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Q&As



Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Srs. Gracy Thombrakudy (far left) and Francisca Sanga, the coordinator of Jeevika Migrant Outreach Services, with interstate migrant workers in Kozhikode, Kerala, southwestern India. (Courtesy of Gracy Thombrakudy)



by George Kommattam

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Sr. Gracy Thombrakudy, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, has advocated for the rights of migrant communities in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala since 2015.

She is the first member from her congregation to collaborate with the Kerala province of the Jesuits in this mission. Thombrakudy had earlier worked in northern India, where most of the migrant workers in Kerala come. She brings the cultural and language skills she learned in the north to help the migrants in Kerala.

One of her major services is ensuring migrants receive proper documentation, fair wages and spiritual support in their work places.

She is based in Kallanode, a village 27 miles northeast of Calicut. She regularly visits migrants, locally called the guest workers, and organizes medical camps for them in villages.

Thombrakudy shares with Global Sisters Report her work and mission.

GSR: Please tell us about your background.

Thombrakudy: I was born on Feb. 15, 1950, in Kerala's Kothamangalam in a family of five sisters and one brother. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in Economics from Mar Athanasius College, Kothamangalam. I felt called to serve the marginalized, reading missionary magazines during my college years. This led me to join the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth congregation in 1973.

My first mission was with the Santhal tribals in Bihar [eastern India]. I learned their language and culture by living among them. Over the years, my work extended to Jharkhand [Bihar's southern neighboring state], Mumbai [western India] and Kerala. My focus was the advancement of women and tribal youth through education, skill development and social awareness programs.

However, my work with interstate migrants in Kerala is the most fulfilling chapter. For nearly a decade, I have served with Jeevika Migrant Outreach Services, a joint

initiative of our congregation with the Jesuits at Kozhikode town.

What inspired you to work with migrants?

I lived among the tribals of eastern India for nearly three decades. I used to stay in their homes, returning to the convent only on weekends. They used to call me *Sanjaly* (third daughter in Hindi). My love for them inspired me to work with them in Kerala. My knowledge of their background, language and culture was an added benefit.



Sr. Gracy Thombrakudy in her office at the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Convent, Kallanode, a village in Kerala's Kozhikode district. (George Kommattam)

What are the most effective ways to help migrants?

Direct interaction with them is the most effective way. I used to visit them in their dwelling places after their work hours of 6-10 p.m. This is when they were available and open to conversations. Speaking to them in their native language was essential to build trust and ensure they listened to us.

We collect their details like workplace information, contractor details, house address, phone numbers, identity documents, photo, signature, thumb impression and a copy of their identity card. Only then can we intervene when a problem arises.

Can you share a success story from your work?

In 2022, I encountered Mrithunjay Tiwari, a migrant worker from Motihari district in Bihar who had worked in an upholstery shop in Kozhikode for 23 years. He had a good rapport with his employer. So, he decided to settle down in Kozhikode. The landlord agreed to sell him a house. He sold his property in Bihar and handed over 2.4 million rupees (US$27,820 then) to the landlord, who neither gave him the house nor returned the money.

When I heard it, I immediately met Tiwari and reported the matter to the police commissioner. I also sought the support of councillor Alphonsa Mathew and informed the landlord of our plan to protest in front of his house. Finally, he agreed to return the money with interest.

How have your linguistic skills helped you help them?

During a regular visit to the mental health hospital in Kuthiravattom near Kozhikode, I met Somnath Kisku, a migrant worker from Jharkhand. He was admitted there after being found disoriented and throwing stones at people near the Kozhikode bus stand. I overheard the nurse mentioning the name Somnath Kisku and I recognized that "Kisku" is a common surname among the Santhals of Bihar. I asked the nurse to allow me to talk to him.

When I spoke to him in Santali, he calmed down. Through several sessions, I understood that he went missing on his travel to the workplace in Kerala. Police found him violent and admitted him to the mental hospital. Within a few weeks, I found his brother Monsa Kisku and reunited him with his family.

How do you help migrants maintain their faith and cultural traditions?

With my experience in North India, I can identify the faith and tribal background of migrants from their names and surnames. I organize Mass in Hindi every Sunday at different centers in Kozhikode district. I also arrange Bible classes and opportunities for confession. We celebrate all major tribal festivals in a grand way.

Have you faced any challenges while serving migrants?

The main challenge is their floating nature. They often move from one place to another. So, I have to begin from the beginning every now and then. Drug abuse and self-medication are other major concerns.

Initially, I faced threats from agents and contractors who exploited migrants by not giving them fair wages. Now, migrants call me whenever they have a problem. I solve the problem by sitting with them. They call me *Didi* (elder sister). Now their problems are decreasing.

Police once warned me not to go out during the night after they sensed threats to me from agents. Once, a vigilance officer accused me of conversion and questioned me. I showed the documents and reports of my activities. He was convinced of my genuineness and became a supporter.

How did working with the Jesuits help your work among migrants?

Working with the Jesuits has deeply influenced my approach to helping the migrants. Their unconditional support, both moral and financial, has been invaluable. Their encouragement has inspired me to go the extra mile.

My congregation always supports me, granting me maximum freedom. I recall my provincial once telling me, "Your call is a call within a call," which has been a source of immense motivation and affirmation in my work.

What support do migrants need from the church?

The migrants need the church’s support a lot. Every parish in Kerala should have an office for migrants, managed by sisters who have worked in northern India.

How has your family influenced your mission?

My father, a farmer, employed some 10 daily workers and treated them with great respect. He would give them time to relax [on] Saturday afternoons. His approach

taught me the lessons of dignity and equality. My mother was generous in helping others.

What are your hopes for your ministry’s future?

I envision forming a collaborative team where religious congregations, laypeople and clergy work together to take care of migrants. By collaboration, we can make this ministry more impactful, ensuring migrants receive the dignity, protection and support they deserve.

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