

# The Road Less Travelled

## 20 Years of Journey of Petra Theiner with the poorest of the poor

### Introduction

The story of the journey that Petra Theiner of Sudtirool has made in the last 20 years at the service the poorest of the poor in Calcutta makes incredible reading. How one persons dream when it is translated into reality can touch and transform the lives of so many is truly amazing. It all began with her arrival in Calcutta as a Volunteer of the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa in 2004. While serving the destitute and sick and tending their wounds in the various houses of the sisters, she was able to gain a good bit of knowledge about the underbelly of Calcutta where the poorest of the poor live. She came into contact with Fr. AC Jose who had launched a number of poverty alleviation programmes in the various slums around Sealdah railway station and Tengra. That time she also came into contact with Fr. Mathew George, who was the director of Don Bosco Ashalayam, a project for the training and rehabilitation of railway station children and street children.

A chance visit to Bagar, the garbage dumping ground of Howrah Municipal Corporation that time shocked her beyond belief seeing the inhuman conditions of hundreds of families living around the garbage dump, making a living by scavenging for recycle materials. On her return to Sudtirool she felt a tremendous restlessness with her soul and she felt as if the Lord is telling her to do something for the most poor and unfortunate people. She approached the Don Bosco Society in Calcutta to do something for these people and after several attempts she was able to start the works for them with the collaboration of Don Bosco society.

### Rickets Children in Shillong

In the meantime she did not sit idle. She came to the aid of thousands of children who were suffering from rickets in Shillong. Rickets is both preventable and curable is a disease that affects children caused by deficiency of Vitamin C and D. There are thousands of children who get this disease in infancy and timely intervention with medicines it can be cured. During her association with rickets eradication programme in Shillong, undertaken by Don Bosco Society, she financed medicines, medical camps in villages and a dispensary building.

### Saraswatipur & Siliguri

When Fr. Mathew George was transferred from Ashalayam in Kolkata to Don Bosco Parish in Siliguri, developmental works began in a tea garden at Saraswatipur, situated right inside a jungle. The people earned a living through tea picking that was seasonal work and other times they were finding it difficult to make a living. Children were sickly and malnourished, access to education was scanty for them. Petra Theiner was approached for help and she came forward immediately.

The first programme that was launched in Saraswatipur was nutrition programme for babies below the age of two. A packet of nutritious baby food items were distributed to babies and their mothers every month. The results were visible almost immediately with increased health and vitality in children.

Artificial limbs were fitted on 15 people in and around Siliguri, people who lost their one legs and in some cases two legs due accidents and sickness. All of them were brought to Calcutta in different batches and prosthesis supplied by Otto Boch was fitted on them. All of them regained their mobility and live dignified lives now.

Another area of involvement was in the medical field. Conducted several medical camps and provided assistance for hospitalization, surgery medicines and tests. An ambulance was provided by Petra Theiner for taking the patients to hospital and other medical related works.

Education of children was given top most priority. A small school was opened and students who were attending schools far away or staying boardings, were given financial assistance for school and boarding fees, textbooks and exercise books, school uniforms, school bags, school stationery. In all these years several hundreds boys and girls have been able to pursue their studies and go ahead in life.

The Saraswatipur Tea Garden with people staying in two villages lacked access to good and clean drinking. The water that was drawn from shallow wells, was contaminated by too much iron content and other impurities. A borewell each was dug in both the villages, pumped the water to overhead tanks, then filtered and supplied to several points in the villages. This brought down the incidences of frequent sickness and recourse to hospitals.

## **Bagar in Howrah**

The dream of Petra to do something substantial for the people living around the dumping ground in Bagar came true when Fr. Mathew George was transferred to Calcutta in 2014. With the permission of the authorities of Don Bosco Society, a series of programmes were launched for the overall development of the people in Bagar slum with Petra serving as the moving force behind.

**Nutrition Programme:** The first program that was launched in Bagar was the Nutrition programme for babies and their mothers. In a need assessment study that was done, we came across too many babies that were malnourished and some even stunted. So during the first 3 years we gave nutritious food packets for all the babies below the age of 5, and after that for the rest of the 7 years we gave to babies below the age of 2. It was great help for the children and their families and health of the babies improved considerably.

**Construction of community hall:** The need for the construction of a community hall to gather the people for various events like community meeting, medical camps, celebrations, etc was felt strongly and beautiful community hall was built with support from Petra Theiner. It has also a computer centre and tailoring centre and an office room.

**Community Toilets:** On our arrival in Bagar, we found that the community toilets were in a dilapidated state and we renovated them and made them usable. But a year after that with incessant rains the entire toilet structure collapsed into the drain. This put the people into extremely difficult situation as people had to go the garbage dump to relieve themselves. The women went through traumatic situations. A new toilet complex with 12 toilets each for men and women was constructed through the kind favour of Petra Theiner.

**Clean drinking water:** The Bagar slum lacked access to purified drinking water. From the municipal corporation drinking water supply pipe line, pipes were laid and in 18 places in the slum taps were fitted for people to collect drinking water. This was indeed a great blessing for the people.

**Help for Education:** Great stress was laid on the education of the children and several hundred of students were given school fees, admission fees, books and school stationery, school bags every year. Attempts were made also to discourage children from going up the garbage hills, skipping schools, to scavenge for recyclable materials. Every year educational tours were conducted for students to visit zoos, museums, amusement parks, etc to give them an opportunity to see the outside world.

**Medical assistance:** An area where a lot of help and assistance was rendered was in the area of health care. Several medical camps were organized in Bagar in this span of 10 years. Assistance was given for treatment in hospitals, surgeries, medical tests and medicines. Jeet Das underwent 4 surgeries in CMC Hospital in Vellore to cure his deformity on the face.

**Low cost housing for homeless families:** There were 11 families living under plastic sheets in Bagar leading a near inhuman life in the midst of dirt and slime. In a small portion of land that was available, a long shed was made with 11 rooms and the families took up residence there.

**Sewing Classes and Sewing machines:** As part of women empowerment a class was opened for women to learn tailoring as source of generating additional income. Six batches of women were taught sewing and at the end of the course a sewing machine was given to each one. Girls were given Beautician classes.

**Corona Lockdown:** During the corona lock down, most of the people of Bagar was jobless and could not earn their daily wages, Dry food items were supplied to all the families in Bagar three to four times during the lock down. .

**Children's Day Celebrations:** Every year at Christmas-New Year special programmes were organized for over 1200 children and were given prizes, gifts and food packets.

## **Kapali Bagan**

Kapali Bagan is situated close to the Salesian Provincial house People live shanties built along the banks of the drainage canal of the city. Some years ago Don Bosco launched a low cost housing programme. Petra Theiner generously contributed for the construction of several low cost houses there.

## Dhobasole

Dhobasole is a new project of the Don Bosco Society opened 7 years ago. It is situated 200 kms away from Calcutta. It is in a totally rural agrarian area inhabited by tribal people who are poor and work as agricultural labourers. In 2020 Fr. Mathew George while keeping the works going in the slums in Calcutta launched a series of developmental works in the area with the support from Petra Theiner and her organization Hoffnung fur auf einen bessern Morgen. A need assessment survey of the area was done and the immediate needs were identified and presented to Petra and she came forward willingly to render help and assistance.

**Drinking water project in several villages:** A total of 17 villages have been provided with clean drinking water for the people sponsored by Petra Theiner. Dhobasole is a rain deficient area and people have difficulties in having access to drinking water throughout the year. Deep bore well are needed to tap ground water and with a submersible pump, water is pumped up to storage tank over head and distributed to the people. The benefits of easy access to drinking water were numerous and among them it reduced the workload of women who had travel long distances to fetch drinking water for the families .

**Hoffnung Villages for Homeless and landless people:** Two things that affected the lives of the people in the region were landlessness and homelessness. To solve the problem with the help Petra Theiner two Hoffnung housing complexes were set up. In one colony six destitute families have been housed and in the second village 7 houses have been already built and there is place for several more houses which will be built as per need arises. Both the colonies have community toilets and access to clean drinking water. Two more houses have been completed in two other villages. Besides these new houses, we have also repaired around 25 dilapidated houses of widows and orphans spread over in several villages around Dhobasole.

**Construction of vocational training center at Dhobasole:** Taking into consideration, the condition of several unemployed youth and to need to offer them non-formal vocational training, a building was constructed in 2022 to have a Motor Driving School, Computer Centre and electrical wiring. Three batches of students have completed training in four wheeler motor driving and have obtained their driving licences. The driving school is recognized by the government. The electrical wiring course will be starting soon. It has also a computer centre with 20 computers to give basic training computer to school going students who come daily for classes after their school hours.

**Assistance to the Handicapped People:** More than 50 people with disabilities have been provided with wheelchairs, tricycles, battery operated e-tricycles, crutches, financial help to start small business, for treatments, etc.

**Free Dispensary:** Dhobasole has a free dispensary to treat common sicknesses with medicines under the supervision of a qualified nurse. There is also facility for short

term stay during the treatment. Medical camps are organized in the villages with the help of doctors at regular intervals. There are also two Ambulances donated by Petra for the medical needs in Calcutta and Dhobasole. A training programme was conducted for village health workers on the medical benefits of Artisimea plant.

**Tuition Centres in Villages:** To give a boost to the education of students in the rural areas where they attend government run schools, where little teaching takes place, we have opened tuition centres. Every day in the morning children gather for two hours in these centres where teachers give coaching on various subjects taught in the schools. One Sunday's recreational facilities are provided for them. The students are supplied with school bags, note books, school stationery and umbrellas every year. It has considerably improved the standard of education of the children.

**Renovation of a Government Middle School:** A government supported middle school in Dhobasole that was in a dilapidated state has been totally renovated and refurnished with support from Petra Theiner.

**Construction of Community Hall:** A community hall has been constructed in Pierdoba village for various activities like tuitions, tailoring lessons and for the meeting of the community on various occasions.

**Children's Day Celebrations:** Every year at Christmas-New Year special programmes were organized for around 500 children and are given prizes, gifts and food packets.

## **Bagar-Shalimar Cluster Slums**

After 10 years of service in the slum around the Bagar garbage dumping ground, we began to focus our attention on a few slums near Bagar where the living condition of the inhabitants are at abysmal conditions. Immediately we opened free tuition centres in these villages and began our services there. In Shalimar slum we renovated and refurnished the community centre for tuition classes, computer classes and tailoring classes. There we built also community toilets, bathing stations and sunk a deep tube well for supplying water in various places in the slum. There are several families living under plastic sheets and low cost houses will be constructed for them.

## **Assistance to Leprosy Patients**

In 2024 a new project was launched with the support from Petra Theiner to reach out to the numerous lepers in the region.

### **1. Bankura Leprosy Hospital**

The Bankura Leprosy Hospital, run by the government, is located in Anchuri village, near Anchuri railway station, about 12 km from Bankura town in West Bengal, India. It is a 500-bed hospital and has full capacity patients coming from all over West Bengal and neighbouring states. The hospital is spread in 10 blocks on a government land. Each block of buildings accommodates 50 patients and has a nursing ward each. There are doctors and nurses to take care of them and food and medicines are distributed free of charge.

Although leprosy is considered eradicated in the country, there are thousands suffering from it in the less developed states of India. West Bengal is one of the countries leading in leprosy cases. The leprosy patients face all kinds of discrimination – they are thrown out of families and villages and boycotted by the society. They seek shelter in government and non-government facilities for treatment and survival. The social stigma associated with leprosy is indescribable. They need empathy, care and understanding.

Our visit to the hospital, 60 km from Dhobasole, at the beginning of this year made us aware that the poor and helpless patients, who live in large numbers, lack many basic facilities that were not provided. We sat down with the authorities and made a list of things that the patients needed immediately, things that the government will not provide or they do not have the means to provide.

We sent a project proposal to Petra Theiner from South Tyrol and she immediately gave us the green light and we immediately got to work.

Our services there: In the last few weeks and months we have provided 500 bedside lockers for the patients, 50 wheelchairs, 20 tricycles, 50 pairs of crutches, 105 hearing aids, 120 umbrellas, 120 ceiling fans, buckets, stools to sit on, towels, soap, oil and other commodities for all the patients. The leprosy patients are infinitely grateful for standing by them when everyone around them leaves them to their fate.

## 2. Leprosy Rehabilitation Village in Pierdoba

Pierdoba is a village located about 20 km from Dhobasole. There are 30 families living in this village who have been settled by the government. They are all families who are among those who have been cured of their leprosy and are able to lead a normal life. Since they were not allowed back into their villages due to the stigma associated with leprosy, the government arranged for them a small house for each family. We visited this village a few months ago and found that they are living in poverty and earning a small income to support their families.

Our services there: With the help of Hope for a Better Tomorrow, we have provided them with clean drinking water by sinking a deep tube well and installing a pump and water tank, we built a multi purpose community hall, a tailoring school for women, where 9 people completed their training and given a sewing machine each. We also provide them with food items and dress from time to time.

## 3. Colony of cured lepers and families at Garbheta

The leper colony at Garbheta, which is home to 15 leprosy families who have been cured of their leprosy, is located 15 km from Dhobasole. It is a colony and not a village as they live along the railway tracks on land belonging to the railway. They earn their living by begging in the markets, at train stations and bus stops nearby and live in houses made of plastic sheets and mud walls. They live under inhumane conditions as they face social stigma and ostracism. We have been giving them food items and clothes from time to time.

To make a decent dwelling place for them, Hoffnung auf einen bessern Morgen has come forward to help them. We are trying to approach the government authorities to allocate a plot of land for them where we can make 15 houses. If that is not possible, then we will renovate the houses where they are living in now. Since it is railway land, no concrete structures can be built there.

## **Don Bosco Nitika Kolkata**

Don Bosco Nitika has been in the forefront of creating educational opportunities to children living on the footpath and slums and railway stations. Fr. AC Jose of happy memory had started many years ago of gathering these children on Saturdays and giving them opportunities for recreation, literacy and nutrition. This programme since its inception has been supported by Petra and continued for several years.

## **Krishnagar**

### **Disabled Children and Abandoned Old People**

The Diocese of Krishnagar is running a Home for the disabled children “SNEHANEER” and an Old Age Home “BRIDHAASHRAM” at Krishnagar. We were finding it difficult to run these centers for disabled children and Old Age Home. We approached the organization of Petra Theiner –Hoffung Auf einen Besseren Morgen. She has been supporting our Homes for Handicapped Children “Snehaneer” and Old Age Home “Bridha Ashram. She has been supporting us.

The ground water in Nadia district is highly polluted and contaminated. The water is arsenic and there is plenty of Iron contents in the water. Consequently people are suffering from stomach problems, children suffer from arthritis, running nose etc. The children easily fall sick with fever, cold and stunted in growth. In short people have to trek long distances for drinking, cooking water etc.,

We received funds for digging deep Tube Wells with overhead Tanks for Home for the Handicapped Children and Old Age Home. Petra funded 5000 LPH iron removal and automatics Water softener for Home of Handicapped children and Old age Home.

We put up UV/RO Purifier with 50 lit Tank (Ecco Crystal) for drinking water in Homes of the disabled children and Old Age Home. The supply of electricity is very erratic and unsteady especially in the hot summer season. We made a project for Solar Power Generation System for the Handicapped children. Petra approved our request and we put up Solar Panels and other necessary equipment for light and fan for the children. This was a great relief for the Home of the handicapped children in the hot summer season when the supply of electricity often fails.

We had to improve the supply of drinking water for these children and Old people. In November 2022 we installed new water tanks with high cost. We repaired the roof of the Old Age Home and the Home of the disabled children. We covered the roof of the buildings with Tins. The area covering 4875 sq.ft. of Bridha Ashram ( Old Age Home ) and 5245 sq.ft. of Snehaneer( Home for Handicapped Children ) were covered with Tins. The rooms and dormitories are protected from the excessive heat of the summer and during the rainy season. The corridor of Old Age Home was repaired with tiles since the cement floor was cracked and damaged due to wear and tear. The dining room area, the washrooms of ladies and gents, the dormitories were repaired and painted. We installed an Air conditioner for the Handicapped Children. The Old Age Home was repaired and painted.

We were able to provide warm clothes and dresses to the inmates of the Homes of the children and Old Age home. We improved the food of the inmates supplying

nutritious food items like eggs, Horlicks, milk, biscuits etc. They were provided with mattresses in winter.

In winter food items like rice, dal, wheat and grains etc., are less costly due to the harvesting season. We were able to stock food items with the donation received from Petra for the coming year. We stored rice and dhal for almost six months to feed the inmates of our homes. We provided stationery items like soap, tooth paste, hair oil, and surf to the children and old people with the funds received from Petra through the year.

We arranged regular visit of Doctors to monitor the health conditions of Disabled Children and Old people and to provide adequate medicines and the related treatments during these years. This was a great help for the inmates the Handicapped Children and Old People. We were able to run the Homes smoothly without major difficulties. Petra has also donated an ambulance to the dispensary in Polsondamore, one of the centres in the diocese of Krishnagar. Altogether 4 ambulances have been donated so far for Saraswatipur, Dhobasole and Krishnagar.

## **Conclusion**

For a human character to reveal truly exceptional human qualities, one must have the good fortune to be able to observe its performance over many years. If this performance is devoid of all egoism, if its guiding motive is unparalleled generosity, if it is absolutely certain that there is no thought of recompense and that, in addition, it has left its visible mark upon earth, then there can be no mistake. This is how Jean Giono begins his story of the Man who planted trees and reaped happiness. Looking back at the 20 years life and services of Petra Theiner to those who live at the lowest rung of the society, these words can be applied to her. Through all the characteristics mentioned Petra has revealed truly exceptional human qualities. Her dedicated life and mission with concrete actions for the poorest of the poor has touched and transformed the lives of thousands of people. Through her hard work and through the generosity of the people of Sudtiro, a huge number of peoples hope for a better morning came true. She is a person on fire with zeal for the mission of uplifting the most marginalized people in society and giving them a sense of dignity, self-worth and self esteem to live a life worthy of a human being.