is a meditation room, a library and other rooms where the girls learn and practise yoga, dance and martial arts.



The karate classes were added in recent years as a part of the TOS Women's Empowerment program as a way for girls to protect themselves. Rape and violence against women are rampant in India.



There is also an art gallery where painting and other art works made by the girls are on display. Some of it, like this example of tribal art, is exceedingly good.



When the girls returned from school that day (they attend various schools in the local area) they danced for us and showed us some of the karate moves they had learned. I pity any guy who tries to harm one of them! These girls are serious. Most of the girls here are orphans, others just abandoned by their families. All sported smiles and were full of energy. There are 85 school age girls living here and another 15 who are over 18. This is unique as in most homes of this kind girls leave when they finish high school and reach 18. Here that is not the case. Girls are welcome to stay to pursue a college education or prepare for marriage, and financial help is given in either case. (The TOS Italy helped some young women this year by providing scholarship funds.) The administrators of the Home recognise the difficulty and danger of a young woman going from a sheltered environment into the world on her own, especially in a culture where family support is vital and expected; they thereby offer a bridge from one to the other.

At the other end of the age spectrum Deepa and I visited an old age home that the TOS supports with donations that cover the cost of food and other necessities. We sat in a large circle with the 18 residents of the home. We were introduced and chatted with the elders.



Several of the residents entertained us all with spiritual songs, their voices strong despite their years. At one point a young cow (a sacred animal in India and free to roam the streets) walked through our circle while we sat there. I watched as an old woman touched the cow when it walked by her, then her own head, taking a blessing from it. This place and its residents touched my heart. While the other two residence-type places we visited were large, clean and in good repair, this home was not. The three-storey building, located in a very poor area, needs much tender loving care. The upper floor is not used at all and is slowly undergoing repair. The sleeping rooms are small and crowded. The young man and his wife (both teachers) who act as caretakers do the best that they can, and the residents appreciate them. They couldn't say enough good things about them. Others, besides the TOS, support this facility as well, but more help is needed. Our elderly deserve the respect of a comfortable place in which to end their days.

All in all, my visit to Bhubaneswar was fruitful and enjoyable. The TOS here stands as an example to others of how we can be of service to humanity.