

Visit to the Mar Gregorios Rehabilitation Centre in Trivandrum on 3 March, 2012

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While staying in Cochin and preparing the visit to our new partner organisation Mar Gregorios Rehabilitation Centre (MGRC) in Trivandrum / South India, we inquired about the possibility of meeting some of the pupils and students sponsored by noon. As it happens, there was to be a seminar organized by the MGRC the following week, which quite a number of students were going to attend. We spontaneously decided to accept the date - 3 March, 2012 - and set off for our visit on the day before.

The Mar Gregorios Rehabilitation Centre cares for needy people with all kinds of disabilities in a large rural area with about 240,000 inhabitants near Trivandrum. The concept is **not** to take the needy children away to live in homes, but to let them remain with their families and support them in all possible ways to arrange their lives within the family circle. This help ranges from transportation to hospitals, filling in applications for, as well as getting, government assistance, providing aids and appliances such as spectacles, crutches, wheelchairs, medicine, to financial support for equipping small shops and loads of other things. During the last year, the group of the MGRC succeeded in convincing the authorities to have a hospital doctor taken by the Centre's ambulance to those patients who are unfit for transport.

On the initiative of the Swiss organization Direct Donation the MGRC started an additional activity, namely the 'education programme' which provides support for needy children and young people. Its aim is to enable them to receive an education by taking over the costs for school fees, transportation, books and so on. Some of the children are disabled or have disabled parents. For various reasons, in many families the father fails as the breadwinner: either because he is dead or unable to work or has abandoned the family. Without support, these children would not stand a chance of getting a proper school education and vocational training.

The "education programme" is in safe hands since the Centre's volunteers running it – all working on a voluntary basis - are for example former high school teachers with a long teaching experience or former senior staff in companies (e.g. insurance companies).

In each case, two members of the Centre's management visit the students eligible for promotion at home. They talk to the parents and the young people to find out what is to be done. As the social workers of the MGRC have been working in the villages for a long time, they know all the poor families. The entrance qualification for the "education programme" is decided on every year anew and the certificates of achievement are evaluated. We, the people from noon.ch, receive a list comprising the names and addresses of the students, as well as copies and receipts of the past school year or academic year respectively.

By now, about 250 children are being sponsored in the education programme of the MGRC, and noon.ch is covering a large part of the cost for the 100 or thereabouts young people who are either attending classes from "plus 1" onwards (equivalent to the 11th class of our system), are receiving a vocational training, or are going to college. Usually, the MGRC finances only part of the training, say through targeted

grants for school fees or purchasing study material, since students are often entitled to and receive scholarships from government sources, churches and convents as well. These opportunities are frequently unknown to the young people and their parents, though.



This year we were able to participate in one of the periodic events held by the MGRC: On 3 March, 2012 there was a coaching seminar for the students of class 11 and above. Lectures were given on the topic "exam preparation", then a task was set of doing a piece of work on that subject in small groups, and finally the results of the group work were presented to the plenum. We saw the young people taking part actively in the group discussions.

There are also periodic seminars on the issue of career choice, for which professional practitioners and experts in the field of education are invited for lectures and group work. The young people do not have a family background inviting discussions of these issues.

During our visit we were able to have a long talk about the situation of pupils and students of poor families with the persons in charge of the centre, and we learned a lot about the job prospects of the young people we support.



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Fort Cochin / Kerala, March 2012