

## Dr. Ronald Fritz Trip to Samarpan Dental Clinic, India 2007



Upon returning from work in Puerto Rico during the last two weeks of July, I had to hustle and do my laundry, pay bills, and repack. Two days later I would leave on an adventure I had only dreamed about for years: A trip to India – my destination, Kochi (Cochin in English), in the southern state of Kerala, traveling via Taipei and Singapore.

The reason: Samarpan ([www.unconditionalservice.com](http://www.unconditionalservice.com)) medical clinic, located in Kottapuram and operated by Dr. Alex Kodiath (EdD), is desiring to add a dental clinic for children in one of the examining rooms. The two story structure was constructed in 2003, on the site where his father had lived and died (1987), and where the medical clinic began (1989) after he passed away. Patients are seen every day in the medical clinic on the first floor of the Samarpan building, with a full time nurse and pharmacy. Various specialists (family, ophthalmology, OB-GYN, Peds) rotate thru on certain days each month. It was now time to add dental services for young patients (up to 18) and SDCDS referred Dr. Kodiath's request for help and consultation, to me. It was definitely an honor to assist, and be assisting, with this project.



When I arrived at Kochi, Dr. Kodiath and son, Praem, were already there. I was driven from the airport to Kottapuram, a village of about 35,000 people, about an hour north. I quickly got situated in my private room, upstairs where lovely living quarters with private bath, are located, and went to sleep. My system and body did not like the idea of the 12 hour change: When I arrived at 10 pm, it was 10 am in California (actually 9:30 am, as there are actually 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours difference for some reason). When I awoke the next morning (night for my system), there was hot tea waiting for me on the table. Soon, a full breakfast arrived from the nearby house of a niece, and I enjoyed my first feast, all local foods and flavors. I always enjoyed Indian cuisine anyway, but this was a special treat! My favorite breakfast? “Thread Bread,” which looks like an off-white ball of yarn, over which is poured a spicy split pea with vegetable sauce. Yummmmmm... it makes me hungry to think about!

Every day we enjoyed three full meals, all local cuisine, sitting with Dr. Kodiath and son at a large table. Eating is done with fingers instead of utensils, but I stuck to my fork. The cook and other family members seated in chairs other than at the table, and this I interpreted as a custom of courtesy and respect. We also enjoyed a walk every day, which I found rich in photo ops as we strolled. Dr. Kodiath grew up there, and everyone would greet him, often stopping him to chat. So I was treated like a king, and felt like one, too.

The monetary denomination is the rupee, and the exchange rate is 40 rupees to \$1 US. This had slipped from 50:1, due to dollar weakening. In spite of this, everything for sale (food, clothing, souvenirs) is based on local economy, and seemed “very reasonable” and inexpensively priced. To send a post card was a little more international, but cost only 8.00 rupees (20 cents US). My all leather Indian sandals were 250 rupees (just over \$6 US). There are 16 different languages spoken in the country of India, Hindi being the most common. In Kerala, however, Malayalam (same backwards or forwards) is the common language, so common that most people would not understand Hindi. If one does not speak Malayalam, a translator is of course necessary, although most students in the high school speak some English. It was so much fun to see the immediate smiles on the faces of school children walking by, as we would say, “Hello,” or “Good Morning,” or “How are you?,” and they would try to answer in English, usually successfully.

Of interest to me are the footprints which St. Thomas (Thomas, the disciple, the “doubter”), left in the territory surrounding Kottapuram. Thomas is said to have traveled to the west coast of India in his mission outreach to spread the gospel. There is a small stretch which must be traveled by land, when leaving Jerusalem. But the majority of the trip would have been by boat across the Arabian Sea, to the coast of India. He lived several years of his life here, preaching the gospel and teaching others about his firsthand experience with the Master. Any statue one sees of him has a book in the left hand, and the index finger outstretched on his right hand, as if in a position when he felt the spear hole in Jesus’ side. His influence was widespread, and for this reason, there are many Christians in this southwestern part of India.

The plans for the dental clinic were begun and are progressing. It is all being funded by donations to Samarpan. With the help of a local dentist nearby, Dr. Jovie Joseph (DDS), one of the chairs has been ordered, just about \$2,000 US, light and handpiece console included. Not too bad! We feel that local manufacturing yields much better local servicing of equipment. We will begin seeing children as soon as the chair is installed and functional. We are maintaining a list of interested colleagues who could volunteer either a one or two week period, and

this would begin in early 2008 when the patient load is sufficient. We already have a good number on the list.

On Sunday, all children from one of the nearby orphanages were screened. Generally, nothing worse than what we encounter here, was seen. There is less availability of refined sugary snacks in their environment, so less damage is caused by between meal snacks. Education will be one big goal of this Samarpan dental clinic. From the reaction to our screening, with other similar organizations nearby asking for help, it appears the clinic will become very busy very soon.



If you are interested in helping with the Samarpan project as a volunteer dentist, please contact Dr. Fritz. Believe me, you will be treated in a special way by special people, and you will not be disappointed. On the contrary, being privileged to help in a needy environment like this, brings many rewards and a satisfaction that money cannot buy. I appreciate any of you who can help.

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