

Visit to the Missionaries of Christ Jesus in Gomia - early March 2015

Gomia is a small town in India's Jharkhand state. It should not be confused with Gomo or Gomoh, the railway junction, which is an hour or so by train from Gomia or two hours by vehicle. The project that I'm reporting on here is run by the Missionaries of Christ Jesus. This project, "Asha Seva Kendra", is centered in Gomia where the sisters live.

(The Missionaries of Christ Jesus is a small order of Catholic sisters with 300 or so members world-wide. It was founded by a Spanish woman who felt that there was a need for women, not wearing habits, to do Christ's work of helping those in need in places where others would not go.)

Reaching Gomia was easy thanks to Sister Louise who met me at 4 AM in the Gomo train station; she had traveled from Gomia by train the previous evening. Truth be told, Sister Louise saved me — the conductor had failed to wake me up when the train reached Gomo and I would have woken up in Calcutta if Sister Louise had not contacted the conductor and demanded that he wake up the foreigner who was somewhere on the train. I stumbled off the train in a daze and for an hour or so I was dizzy and disoriented.

Sr. Louise and I waited around the station until 6 am or so and then caught a local train to Gomia where the project's only vehicle, a jeep, was waiting to take us to the mission house.

Anyone going to Gomia in the future will be happy to know that there is a direct train from Calcutta to Gomia.

The Missionaries of Christ Jesus, all five of them, took very good care of me. The coordinator, Louise, is hardy, honest, hard working, and lives to serve those in need. And there are a lot of people in need in Gomia.

The order gives the sisters enough money for tooth-paste, soap, and that sort of thing. Any extra money comes from their families. Two sisters have personal computers, one has a digital camera, and communally they share one old notebook computer.

Their only luxury is an old television which they gather around nightly to watch the news and then a soap opera.

The sisters do no proselytizing. They meet together for a few minutes in the morning at 6:30 in their tiny chapel for prayer and singing. That is the only religious activity that I observed. A few of the sisters have done 10-day meditation courses, but they have not maintained a daily sitting practice.

Louise is also in charge of the TB / AIDS clinic. It seems that coal mining, smoking, AIDS, bad nutrition, and who knows what else are recipes for tuberculosis. AIDS is prevalent because the men, almost all of whom are illiterate, go to Calcutta, Mumbai or Delhi, live on the street, sleep with prostitutes, and then infect their wives.



Missionaries of Christ Jesus in Gomia:
Louise, Christina, Regina, Stella, and Prima



Entrance to the Sister's living quarters and garden



Patients in the clinic.

One woman at the clinic did not know that her husband was dying of AIDS. He died and then she realized that she was infected.



Patients in one of the two dorm rooms.

The clinic is a peaceful place. The patients are free to come and go as they wish, so they wander off to the market on Sundays, but mostly they just hang out at the clinic. The residents, all of whom are, I believe, tribal people don't seem to have a problem with mixed sexes sharing the same dorm rooms and the arguments and fights that one would expect if Westerners were in such a situation don't happen. If anyone starts a romantic affair they are asked to leave. No alcohol is tolerated. I didn't see anyone smoking.

Every patient has a family member staying with them who cooks for them. Family members also help out in the garden. Every morning all of the patients are given a glass of wheat grass juice which is produced in the compound garden.



Patients drinking wheat grass juice.

Electricity is unreliable in Gomia and anyway it is cut in the evenings. A solar lighting system gave light to the patients in the evenings for years and then thieves stole it. If things went well, the project would like to purchase another solar lighting system, upgrade the floor and roof and install cupboards where there are now shelves in the dorm. The buildings of the clinic have not changed much in 40 years.

When they had the solar-powered lights, emergencies in the night could be dealt with. Now, with no light, it's hard.

This year five people have died in the clinic. Once they die, their bodies are given to the families. Louise said that often patients will begin vomiting huge quantities of blood and die of shock when they see so much blood. If they survive the shock, IV's will, she said, will keep them alive.

Sister Prima is in charge of field visits, that is, delivering primary health care to the villagers. I went with her on one trip. She checks up on patients in their houses, looks for signs of TB, and makes sure that kids get Vitamin A. She also, with her volunteers, conducts education trainings.

The day that I accompanied her, the mothers, a few men, and children surrounded the program's vehicle and listened attentively for an hour or so to a lecture on the principals of good health. In the crowd was a 12-year old girl and her mother. Sometime during the afternoon the girl realized that she was symptomatic of TB, so she, along with her mother, were given containers to put sputum into.



Receiving containers for a TB test. One of the containers is for her mother.

Also in the crowd were older people who looked to be very ravaged by TB. Prima says that they wait until they are very sick before seeking treatment. Quack doctors and spirit doctors frequently see the patients before she does.

Sister Prima tries to get training for her volunteers and works with the government clinics to get patients to them. The program clinic has a microscope, which they would like to upgrade.

I asked about birth control. It isn't on the radar—they just don't think about it. Sister Prima said that if anyone asked about it, she would direct them to government services. Prima pointed out that families tend to want children because if they don't have them, there will be no one to farm the land. Also, because so many children die, the mothers keep having them in the hope that a few will live.

[A health care professional (who now runs part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) once told me that to reduce the birth rate you just have to provide basic health care and teach the women to read.]

One sees women nursing their babies everywhere.

In the villages I did not see a single store. (Which is strange for India.)

The people who are not sick all looked fit and trim.

The sisters get a lot of their funding from Spain where the founder of their order is from. Someone managed to make a donation large enough for them to buy a vehicle, a jeep. The jeep is lovingly cared for and driven only for business. Oh the day I left, they had the choice of taking me to the Gomia train station, about 30 minutes away, for the 4 AM train which would travel for 60 minutes or so to Gomo where I would have to wait around for the 11 AM train. Or they could take me by jeep to Gomo. Louise opted for the jeep. It was the first time they had ever driven to Gomo, two hours away. As we drove they kept asking for directions. The roads, as one could imagine, were horrible.

There is no night watchman or male guard at the Asha Seva Kendra compound, so the sisters lock themselves in at night and hope for the best. They don't fear for their personal security because if anyone would harm them the attackers' families would disapprove—the clinic and other programs have generated tremendous goodwill in the community for the sisters. A few times people have come with weapons demanding money. Once the sisters handed over about 2000 rubies. More than once the police have found the thieves and given them severe beatings.

Once the medicine cabinet of the TB clinic was stolen. The thieves broke the cabinet open in a field and left it there -- there was no money inside and the thieves did not want the medicine.



Prima listening to a man's breathing.



Vitamin A supplement.



Inside a house.

Sister Christina runs the supplemental education program. She recognizes the utter failure of the government school system so she, following in her predecessors' footsteps, has managed to set up classrooms in remote villages, in temples and even in government school buildings for the children. The kids get two hours of instruction per day. The conditions that the teachers work in is challenging—a concrete floor for the kids to sit on, and no blackboard. The teachers, all of whom are tribal, seem dedicated.



A class outside the classroom of a government school.

I visited a few of the eleven remote classrooms where the afternoon tutoring takes place. Many are in villages that only became accessible by vehicle a few years ago. I was told that I was the first foreigner for the children to see. Years ago I was also the first Westerner for the children of remote Pacific Islands and remote parts of Laos to see. The South Pacific children and the Lao kids treated me like a visiting rock star which was in stark contrast to the tribal children who seemed to take no notice of me at all. I asked the children whom they thought I was. They said that I was probably someone from very far away—Delhi or Calcutta. No one seemed to think that white skin or blue eyes were anything to pay any attention to.



This was the largest single class I saw.

Later I read that the Santhal tribal people have a strong sense of identity that has allowed them to keep much of their culture and language.

Christina also does teacher training.

If she had more money, she would like to buy blackboards, do more teacher training, establish more learning centers, etc. It would seem that just a little money would go a long way.



Women discuss small loans

Sister Stella helps village women organize savings programs that allow them to make small loans to each other. Her work began by giving the women a sense that they could collectively improve their lives. Each women's group has a secretary and someone to keep the money. The money is kept in a metal box about half the size of a briefcase in the house of a group member. The key to the box stays with another group member.

I attended a meeting in a village. The women had been notified that a guest would come so they had put on their best saris, collected flowers, and made garlands. As I sat in a plastic chair, the women walked out of a classroom of a government school into the courtyard where the



Village women meet a foreign guest.

meeting was held singing and gently dancing. It was a beautiful ceremony that ended with the women putting a garland on me and then washing my hands and drying them with a towel. The greeting ceremony, I was told, always involves washing either the hands or the feet of the guests.

The meeting continued with Stella explaining something about managing money and then the women broke into three groups of five or so women, with the sister, or one of her volunteers, managing each group. Every woman seemed to have a savings book. As they put money into the savings box, each contribution was noted with either a signature or a thumb print. A few times one of the volunteers coached a woman how to write her name.



Verifying a deposit.

Supposedly the savings will go to village projects or to families in need. I was told that one family was able to escape the clutches of the dreaded money lenders thanks to the village fund.

No one has done anything dishonest with or absconded with the savings box.

The women seemed to take the entire savings program with the greatest possible seriousness.

I did not ask Stella what she would do if she had more funding. However, one thing that she does is train the women in accounting, suggest projects, and encourage village development. If she had more money she could expose the women to successful village development projects, provide more training, etc.



Stella explaining the details of dealing with money.

Almost all of the people that the sisters serve belong to the Santhal tribe. The Santhals live in beautiful windowless mud houses. (Entering a Santhal house at mid-day, I really couldn't see a thing, but they seem to have the eyes of cats.) The houses can be nicely decorated, are kept clean, and require high maintenance--the mud regularly needs to be polished and renewed with cow dung paste.

The sisters told me that Santhal women traditionally are treated much better than Hindu women. The Santhal people generally do not do dowries although that tradition seems to be slowly coming. They are outside the caste system.



A woman polishing her house.

There is a tradition among the Santhal people of making fermented beverages, home brew. Nevertheless, some men will spend their earnings on alcohol and the traditional beverages these days may have chemical additives. In one house that I visited to watch the team do a TB check up, the mother of the house was rather drunk and it wasn't even noon.

The Santhals do not have a tradition of literacy. In recent years many men have earned their living in the coal

mines. I don't understand the system of mining completely, but it goes something like this:

There are vast areas of coal in Jharkhand state. Officially access to the coal is controlled by the government. Unofficially and illegally the local people can find access to areas where the coal can be mined. The men will dig from open pits or tunnel haphazardly until their tunnel collapses and they die. When that happens the other men will wait three days and then begin tunneling again. Once the men gather the coal, they tie the coal, in what look like rice sacks, onto their bicycles, or in recent years motorcycles, and then carry it immense distances to the shops where the coal is purchased by black market buyers. I was told not to enter the shops where the coal is purchased and once, when I photographed men with their bicycles loaded with coal, a man asked if I was going to give the picture to the police.



Coal leaving Gomo by train.

Some men will spend their earnings on drink while others will build a better, brick, house. A few Santhal men work legally in the mines and a few are apparently successful in other professions.

Being illiterate, the Santhals are subject to unscrupulous types. They can be exploited for their land and the women can be trafficked--promised good jobs and end up in brothels.



A man pushes a bicycle weighted down with coal.

Corruption seems to be out of control as far a coal mining goes.

I didn't have the opportunity to see the men digging the coal. However, I saw them carrying their illegally obtained coal on bicycles and motorcycles. How much coal they carry and how much they suffer carrying it is amazing, frightening, and depressing.

Louise told me that donations can be directed. So if someone wanted to buy a solar system or make an education grant, that could be done.

The sisters have a spare bedroom. They will take excellent care of guests and clearly going there is a very moving experience.

The world has so much suffering and need that it's always hard to know where to give money to help the most. However, I'm sure that the Missionaries of Christ Jesus will use every cent given to them wisely.

-- Tom Riddle, Sarnath, Varanasi, March 2015