News
Ministry



Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Pronoti Costa and Sr. Shongita Gomes proctor at an examination hall at St. Martha's High School at Sreemangal, Moulvibazar District, in Bangladesh. The congregation built the school and a hostel for girls of the Khasi ethnic group and for girls of workers from the area's tea gardens. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)



by Stephan Uttom Rozario

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Sreemangal, Sylhet, Bangladesh — January 4, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Utian Tongper, 71, head of Aliarchhara Punjee (a punjee is a cluster of houses within the cultural boundary of a community), is still a nature worshiper. His father was also a nature worshiper who saw the work of the Our Lady of the Missions sisters' (or RNDM) educational efforts and donated one acre of land to the sisters. The sisters used that land to build St. Andrews Boys Hostel.

"The sisters were the blessing of our Khasi punjee, an Indigenous village. Many of us have become highly educated today as a result of the hard work the sisters have done educating our children. We are eternally grateful to them," Tongper told Global Sisters Report.

There are 120 Khasi families in the punjees. Ninety families are Catholics, and the rest are Protestant Christians. The Khasi are a matriarchal ethnic group found in the Indian state of Meghalaya and northeast Bangladesh. They live a segregated life in hilly, forested villages. All of them make a living by cultivating betel leaf, while some work outside as day laborers when there is no betel leaf business.



Utian Tongper, 71, head of Aliarchhara Punjee, is a nature worshiper. His father was also a nature worshiper who donated one acre of land to the sisters for education. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

There are tea gardens next to every Khasi punjee. Tongper told GSR, "We are oppressed by the local tea garden owners and the government, who want to evict many of our people to grow their own gardens. Sometimes, our capital is declared a protected forest, and they try to build a government eco-park there. They also cut down [our] betel leaves."

In 1937, when there was no name yet for Bangladesh or Pakistan, the sisters were working in Chittagong, a port city around 350-400 kilometers from Sylhet. The government administration of Sylhet invited the sisters to serve the government hospital there, and four sisters responded to the invitation and came to serve.

During the partition of the country in 1947, the Hindu-Muslim riots caused the sisters to go back to Chittagong, thinking that it was not safe to keep foreign missionaries

in Sylhet. From then, the sisters would come to Sylhet on Christmas, Easter Sunday or other special days to assist the priests in their pastoral work.

Later, when the liberation war of Bangladesh ended in 1971, the sisters came permanently to Sylhet in 1973 to work with the priests. The sisters did pastoral work, including spiritual care, teaching and making people aware of their land rights.



Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Suprity Bibiyana Costa, a senior sister and head of St. Martha's kindergarten (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Suprity Bibiyana Costa told GSR the sisters lived in the school hostel for boys, teaching English and religious education. She added that teachers came from different villages to teach, and there were 32 schools in the tea gardens and punjees she looked after.

Since the Khasi and other tea workers lived in extreme poverty, the sisters ran the school for free. Costa said they taught religion and morality in the gardens, praying the rosary every night, adding that they did this "seven days in one garden and

seven days in another."

According to the people of the tea gardens and punjees, "One had to walk from one punjee to another, all day long through the forest, and through the waterfall, and the sisters had to go there too."

Costa told GSR, "The economic situation was terrible. In the gardens, they used to work for a week and get 150 taka [about $1.37]. If they could eat one meal, they could not eat the next. But they received us gladly, and never said they could not feed us."

Now, the tea garden workers make 1,020 taka (about $9.30) per week.



Women pick tea leaves, and earn only 170 taka a day, approximately $1.55 per Jan. 3 exchange rates. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

The sisters ran primary schools in different tea gardens and punjees, including Aliachhara Punjee. However, many boys and girls used to drop out after primary

school. As a result, it was increasingly difficult for the sisters to work on their rights alone. Initially, the sisters employed people to contact various government offices to secure land rights. But nothing worked. Then, they thought of an alternative. The sisters realized they had to work for the rights of the Khasi and tea garden people, and education was necessary.

Costa explained that they built a high school and a hostel for the girls of the tea gardens and of the Khasi punjees, where they were kept and educated at a low cost, adding that, "sometimes, the girls don't pay because they are extremely poor."

The school is named St. Martha's High School, a four-story building with more than 700 students. There are around 50 girls from various Khasi punjees and tea gardens attending.

Thanks to the sisters' schools and hostels, many Khasi and tea garden boys and girls are highly educated and established in society, working to protect the land rights of their community.



Sr. Rikta Gomes is pictured with St. Martha's High School students at Sreemangal, Moulvibazar District, in Bangladesh. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

"At least 30 girls who have studied at our school have joined as sisters from different congregations, some doing government and non-government jobs. But it would not have been possible without this school and hostel," Costa said.

Costa added that she plans to extend their capacity in the hostel to educate more people from the punjees and tea gardens.

Holy Cross Fr. James Shyamal Gomes, the parish priest of Sreemangal Parish, where the sisters have worked since 1973, told GSR that the contribution of Our Lady of the Missions sisters in pastoral care, education and awareness building in the area is undeniable.

Gomes said, "The area is large, and the distance from one village to another is very long. So, it was quite difficult for two or three priests to work there. Again, the transport system was poor, so the sisters contributed greatly to evangelism and education in the region."

Advertisement

Pius Nanuar, a father of three from a tea garden in Sreemangal, Moulvibazar District, is a manager at Caritas Bangladesh. He attended Our Lady of the Missions, the sisters' primary school. He also attended high school and college in missionary institutions.

Nanuar is now working with his fellow educated youth to establish their land rights.

"The Khasi punjees and tea gardens have educated people due to the contribution of the missionaries, especially the sisters," Nanuar told GSR.

Nanuar also said, "I think our people are not unaware of their rights, and more work needs to be done by the church because of the unfairness and injustice that is still happening to our people."

He said the sisters went from village to village looking after the schools, paying and training the teachers. He explained that they made them aware of their rights. "We

can contribute to society in the light of that education."