

# A Personal Interview with Ruth Friesen, *Missionary to India: 1952-1972*

by Fran Martens Friesen



Before Ruth Friesen and her husband, Jake, went to India as Mennonite Brethren missionaries, she became a registered nurse through the Fresno County Hospital. 1947. Credit: Ruth Friesen

**“Our doctor’s office got started on a small porch attached to the house.”**



Three of Ruth Friesen’s children were born in Jadcherla, India. Here, her son Ken plays with his friend, Cheetababu. 1968. Credit: Jake Friesen

## What brought you to India?

Ruth Friesen: *I went because of the opportunity for service and to answer God’s call. I had been studying in a three-year nursing program at Biola College in order to serve in Christian ministry. I took a fourth year in pre-nursing at Reedley College and got my RN degree through Fresno County Hospital, shortly before leaving for India (and I remember being pretty proud of that!) My husband, Dr. Jake Friesen, was also willing to serve wherever God led us. We signed up with Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services, and they sent us to India to work in the medical field.*

*We went to India in November of 1951 from New Orleans by ship. It took two months. We arrived January 12, 1952. On the ship we received some informal language study training and orientation from our fellow missionaries, John and Viola Wiebe who were returning to India after furlough. We served in India twenty years, returning to Reedley, California in 1972. In fact, three of my four children were born in India.*

## What happened when you first got to India?

RF: *We lived in a small house in Jadcherla, a town about three hours away from Hyderabad. Our doctor’s office got started on a small porch attached to the house. I had brought a stash of basic medicines along and*

*when people heard of that, they lined up in front of our house. It didn’t take long to run out of those medications! While patients were waiting in line, we talked with them and shared our faith. As many were Hindu, they found the idea that there is one God who loves them to be a foreign concept—they were used to serving and trying to appease many gods.*

*Soon after we arrived we got word that a missionary, Bea Warkentine, needed medical help in delivering her baby. We grabbed forceps (our surgical instruments were not even unpacked yet) and a delivery table which we put on top of the car and drove to the next village fifty miles away. It was all quite primitive; Bea was a brave woman! After a while another nurse, Regina Suderman, came from Reedley, California to help out in Jadcherla.*

## When did you establish the hospital?

RF: *That was established in 1953. We also started a nursing school which was helpful for Indian girls who had failed out of the local high schools. Attending our school gave them a certain status and opportunity for further training.*

*After the hospital was set up, we built a larger place to house our growing family. My husband helped design and build it himself, getting supplies from Hyderabad. Once, he was in Hyderabad and I stayed in the house with a guard sleeping outside. I was not at all afraid, but the funny*

thing was I got no sleep because every so often, all through the night, the guard would cough loudly just to let me know he was still guarding!

**You also served as something of a Bed-and-Breakfast hostess and live-in nurse as well, right?**

RF: Yes, missionary wives of various agencies, such as India Mission (interdenominational) and of course MBMS, came to our house for several weeks of prenatal care and stayed for several weeks after birth to recover. Then they went home to their various stations. We constantly had people coming and going—both Indian friends and missionaries. We had a cook and cleaner to help, fortunately, whom I supervised.



Joy Kelly (left) an Indian nurse, Ruth Friesen (center), and Regina Suderman (right) also from Reedley, California. These women were nurses at the hospital in Jadcherla, India that was established by Mennonite Brethren missionaries. 1953. Credit: Ruth Friesen

**What was your relationship with the local villages?**

RF: We missionaries had a good relationship with people in the villages who generally had respect for Indian Christians. In fact people from the low caste—now called Dalit—gained in status when they became Christians. Missionaries started schools for children of these new Christians who often became more educated than children from higher castes. Some even grew up to become city officials and people of influence.

they were everywhere. Streets and buildings were cleaner, but we had to be careful to keep things neat. There was a certain nonchalant attitude in India, but here people were more concerned about restrictions (and our boys had a hard time keeping their shoes on in church!) In India there was an open acceptance of strangers and warm hospitality whereas in the U.S. people kept to themselves and were on guard with strangers. Our experience in India remains a rich part of our lives and our Indian brothers and sisters remain dear to our hearts to this day.

**“We also started a nursing school which was helpful for Indian girls who had failed out of the local high schools.”**

**So, after all those years in India, how did you find the adjustment back to life in the United States?**

RF: Our reentry orientation was brief—in fact it was just Jake having a short conversation in the mission office—and I was not even there. We were shocked by many things. In fact, we found the reentry to be more difficult than the adjustment to India. For example, when we left the U.S., there were no freeways in the Central Valley, but when we returned

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Fran Martens Friesen teaches in the English department at Fresno Pacific University. She is the daughter-in-law of Ruth Friesen and had the privilege of living in India for six months in 2010, teaching at the Kodai Kanal international boarding school where Ruth’s children went to school, visiting the family home in Jadcherla and touring the hospital grounds where Ruth and her husband, Jake, worked.



Ruth Friesen and her husband, Jake, lived and worked at the Mennonite Brethren mission hospital in Jadcherla, India. Jadcherla is a village approximately fifty miles south of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, a state on the southeast coast of India.