

From darkness to paradise

Accountability

Foundation “De Vaste Burcht” (The Mighty Fortress) is a Christian organization, born out of private initiative in 1980. It has been active for almost twenty years in the most backward areas of India, especially in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. We are engaged in bringing the Gospel to those who have never heard of it and do it in word and deed. We are assisted by three managing pastors, including Mikhael¹. They direct our group of 80 pastors who share about God, the Creator of heaven and earth, perform social work, teach children, manage sewing schools, care for 62 orphans, lead a leprosy camp and teach in four bible schools in the jungle. We have built about 60 churches and more than 500 pastors have followed a three-year Bible study. The opposition is large and increases noticeably; we now even have lost some pastors through assassinations. But the spiritual hunger is great and the fields are white for harvest, and our pastors are willing to sacrifice their lives for the Gospel.

Preface

This book follows the life of one of our managing pastors in his area in Odisha. What we describe actually happened; there is no fiction here. The goal is to create a greater awareness of social and missionary work in areas that hardly anyone has ever heard of, let alone can tell you about. In all the years that we have been working in these vast areas, we have never heard of another aid organization - secular or spiritual - that tries to bring some improvement to the lot of these unknown tribes and forgotten people. What we describe here is just a sample of the variety of topics we could cite. There is much more to tell, and often it is too awful for words. Maybe someday a description of the aspects of life in the Indian Remote Area will come about. For those interested there is in principle an opportunity to join us in traveling to these areas.

Chapter 1 - How it started

Mikhael was not unfortunate in life. In fact, his life was fortunate. He grew up in the Nabarangpur district in the state of Odisha, India. He was lucky that his father held an administrative position with the Indian Railways, together with three million colleagues. That means that you belong to the more affluent groups in society, but that is relative. The monthly income of his father was around € 150², which was considerably more than the majority of the 35 million people of Odisha earned. The income often is not more than about € 35 per month for a family with four children.

Odisha is the poorest and most backward state, which is obvious when you get there. You see it everywhere: the buildings, the people, infrastructure and public services that

1 The names Mikhael and Rachel are not the real names. This is to protect those involved.

2 The various amounts are given in Euros.

do not work, or very poorly at best. Public education is of poor quality, particularly in the Remote Area. A child can have six years of schooling and still not be able to write his name. No, that's not due to the intelligence of the child, but due to corruption - even in education. The teachers make a deal with the headmaster: "You get twenty percent of our salary, but we do not come to teach. We only come to hand out rice³ and then we go home". So, the children are only in school for a free meal of white rice and nothing else. At least that's something, because at home, poverty is common and there is often nothing to eat.

All that was out of sight for Mikhael. The large income of his father made it possible for him to be sent to a private school where he received a good education so that he could read properly and was able to write and do math's. His parents were Christians, but Mikhael did not have the impression that the belief in them was deeply rooted. One day they took Mikhael to a "real" crusade in the city. This "real" is important, because there were fake crusades set up by scammers. They go around the city and promise everyone one euro if next day they come to the open-air meeting. If you have nothing to do and your stomach is growling with hunger, you go of course! So, several hundred people will gather and the "evangelist" preaches an impassioned sermon. There is music and a choir sings unfamiliar songs for the audience, while the whole show is recorded on video. What visitors do not know is that the scammer sends the video to America to extract money from churches there for the "church" of the so-called pastor. Some churches in the USA fall into that trap and provide thousands of euros. If donors want to visit the "church" after a few years, there is suddenly no longer any contact - and of course the money is gone.

This time it was different. The preacher was a Spirit-filled man who knew how to touch hearts, at least the heart of Mikhael. He made a definitive decision about Jesus and began to work seriously on his faith. He had found a club of friends who together visited a small Pentecostal church and joined them. His faith grew and as young as he was, he had an unstoppable desire to make Jesus known to others. After he had completed his secondary education, he decided to enroll in a seminary to study for a Bachelor of Theology – comparable to the HBO education in the Netherlands. Fortunately, he received a good education in the bible and his study also allowed him to gain a serious understanding of the English language which came in handy later on. This "serious" we do have to mention, because the education system there is a drill system: you should just do what the teacher says, but you do not have to understand. So, you can sit next to a student and look in his language book. There is a picture of a tree, and below it: "What is this? - This is a tree ". Then you ask the child, "What is this" - while pointing at the picture. The child says obediently: "This is a tree". Then you take the child outside and point at a tree, "What is this?" - and the misunderstanding will be obvious.

3 In order to be able to eat, children have to work so they are not able to go to school. Therefore, the government provides rice at school so that having to work for food cannot be a reason not to send children to school.

One afternoon Mikhael sat in the courtyard of the Bible School enjoying a glass of tea. He thought about what he would do after his graduation which was coming soon. One thing was certain, he would soon marry Rachel who was now twelve years old. He had no idea what his career would look like, but this afternoon would change all that. He was alone and there was nobody around. What happened next, he cannot describe, but he had a vision or had fallen asleep and had a dream. Whatever it was, the message was clear to Mikhael, and it was as follows.

Jesus walked with him through a rural area and together they climbed a hill. At the top he saw a vast valley before him with a lot of people gathered; it was an immense, dark mass. Jesus said to him, "Count them." Mikhael began to count, but there was no way to do that. "But Lord, there are too many, I cannot count them!" Jesus turned and said to Mikhael that he should follow Him. A moment later they arrived at the gate of a garden, but it was locked. Jesus took a key from his pocket and opened the gate. They walked together through the garden and Mikhael enjoyed all he saw immensely. One tree was more beautiful than the other and so it was with the flowers and fruit. He had never felt so happy as at this moment, but everything comes to an end, even this walk with Jesus. They went into the garden again and Jesus handed the key to Mikhael; "Close the gate again." He did that and turned around so he could return the key to Jesus but Jesus was not there!

With a shock Mikhael came to his senses and he knew with absolute certainty what the dream could mean. Jesus had shown him an innumerable multitude of people who lived in darkness and it was his mission to guide the people into paradise.

The dream had seriously affected him and he wondered where and how to start this calling. The first step was to ask Jesus what he should do and where he should live with his wife. The answer came: "Go to the Nabarangpur district". Mikhael now had responsibility for his wife. They decided to buy an "open air hut" in that city, which is a hut with no walls, so basically just a



Open air hut

roof of palm leaves on stilts. The wind and dust blow through it and some huts offer hardly any protection. The purchase of this structure was already affecting his savings in a big way: twenty euros.

Anyway, Mikhael had now become a preacher of the good news and went energetically to work. He had rented a piece of canvas for ten cents and used it as a roof suspended from a few posts. He then invited the people who lived around the hut for a meeting; they sat in the shade under the cloth and listened to his first sermon. In the days after that he repeated this exercise but one night he and Rachel sat together in their hut and Mikhael said to God: "Lord, if you do not help us, we are going to die of hunger!" Sometimes God's answer comes some time later or it does not come at all, but not now. It came immediately: "The pot will not empty"!

For us Westerners this answer requires some explanation. In these poor regions of India money is scarce. A collection in church is collected in kind and done in a pot. Mostly the believers take a handful of rice along to the meeting and that is for the pastor. But you cannot live on rice only, because sometimes you need a few euros to buy a pair of flip-flops, or fifty cents for a second hand shalwar kameez (women's clothing). Money for necessary things was therefore rarely available and the family lived in poverty.

Rachel gave birth a year later to their first child, but the delivery was very problematic. She was taken to the local hospital, where the doctors would not help her. She had to pay seven euros treatment costs up front, but they had no money. Mikhael then approached anyone who could help him, his father first. He was able to pay the seven euros easily, but he refused! Other friends were no help either, they either did not help or they could not afford the money. If nothing was done, it would mean the death of Rachel and the baby. Of course, this had been a subject of intense prayer and Mikhael decided to beg the chief physician to help his wife, even though he was not able to pay for it now. The man relented and said that the hospital would advance seven euros, but he had to pay them back later. The baby came healthy into the world and Mikhael has paid off the debt, but it took him five years!

Chapter 2 – Poor with the poor

Pastor Mikhael is a very modest man. He speaks without raising his voice and his communicative gifts can also be called modest. It seemed that organization is not one of his gifts either, but that would later prove to be a misconception. His church was small in size and remained so for a long time, but God made sure that the pot did not become empty - but more than the contents of the pot was there not! Yet, as poor as he was, Mikhael was concerned with those who had less than he, like the lepers, beggars and prisoners.

Nothing is worse in India than to suffer from leprosy. You will be ostracized by everyone. Even your closest loved ones want nothing more to do with you and declare you dead. The government has issued all kinds of rules and regulations that isolate you. You are not allowed to drive, but that's the least important thing in these regions. You cannot use public transport, hospitals cannot admit you, there is no access to government services and even some pastors avoid you. Leprosy is common in the Remote Area for the cause is often a lack of hygiene and walking barefoot.



Leper village

There was a small leper colony in the Nabarangpur district where lepers vegetated and in reality, were waiting for their death - either by starvation, exhaustion, illness itself, or a combination of all. There was no help in their distress, but Mikhael visited them every day. He could do nothing for them, because he himself had a shortage of everything. Sometimes he took a razor blade

to cut open wounds so he could squeeze the pus out. But his main task was to tell these outcasts of Jesus, the Saviour for the present and the future. The rescuer who cares about them, who heals, who has mercy and who gives relief, but they saw none of those promises come true! Nevertheless, after some time they all came to believe, without having experienced anything of what Mikhael told them. He managed to get the local government to put a few shacks at their disposal, located in a dead-end street which was completely neglected and no longer in use. Here the outcasts were accommodated and gradually more of them came. Thus, a small camp with twenty residents was formed. Because our pastor got more and more to do, he needed someone who could oversee the camp and occasionally carry out odd jobs. A solution for this came about, more about that later.

One day, two impoverished pastors from Koraput (two hours journey away) came to visit Mikhael. He did not know the men, but invited them into his house. They came on behalf of a group of 25 pastors from the Remote Area around Koraput and had a request for him. The request was whether he - Mikhael - would like to be their leader. Mikhael was perplexed. He did not know the men, had never heard of them and now he should be their leader? It had to be a mistake. "I do not think you've knocked on the right door. I am a poor pastor, like you, and I can't offer you anything. I'm not known and cannot financially support you in your areas." The two guests made it clear that they were not mistaken. They did not ask for money, but only that he would be their leader. Mikhael prayed and God put it in his heart to do what was asked of him. This laid the foundation of what a few years later became a great spiritual work in one of the most remote areas in the world - where people live in the stone age and where they still offer human sacrifices. Where never the name of Jesus had sounded. But more on that later too.

Mikhael worked hard and popped up everywhere where people were in big trouble. You'd think that he could not offer much in the way of money or anything else for he had nothing

himself. All he could do - and did - was bring the gospel, and he did that with heart and soul. The people who had the greatest need were those who were rejected by society. In addition to the leprosy sufferers there were the beggars. There are professional gangs of beggars who “rent” a baby of a mother and a woman, who is one of their gang members, walks amongst the busy traffic, pretending that her baby is hungry. Often drastic steps are taken to rake in money. Every year about 40,000 babies are kidnapped and then become beggars or prostitutes, or are forced to do slave labour in a quarry or a textile factory. The epitome of horror is that children are slaughtered - I can hardly get the word out of my keyboard - so that their organs can be sold. These conditions occur mainly in large cities and specifically those where many tourists come.

It is different in the Nabarangpur district as it is a town where no foreigner shows up and everyone is poor. The beggars are forced to be beggars in the Hindu culture, because their parents and ancestors were. That means that you are not allowed to work - so they don't. Would anyone try to escape from this curse by trying to do work, no one would hire him. The only solution that remains is to beg, or sometimes - very rarely - to do a day of work in the rice fields at harvest time.



Beggars camp

There were many beggars in the city, about 1000 out of a population of 20,000. The council found that such a large group was too much of a nuisance so they devised a plan to get rid of them. They proposed a budget to gather the beggars a few kilometers outside the city in a camp that would be built for them. For the houses you have to use your imagination. They most closely resemble a shoebox with two windows at standing height without glass, and a doorway - but no door. There is one room with a half wall in the middle to create the impression that there are two rooms. Unfortunately, during the construction process, too many people had to benefit from



Slave labour in the paddy fields



Children's church in the beggars camp

the cash flow, so the mortar contained less and less cement and an increasing amount of sand. As everyone knows, the strength of the structure is thus compromised with the result that the first shelters collapsed within a year. In addition to the shoeboxes and one hand pump there was nothing in that area: no electricity, roads, water or what-

soever. There was no school for the large families and the children of the beggars were not allowed to go to an ordinary school – even if they or their parents would like to do so.

It was here that Mikhael found a large work field with people who were not used to anyone who positively paid attention to them. It was difficult to bring something to these people, because they were - and behaved inappropriate. There was always a lot of noise and shouting, but Mikhael persevered. With the help of a few of the residents, he built a church using bricks from the collapsed shoeboxes. Many residents came to faith, although the depth of it was unfathomable. Children's services were organized in the afternoon, because the kids had nothing else to do anyway.

One afternoon in 2004, a pastor appeared in the camp. He was from a large church fellowship in Visakhapatnam, the nearest big city, about eight hours travel away. Mikhael knew him quite well, and the visitor brought a special guest with him, a white man. The pastor led him around the camp and he also had the opportunity to briefly speak Mikhael. Not long though, because the pastor did not allow that.

Mikhael was not alone busy with all kinds of spiritual and social affairs, for Rachel was very active too. She led a women's group, had to care for her family of four children and held church meetings, which was quite unusual for a woman. One afternoon she was preparing food outside when she said to Mikhael: "Next year there will come an end to our poverty." He was overwhelmed by the bold statement and asked how she came to say that. "God has told me that next year there will be an end to our poverty." He wanted to know how God had spoken, but he got no further with the answer: "I do not know, but God has spoken, and He is a true confirmer of His word." In the year that followed nothing special happened that could result in the relief of the poverty.

One day a boy from the beggar camp came running up and gasped: "The white man is back, but now he is by himself" Mikhael quickly grabbed his bicycle and sped to the camp.

The white man had tried to make contact with the people who found it all very interesting, but there was no one who spoke English and the white man did not speak Odia. Mikhael spoke to the white man, who was glad to finally have someone who spoke English, however limited it was. Mikael offered to show the man through the camp and yes, he was allowed to look into the shoeboxes and take photos. He also showed him the church and the white man was clearly impressed by the relatively large number of believers. They all had come to faith in the camp under the preaching of Mikhael.

Mikhael asked the man whether he had visited the leprosy village at all, but that turned out not to be the case. The village was a few hundred meters away from the beggars' camp and the visitor was shocked by what he saw there. No matter how poor you are, and wherever in the world you live, people everywhere can still laugh and children find something to play with. But there was nothing to laugh in this village; death was to be seen on the faces of the people. There was a woman who had a dramatically bad condition and that made the greatest impression on him. Her name was Hannah. Her leprosy was untreated, she had no hands and could only move in a sitting position. She was clad in a burlap sack, but that was not the worst of it. The worst thing was that she had been totally deaf and totally blind for twenty-five years. Imagine: you live twenty-five years within yourself and have no more contact with anyone!

The man was clearly moved, and when leaving the camp Mikhael gave him a piece of paper with his contact details. The man said: "Twice a day someone gives me his business card and asks me for help, but I am not the Minister of Finance of India, so I cannot help everyone. I'll take it, but you should not count on me to ever contact you again. Mikhael went home disappointed and let himself be comforted by Rachel. "You know what God told me last year? Trust in God and not in man."



Hanna before her healing

Not long after, there was a letter on the mat - well, not literally of course. The letter had come from a faraway country and Mikhael did not know exactly where it was; it had the words "The Netherlands" on it. The writer was the white man and he reminded Mikhael of his visit. He said in the letter that he would help him, but to make this possible the first thing Mikhael had to do was to go to an internet facility and open a bank account. The next step would be to transport Hannah to a leprosy hospital to treat her illness. It was not easy to organise this as Hannah had no idea what was happening and no one could

reason with her. Mikhael had found a woman who was willing to accompany Hanna on the four hundred kilometres journey and help her with cooking her food in the hospital. They made sure that a car was available and tried to get Hannah inside, but Hannah did not want to. "What's happening, stay away from me, no, I want to stay in my hut!" Hannah was not going to co-operate and after several attempts they decided to take a different approach. They brought the car in front of the hut and tried to force Hannah into the car. She still didn't want to go and fought like a lion, but that was not easy, after all, she had no hands. Therefore, she sank her teeth so deep in the upper arm of the woman who would accompany her, that she had to be taken to the hospital.

They brought Hannah back to her hut and a disappointed Mikhael sent an email to his white friend in the distant Netherlands. "What should I do now, how to proceed with this?" The return email gave the following suggestion: "Organise a prayer meeting for Hanna" Mikhael was ecstatic. "Yes, we are going to do that. We will fast and pray for three days, but you must also participate." In the Netherlands prayers were alerted, including a group of Christians who had gathered for a multi-day seminar, organized by Bart Doornweerd. In India too, serious efforts were made with the prayer meetings. They go about it in a different manner than we are used to, from early morning until late at night, or even through the night.



Hanna after her healing

When Mikhael and Rachel came home on the second day of the prayer meeting, a couple with their son were waiting for him. They had come back from a long trip to a hospital in Visakhapatnam in order to have their son examined. He was severely weakened because every day he was bleeding from both ears and it looked like he would die. The doctors had looked concerned, but thought that they could solve the problem. Only, it would cost € 1500, which is

an unreal amount for someone who does not have a single euro. Empty-handed, they returned to the Nabarangpur district and decided to bring their need to Mikhael, hoping that he could help them. "I'm not a doctor and I know nothing of this medical problem," he said, "but I know that Jesus is able to heal him. We have a three-day prayer meeting in the leprosy village. Come tomorrow, then we will pray for your son too."

The next day would be a day which none of the people present would ever forget. There were prayers for Hanna and also for the boy. Rachel pulled out a bottle of oil and put some oil on the eyelids and the ears of Hanna. Suddenly – as later described by Mikhael - a wall

of fire appeared between those present and Hanna and everyone fell unconscious. How long they have been lying there is not known; it could have been thirty seconds or five minutes, but the people regained consciousness when Hanna shouted loudly: "I can see again and I can hear again!" At the same time the boy with the bleeding ears was also healed. The people in the city heard of the miracle of the healing of Hanna and could not believe it. People in India will under no circumstances enter a leper colony, but this was an exception. They got over their aversion and came to look in the camp and it really was as they had been told. It was indeed true: Hanna was healed of her deafness and blindness, and she did not have to go to the hospital for leprosy treatment anymore. It did not mean that she was cured of leprosy and her hands and feet did not grow back. Afterwards, Hannah slowly improved and she could also walk again, despite her disability.

Mikhael regularly visited the city jail and one day he met Ruben who had been there for only a few months but was sentenced to ten years in prison. The chance that he would survive ten years in a prison in the Remote Area in India was extremely small. Prisons are always crowded, not only with prisoners, but also with rats. Diseases were the direct result of that and fights were the order of the day. At the command of Hindu gods Ruben had sacrificed his few months old daughter by cutting her throat, but even in the Hindu culture this went too far. In prison Mikhael explained the gospel to Ruben and he was converted. That same night he had a dream. In that dream, God revealed to him what day and what time he would be released. That would be a year away, but that was highly unlikely. He did not have money to buy himself free, he did not have "friends" and an appeal was out of the question. He told this dream to Mikhael, but kept it hidden from the inmates. What would they say about it and how would they react? Time passed and the day that God had nominated now approached rapidly. In the natural world nothing changed: there was no lawyer, no one spoke to him and nothing pointed to release. On the day and time that God had said there was rumbling at the door and the bolts were pushed away. In the doorway stood the prison director who said that Ruben could go; he was released! When asked why he was released, the director could not answer; it was an order from above. The man had no idea how right he was in this! Ruben was now a free man and thanked God on his bare knees. As a token of his gratitude, he wanted to go to work for God. That was good, because he was a nurse by profession and agreed to become the manager of the leprosy camp. God has His special ways to accomplish things in the natural world.

In the meantime, Mikhael and Rachel now had a family of six and moved into a tiny little house. The kitchen was one square meter, but that was not a problem as they were used to outdoor cooking on a wood fire and for that you do not need a big kitchen. They had a small living room with a few chairs but no table as that did not fit in there. The table was not necessary anyway, because the inhabitants of the remote areas do everything on the floor. You eat, sleep, cook, wash and do your homework on the floor - often no more than compacted clay. A curtain separates the living area from the sleeping area.

One morning a neighbor came to Rachel with her daughter hanging over her shoulder. The child was sick and when Rachel looked at the child, she was shocked. The child was really very, very sick, and she immediately sent the neighbor with the child to the hospital. Once at the hospital the child appeared to be deceased. To be certain of his diagnosis, the

doctor consulted with a colleague and together they confirmed the death. “Take the child home and bury it.” Crying and sobbing the woman turned back to Rachel, who was devastated. “Lord, yesterday the child was playing in the street and now it is dead! But with you all things are possible and I beg you, bring this child back to life!” While the wailing of the gathered neighbors increased in volume, she prayed again the same prayer. Then there was a voice that said: “Tell the neighbor that the child will wake up at midnight. Tell her to cook food for the child, which should be ready at midnight. The child will ask for food.” It takes great courage to ask the assembled crowd for silence and to tell them that the child will live; rigor mortis had already set in! The gathered women laughed - or abused her, but that evening the neighbor did as God commanded. At midnight the child came alive and asked for food. To this day, this - now - young woman is known in the Nabarangpur district as the miracle child.

The Dutchman went to work energetically. Along with Mikhael he opened a bank account in the Nabarangpur district and set up a foundation under Indian law. Moreover, Mikhael was assigned a salary. “You see now that I heard God’s voice correctly? He has put an end to our poverty - but His work has not yet ended. This is a new beginning and everything will be different from what we could have ever imagined.” Rachel had no idea how much she would be right with that.



Picture of the leper hospital



Church in the lepers camp

The leprosy street kept both men occupied and Mikhael was sent out to see what could be arranged with the city council. Not that they would contribute financially; they had never done so before and they certainly would not do so now. The plan was for the space – in and next to the leprosy street to be used for further expansion with new houses. It turned out that, elsewhere in the Nabarangpur district, there was a

leper “hospital” with another twenty lepers. The hospital is in quotes here because it really was a hospital once, but it was already thirty years out of use and basically a ruin.

There were no doors or windows and some of it had collapsed. The thirty-year old beds were still there including the mattresses of that time, half eaten away by vermin. The living conditions there were indescribable and the plan was for all the lepers in the Nabarangpur district to be invited to come live with us. We would provide housing, three meals a day (what a luxury!), clothes, detergent, kerosene, basic health care and water supply. No wonder everyone gladly accepted this invitation; the village, named Indravati Colony, began with 67 residents.

Do not think it lived up to the standards that we are used to, that it does not. Remember that we are talking about a poor city in the poorest of the 29 states of India. If the most maligned group of people would have it better than the people in the city, revolt would certainly have broken out and would have the consequence that the inhabitants would vent their anger on the just established leprosy village and its inhabitants. Wisdom was the order of the day. We can happily report that in the twelve years that the camp exists no such irregularities have occurred.

Chapter 3 - The spiritual work gains momentum

It was now fifteen years since Jesus took Mikhael by the hand to show him the valley full of people who were in darkness and showed him paradise where he was to lead the people. All he had seen so far was abject poverty and no indication of crowds or paradise. Maybe the Indravati Colony was the first step. The lepers vegetated on the verge of death, were trampled and rejected by



Bible school in Diomalli

all and their life was dark in body and spirit. Years ago, they had already repented and trusted that God would help them, and now they had, as an answer, received a dignified existence. Maybe they cannot find the words to thank Him, but God is the only one who can know what goes on in the hearts of those “uneducated and uncivilized barbarians”.

For a year now, Mikhael had the spiritual care of the 25 “barefoot pastors” in the jungle around Koraput and went there regularly by coach to teach and encourage them. That proved to be insufficient because the men were poorly educated and their Bible knowledge was absolutely inadequate. Together with his Dutch friends, he then set up a plan.

First, they would start with a Bible School in this area; that was something very special, because in Koraput there were Christians and also churches, but they were inwards focused. The believers there hardly knew what was happening in the Remote Area and were certainly not motivated to pay any attention. A Bible School did not exist anywhere near there; you had to go to Visakhapatnam and you had to pay for it - which no one could. Now a three-year Bible School had been established in their area in which all pastors could participate, plus a number of pastors who did not belong to the main group of 25 pastors, the so called “guest students”. Teaching took place three days a week and was completely free: the rent of the building, food and drinks and even the bus fare to it - everything was paid for. The accommodation was free too, but that was not the biggest problem. No, no beds with sheets and blankets; The men slept on a mat on the floor, side by side. If there was not enough space, a few would sleep outside, under a canopy. Sometimes it has its advantages if you are not too spoiled by life. As noted, the people were dirt poor - and our pastors were no exception. They were now full-time pastors and were therefore paid a “salary” of € 20 per month. That was totally inadequate to survive because it should be almost double. Yet they were not paid more in order to not make them dependent on external aid. Occasionally there are marriages, funerals or house dedications and that provides a few Euros extra income per month.



Gospel proclamation in the Remote Area

The men knew the Remote Area at the border of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha well because they were born and raised there. They began by drawing up a list of names of villages they knew. That turned out to be 115, all villages that never had heard the gospel, so a plan was drawn up to visit these vil-

lages. Every pastor would be responsible for a cluster of a few villages so that they could provide aftercare. The instructions in the Bible were exactly followed. When you travel, you take nothing with you; no food, no drink, no clean clothes... only the Bible. Mikhael was the leader of the group and went with a few pastors on the road. They travelled on foot because the roads were too bad or missing entirely; moreover, they did not yet have access to a car. When they arrived at a village, the village elder was asked if they could say something to the people and almost always they would get permission. When permission was refused, they would return two months later and then they would get permission. Mikhael held an opening speech of less than an hour, in which he explained the gospel. After this, he asked if there were sick people in the village, which there always were. He prayed for the sick and laid hands on them as taught in Mark 16: 17 & 18 and in many cases immediate healing occurred. The white man had explained to those interested that

healing also occurred gradually, but that was not the experience of Mikhael, healing always came immediately. After the meeting they would move on to the next village and sometimes a pastor stayed behind to provide follow-up. After that they would come back weekly. The next step was that one of the pastors with his family settled in the area.

One day they walked with a group of five men to the next village. They found the village completely abandoned, but the fires were still burning. Mikhael did not understand it and decided to wait in the village. After an hour the first resident reluctantly emerged. He explained that the residents were afraid of the foreigners. Five men they had never seen before; it had to be an attack on the village and therefore they had fled. On another occasion Mikhael came to a small village with thirty adults and their children. The first person he saw was a man who was laying outside on a bed. He had been sick for months and could not stand or walk. Mikhael asked if he could pray for the man and he agreed with that. He was healed instantly and was jumping and dancing. All the villagers were witnesses of this and 22 of them repented. They were baptized a week later.

One-night Mikhael had a dream. He saw himself standing on the square of a village. He was ready to talk to the villagers, but at that moment a man who was on some kind of mattress was carried into the group. He looked the man in the face and then God said, "You'll meet this man soon and you have to pray for him." The next days nothing special happened and he did not meet the man he had seen



Church in the jungle

in his dream. A week later it was a hit. He came to a village where he would speak to the residents. The village elder accompanied him to the town square where people were already gathered. Someone had arranged a table for him and while Mikhael installed himself a man on a mattress was carried into the circle. He was in a very bad shaped and was more dead than alive. You guessed it: it was the man from his dream. Mikhael walked up to him, put his hand on the man's forehead and said a prayer. Ten seconds, no longer. The man made a few jerky movements and jumped up from his mattress. He was restored to healthy in a split moment and looked nothing like the man who a few seconds before was dying. The result was a great commotion among the villagers and you would understand

that Mikhael now had a sympathetic ear. In another village four people were healed almost simultaneously.

But sometimes it runs differently. He was thrown into a deep pit by a madman and pelted with stones and was quite handicapped for a few weeks. The area does not have effective government, it exists on paper only. Instead, various terrorist groups fight for power with the population as a victim. Two of them are fighting for supremacy: the Naxalites (Peking-oriented communists) and Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an extreme Hindu group that is averse to all the “foreign” spiritual influences, particularly Christianity and Islam. Both groups carry out murderous acts, who would stop them? So, it’s not unusual for a note to be left in a house, stating that the next morning a large sum of money will be collected. If the money was not there, the bread winner will be murdered - and that was not an empty threat!

One day Mikhael was kidnapped by the terrorists. He was locked up in a cave and every day interrogated by one of the leaders. After an alleged wrong answer, he was beaten.



Standing in line to be baptized

This went on for a few days, until the leader of the group apologized: “We have checked with a lot of people in different villages. You’re a good man, and you’ve done a lot of good things. You are free, go home!” The impact of the mission group was growing. About 20 churches were built there in the jungle with a floor area of 40 – 50 square meters. And no, no bucket seats or carpets, but a rug

to sit on; women and children on one side, men on the other side. Because the people are very small (malnutrition) 120 can comfortably be accommodated and if the audience is bigger, they just stand outside. The church does in fact have windows but no glass, so you can hear the message everywhere. Meanwhile miracles are plentiful; people were healed and delivered from evil powers and the hunger for the Gospel was great. In one year, 1440 people were baptized, but the number of converts was many times greater. People are often afraid to be publicly baptized, because maybe you will be expelled from the society, looked down upon or you get no more work as a day labourer, and then how will you eat? A not excessive estimate is that the number of converts to date (2018) is into five digits and the first digit is not a one. God knows; He keeps score and forgets no one.

Chapter 4 - The Healing of Mikhael

Mikhael suffered from malaria, a disease that he had before, but this time it was different. He was sick and stayed sick, no medication helped. To make matters worse, he also had typhoid and there was nothing helping him against that. He dragged his sick body along and was exposed to all sorts of hardships. On their journeys from village to village, they often had no food and had to make do with what they came across in the jungle. Sometimes they drank some water from a muddy stream. At night they slept under the stars with no one on guard! Imagine staying in an area infested with cobras, bears, tigers and elephants. Mikhael commented: "God keeps watch." One afternoon four men returned from a visit to a village when they were attacked by a tiger. The tiger dragged one of the men of the road into the bushes and the rest grabbed stones and beat the tiger with them. What else can you do when you only have a Bible with you? It was a struggle of life and death, until Mikhael yelled "Tiger, leave in the name of Jesus!" The tiger let go of his prey and ran away like a hare. One of the pastors was badly injured and had to spend several weeks in hospital; another pastor got off with lighter injuries.

One evening Mikhael rode his motorbike (light motor-cycle) home when he was attacked by a bear. He was saved by a bus that came from the opposite direction and killed the bear. There are no road signs in the Remote Area; people have other things on their minds than traffic. There is one exception though, there are warning signs for elephants: "Elephant area" and that's not for nothing. In the West we have this idea that they are clumsy but lovable crea-



Children at the dump

tures, but that is a serious misconception. Elephants are real people killers, so Mikhael likes to keep his distance and avoid them. In the autumn the area is ravaged by cyclones and heavy rains, and several times it has happened that Mikhael was stuck in a village for a few weeks and was unable to communicate in any way with the outside world. Once he tried to escape from a flooded area. His motorcycle was loaded in a boat and Mikhael, with another pastor, attempted the trip to the other side. A fierce current caused the boat to capsize in the middle of the river. Both men clung to a tree for three days until they were able to reach solid ground again.

At home a few things happened too. In the beggars' camp one of the shoeboxes was occupied by five orphaned children, aged between five and ten years old. There was no care for the kids and they just had to figure out how to survive. They had found a way. Every

morning they went to the rubbish dump to look for plastic and empty bottles. They carried the empty bottles in a large pack on their heads: up to five kilograms over a distance of five kilometres to a buyer, who gave them a few rupees and that was just enough for a mouthful of rice. To forget all the hunger and misery, they damage themselves by using hallucinogens: molten Styrofoam. However, they were not the only ones who had discovered the rubbish dump as a source of income and that made the pickings meagre.

Mikhael decided with his white friends to look for accommodation for the children and with generous donations of Dutch supporters an orphanage was built. It was actually equipped with the latest technology. There was a kitchen with a sink - but the stove was put on the ground, because they are not accustomed to cook standing up. The epitome of modernity were the toilets and showers. Who else had those? Almost everyone was used to look for a quiet place outside where undisturbed you could relieve yourself on your haunches. But this? Toilets? We have taken 22 children in, not only from the rubbish dump, but also other horrendous cases. For instance, we have a child who witnessed both parents being shot by terrorists. A few days later they said, "Sorry, we picked the wrong persons". What



Orphanage with church in the Nabarangpur district

also often happens is that a widower departs and leaves his children uncared for. He goes to another village and starts another family. This is the sort of thing that happens in India: it is a merciless society where a lot of wry examples can be given.

Meanwhile Mikhael still suffered from malaria and typhoid and felt very sick, but he had to bear a great responsibility. Not only for pastors, but also for the villages and their inhabitants.

The number of pastors had

to be increased when necessary, but the candidates had insufficient knowledge. So, they decided to build a church in Diomalli "at the end of the world.". They also established a bible school in that church. After completion of the church building, they started with 45 students. Here in Diomalli, the road finishes and you could just walk hundreds of kilometers into the wide, wide jungle. No matter how far away, there are small villages everywhere with no facilities: no infrastructure, no electricity, no roads, schools or medical care. If someone was sick or there was the threat of a difficult birth, they prayed and laid their hands on the persons - and God did the rest.

One day Mikhael went to Diomalli to check on the progress of the construction of the church. As he stood with the local pastor and with the villagers in the background, the village was attacked by an army of the Naxalites. The villagers fled, but Mikhael and the

pastor were taken captive. They were held captive somewhere in the jungle, and every morning they were visited by the commander. "I know why you are here. You want to bring the message of a foreign god, Jesus. We do not want that and therefore you must promise never to come back here and no longer tell about Jesus. If you promise that, you can leave. The two men refused that and continued to do so for a few more days. On the last day the commander came again. "I offered that you can leave if you renounce Jesus, but you have refused. Today is the last opportunity to get free. If you do not respond to our demand, you will be shot." The men refused again and they were led outside. They were in a camp with three hundred soldiers. A firing squad was assembled: ten men in a row with their guns ready. Our men were tied to a pole and when the commander was about to give the firing command, Mikhael shouted: "Jesus, save us!" Then came the command "Fire!" and they heard the guns click - but no shot was fired. Something like that is impossible by any probability, but it did happen: all guns blocked! For a few seconds there was dead silence as everyone knew that something special had happened. Then pandemonium broke out. The rebels were running around and in the hubbub the commander shouted "Get out! I never want to see you again. Your God is much too strong for us. Untie them and kick them out of the camp!"

Mikhael returned home dead tired of the hardships and illnesses that still burdened him, but he did not get much rest there. Elsewhere in his area of responsibility a pastor had been abducted; he had disappeared without a trace for a few weeks already. His wife and children were distraught and did not know what to do. Mikhael did not know either and God was silent to his prayers. Good advice was hard to come to so he went to the area where the man had been abducted. He roamed around for two weeks in the jungle, but where to look? In desperation he begged God to show him where he could find the man. In a dream, God showed him a path marked by a special tree and a rock. There he had to go to the right and then he would reach the camp. The next day he continued his quest, plagued by heat and vermin, with no more than the Bible under his arm. While he was on his way, he saw the place he had seen in his dream, and yes, no misunderstanding was possible: they were the same tree and the same rock. He turned right, and walked along a long path. In the distance he saw a camp and when he came closer, he saw a lot of movement and activity. He walked on and soon reached the camp, but it was empty - abandoned in disarray. The fires burned, the guns were scattered on the ground and there was no one in sight. Mikhael cautiously looked into the huts, prepared that it might still be a trap, but there was nothing of the sorts. The camp was really empty, however in one hut he found someone: the kidnapped pastor. The rebels had fled in a hurry. Since there was no one guarding the camp, they left unhindered; a long way back home.⁴

On that Saturday he had a telephone conversation with his Dutch friend. Mikhael told him: "I'm so sick. If I do not recover will you then take care for my family?" If someone asks you that, he must feel very, very sick. The friend gave him the order to go the next day to Visakhapatnam, to the established western hospital there. "That's a long trip, but I want you to promise that you're going. Find a driver, have someone drive you there and

4 Later they found out via a contact with the cousin of a neighbour of an uncle and his aunt... that the terrorists had seen a large army coming and thought that they were being attacked by the army.

be examined. But now I'm going to speak healing over you in the name of Jesus." He did that, and after the conversation Mikhael fell into a deep sleep. He slept twenty-four hours straight and when he awoke, he told Rachel "I'm well again; the disease is gone!" Rachel was obviously surprised and happy, because this was yet another intervention of God. She also said that he now did not have to go to the hospital anymore as that would save him a sixteen-hour journey. But Mikhael said: "I have promised my friend that I would go to the hospital, so I will go!" On Monday he went to the hospital and after arrival he was closely examined. The doctors could only conclude that there was nothing wrong with him. Because they felt very sorry for him that he had made the long trip for nothing, they have given him a few pots of vitamin as a consolation prize.

Chapter 5 - The resistance increases

You could easily get the idea that the work in the jungle of Odisha only involves the proclamation of the gospel. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mikhael and his Dutch friends had an eye for the needs of the people and jumped in where ever that was possible. Many of the villages have big problems with their water supply. Women sometimes have to walk three kilometers down to a muddy stream and then climb up again with a kettle of water on their heads to start the trip back. We had a pit dug: fifteen meters deep - and by hand. In other cases, it was better to install a hand pump.



Children proudly showing their school books

There was a great desire among the villagers for their children to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. Remember that there are villages where no one can read or write yet parents realize how important those things are. In some cases, we have established small schools where education is provided for about forty children. We assign a pastor with his family to some village who then goes to live there. That is no small thing, because they will be thrown back into the Stone Age with all customs and practices that are part of that.

People know nothing of Christianity and practice animism. They pray to trees or rocks and frequently sacrifice humans. The people who are to be sacrificed are bought from neighboring villages. Sometimes it is a person or a family who then move to the village where the “feast” will take place. They are recognized as princes in the community and live there for several weeks, months or even years – all the time knowing what is hanging over their heads! We will save you from further details.

In providing education, it is important that the teacher lives in the village. People have no sense of time, so in the morning the teacher must first go around the village to gather all the children. Then he teaches for two hours in the named subjects. It is therefore not a complete primary education; it’s just to teach reading, math’s and writing. There are no buildings in the villages and Mikhael therefore sought a solution that could serve multiple purposes. He found it by building a community center. This is then used as a school, as well as a church and as a place for town meetings. Mikhael oversees all this and therefore has extensive email contact with the Netherlands. Construction plans and financing has to be arranged, the materials must be transported from far or carried, and the necessary day-labourers put to work. But he also arranges individual assistance in cases of hardship. This can be anything: from the purchase of a wheelchair, eye surgery, to organizing a two-week medical clinic in the jungle led by a Dutch medical team.

The Naxalites have the practice to regularly move their regional commanders around and in 2016 a new commander for the Remote Area took office. He went to work like a mad man and manslaughter and murder were the order of the day. Not only the population suffered under it, but also the regular army. Thus, on the main road to Andhra Pradesh a mine was detonated which eventually cost the lives of 15 government officials. One afternoon Mikhael and three pastors were walking back from a village campaign to their accommodation when they encountered a group of Naxalite soldiers. The commander asked what they were doing there and they replied that they had been sharing about Jesus in a village. The leader of the gang ordered them to promise to never again tell people about Jesus, but they refused, upon which the commander immediately shot and killed one of the men. The others fled and returned a few hours later to retrieve the body. The pastor left a 28 years old wife and four children behind. The fate of widows is very heavy. They have to do heavy work in the fields or on the roads⁵ where they carry baskets with stones on their heads: 20 kilograms at a time! They get half the salary of the man, so they go home with two euros per day. They are day-labourers and only earn money if there is work. It’s not rare that such a family wastes away. If for example the woman sprains an ankle, she cannot work. Then there is no food, and perhaps a neighbor occasionally slides some food around the corner, but she can’t keep doing that. Eventually, such a family goes in to a downward tailspin and dies from hunger and deprivation. Not in this case, as in consultation with the Dutch friends, it has been agreed that if a woman is left alone or the pastor himself becomes disabled, she and her family will be cared for. That is what happened in this case and the woman has fled her village and moved to a city where she has

5 Road construction in the Remote Area is mostly manual work. The use of road construction equipment is – with exceptions - banned. This regulation is set up to provide work and income for the people.

accommodation and receives a “pension”.⁶ This way she does not have to do any heavy work, but can take care of the children.

From the foothold in Diomalli evangelization trips were made to visit the unreached villages in the jungle and to preach the gospel. Many people were converted in a short time, often a quarter of the population or even more. That angered the Naxalite commander and he ordered punitive expeditions against the villages. In a few weeks, 35 new believers were killed across eight villages. Nobody knows anything about it and nobody takes action against it, because a government that can act is not present there. Only the friends in the Netherlands have made a lot of noise in the European Parliament, but the visible result of that was disappointing. Simultaneously Mikhael received a serious warning from the rebels: “Do not ever come here again. Diomalli is the limit”. With their history of violence, one does not take such a threat lightly.

At home Rachel had a thousand fears for her husband. Often, he was away for two or three weeks, no one knew where he was and there was no mobile phone coverage. Until God said to her during an attack of worry: “Do you sometimes think that I do not care for your husband?” After that she has never worried about him again. With this assurance in mind Mikhael decided in 2018 to visit a pastor in one of the villages in the “restricted area”. He started out with a helper, as dangers may be lurking everywhere. On their way they encountered a force of 200 heavily armed Naxalite fighters, led by the same commander who had earlier ordered the murders. It looked like Mikhael’s last hour had arrived. Mikhael said “You are all heavily armed, but we have nothing but our Bible”. “You can do with us whatever you want, but before you do what you think you should do, I want to tell you something. You should all kneel and when I say so, you have to call on the name of Jesus. If you don’t do that, you will die” That’s not the typical language of someone who is about to be shot dead. There was some commotion in the group and the rebels discussed with each other what to do. Finally, virtually all of them decided to kneel and call on the name of Jesus when Mikhael told to do so. Three men flatly refused to do so; they did not participate. Then Mikhael and his helper turned around and walked away unhindered, leaving the terrorist group behind in confusion. A few days later the terrorists were in a battle with government soldiers. Three terrorists were killed – those who had refused to kneel and call on the name of Jesus. This event went like a shock wave through the ranks of the Naxalites and sixty men came to believe that Jesus is not just a name, but the supreme authority. They recognized that He is also their Lord and Master and now go through life as Christians.

This story is not over yet. The commander cannot appear in civilized areas, because he would be immediately arrested - or worse. Therefore, via round about means he ordered Mikhael to visit him in his camp in the jungle. Mikhael had to come alone and was not allowed to bring someone along. One day he departed for a walking tour of more than 12 hours through the jungle. Along the way, he saw no man or village - only wild animals. By the evening he arrived at the camp, but found it in disarray and completely abandoned. It was one big mess: the rifles were scattered, a cooking pot was toppled and personal items

6 Over there it is called “free money”. Pensions are unknown.

were laying all around. But there was one person in the camp, an old, barely mobile man. Mikhael told who he was and the purpose of his coming, but the old man said there was no one there and he had no idea whether, or when, people would come back. Meanwhile, the man took care of food and was very friendly with Mikhael. The next day he remained in the camp, because that was the day of the meeting, but no one showed up. The day after the old man said to Mikhael that he might as well go back; he would tell the commander that he had been. He accepted the return journey; on the road still wondering what could be going on in that camp!

A week later he had telephone contact with the commander who was angry because Mikhael had sent a large army – led by an old man of all things – which was why they had fled. Mikhael told his side of the story and the conclusion can be drawn that no one actually knows who the old man was; the army force was obviously out of the question. A few weeks later the commander called Mikhael again in the middle of the night and asks him to urgently come to the jungle church in Diomalli. Mikhael replies that the next day he will come straight away because a road trip of two hours through the forest in the dark is too dangerous. Shortly thereafter, the pastor of Diomalli calls, requesting him to come promptly, and Mikhael goes on his way. He gets out of his car in Diomalli, and the terrorist rushes toward him, falls to his knees in front of Mikhael and cries with long sobs. He asks forgiveness for all the crimes he has committed and asks if Mikhael can please tell him who the God is whom he speaks about everywhere. The men fall sobbing into each other's arms, and that night find repentance and spiritual rebirth take place for someone who lived in darkness but now has seen the light. Mikhael spends four days with the man and for four days explains the gospel to him. The commander, who according to Mikhael, is a brilliant and highly qualified man, then returned to his army to tell them that he met the God of the Bible; that this has changed his life completely and he therefore can no longer be their commander. And the old man? An angel? Only Eternity will reveal it.

Epilogue

These then are the adventures of one of our three managing pastors in India so far. It's just a few of a long series of events in which the loyalty of Mikhael to Jesus and the Gospel is central. Large numbers of residents of this Remote Area - people in areas where the Indian government only knows the existence of on paper - have now been introduced to the gospel and many have given their lives a new direction. No more drunkenness, no murder, and no more sacrificial piles at the stake. Instead, meekness entered their life, compassion for family and neighbors and respect for the God who created heaven and earth.

Is our work in India now accomplished? No, the fields are still white for harvest, and the labourers are few (Matt. 9:37). Mikhael in India and we in the Netherlands feel blessed with this important work and we will continue – until Jesus comes!

Hoenderloo, in July 2018.

Adri Tijman.

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Recommendation

A brilliant and true account of a mission story full of incredible miracles from the jungle in India. The God of the Bible still proves Himself as evidenced by the special miracles He did and does perform there amongst these primitive and illiterate people. Beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

I am so grateful for that 'Dutch' person who in simplicity has been deployed for the proclamation of the good news among the unreached, deep in the interior of India. In it he is an example to follow for many.

This book is highly recommended for anyone who prays that the gospel will reach to "the ends of the earth". I keep the work of Adri Tijman and "The Mighty Fortress" close to my heart and would therefore warmly recommend it to you.

This report is a must for everyone who wants to be involved in world evangelization.

Highly recommended.

Jaap Dieleman – Abba Child Care International Foundation



Foundation "The Mighty Fortress"

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