

## Praying in a foreign language

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Despite his misgivings – “I didn’t think I was fit for the job” – Fr Phil’s six years as Major Superior were a great success, and his legacy of teambuilding, tribal enculturation, collaboration with religious sisters and Jesuit formation endure to this day. The ensuing years were spent directing a theologate and returning to his work as a parish priest – and getting into scrapes far more adventurous than any he’d envisaged when he set off for India as a young man. In one instance, he and a fellow Jesuit had gotten lost while travelling around remote mission stations. Unused to “crazy foreigners on motorcycles, on bicycles”, the locals ran away every time the men asked for directions.

“So I sneaked up on a boy who was minding cattle and I grabbed him and I must have terrified him. I said, ‘Which, way is it to Kanjia?’ He pointed it out and then ran off after the cattle, which were heading off at that time. Years later, I was at a meeting of catechists [in the same area] and I was telling this story. One of the catechists said to me, ‘I was the boy in the field’. He said, ‘I came home, said to my mother, “Some crazy guy on a bicycle grabbed me and asked me the way to Kanjia”. She said “Oh, it must’ve been the fathers from Kanjia””’.

On another occasion, when he was about 70 years old, Fr Phil was kidnapped, held up at gunpoint and beaten up on the side of the road.

“But that was because I tried to motorcycle my way around the group,” he explained in his self-deprecating manner.

“They put me and the motorcycle into a ditch. Eventually we started talking to each other and when it got dark and they’d finished off [my stash of] peanuts. They must have been hungry themselves. So they said, ‘You can go now, but don’t go forward, because that’s where the police are and you’ll tell the police, now go back the way you came’. So I said, ‘Well, how do I get the motorcycle out of this ditch?’ They said, ‘Oh, we’ll pull it out for you’. When I got back to the parish I was a bit shaken. I needed a whiskey!”

By the late 1990s, as Hazaribag became more autonomous and its own cohort of Jesuits began to outnumber Australia’s, its relationship with the Australian Province underwent a period of redefinition. Drawing “the short straw”, Fr Phil returned to Australia to work as a conduit between the two provinces as they consolidated their respective goals. After a brief return to his beloved India, he was appointed Director of Jesuit Mission in 2008 and returned to his motherland for good.

“I felt misplaced in odd ways – driving, buying a railway ticket – where I’d feel so comfortable doing that in India. I didn’t feel disjointed moving to India; I was too young, it was adventure,” he said at the time.

“It’s the friends you have that you long for, the trees, the streets, the people, the language, the customs. They make up a cultural whole, which envelops you, I guess. I still do miss it. I still keep thinking that I’m in exile and it’s not true. I’m very much at home here.”

This new home encompassed Australia’s close-knit Jesuit community and the many co-collaborators at Jesuit Mission, which had been established as an Australian-based support network for Hazaribag in 1951. Through events like the annual Maytime Fair and the Jesuit Mission Bazaar, the organisation and its volunteers had raised innumerable funds for Hazaribag’s projects over the years.

“It was an extraordinary support system – more than a support system, it was a sort of companionship. They were actually co-missionaries and many of them visited India,” Fr Phil said.

“It was a great sense of belonging, and one of connectedness. They were there from the very beginning, and they were incredible. The amount of time and energy and creativity that they gave to it is extraordinary.”

During his time at Jesuit Mission, Fr Phil oversaw the expansion of the Australian Jesuits’ missionary reach into Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In 2014 he retired from this role and spent his remaining years as an assistant priest at Our Lady of the Way Parish in North Sydney. But his adopted homeland was never far from his mind.

“I still pray in Hindi,” he said in what would be his final interview. “I greet people [in Hindi] if I can get a chance, I talk Hindi to the takeaway guys or the taxi drivers or whatever. It's a good feeling to be able to talk to people in Hindi.”

Comforting memories of his life in India arose, too, from a precious archive of the many decades he’d spent talking Hindi in that foreign land.

“[My mother] kept all my letters,” he said. “And when I came back to Australia many years later, the archivist in Melbourne brought the bundle of letters to me and said, ‘Here are your letters to your mother. She gave them to us’.”

Fr Phil was 89 years old when he died peacefully in his sleep at Lavender Bay on 7 April 2021, after celebrating mass with his community. Perhaps, as he readied himself for bed, he had prayed one last time in his beloved Hindi, and had dreamed of that distant country as he fell into his final slumber.