

# A Story of Hope

## *Educating the Rural Poor of Northeast India*

By Paul Coelho, S.J.

Looking back now, the story of the Jesuit schools in northeast India has been one of unsolicited hope. Things happened unexpectedly, certainly not as the village folks had anticipated or, for that matter, even the Jesuits. But since the arrival of the Jesuits some 50 years ago, the lives of numerous people in remote tribal villages have been transformed.

Make no mistake -- educating the rural poor was not the reason the Jesuits came to northeast India. In 1970, they were invited by the government of Nagaland to establish a school in Kohima, the state capital, patterned on the lines of North Point. For those unfamiliar with North Point, it is a Jesuit residential school in Darjeeling that serves an affluent clientele. It is exclusive, elite and expensive. So the initial plan was really quite straight forward: The Jesuits would educate the children of small clusters of affluent and ambitious Naga families.

But things did not go as planned. Various covert forces made sure the Jesuits would not find land for their school in Kohima. So the Jesuits moved 15 kilometers to the south, to a tribal village called Jakhama. The village was neglected

and undeveloped and, like most other villagers of the region, the people of Jakhama were mainly subsistence farmers. They cultivated rice in terraced fields, as their ancestors had done before them, not aspiring for much more from life. The education offered in the local schools was such that those who could afford it sent their children to schools elsewhere. What soon became clear was the gulf between what the Jesuits imagined they would be doing and where they found themselves.

Disappointed possibly, but not willing to back away, the Jesuits decided to start a school for the local children. That first year, the students who enrolled were a motley bunch with many who were bigger and older than their teachers. Notwithstanding many setbacks, the school thrived through the efforts of the early Jesuits and the sisters who collaborated with them. Leaders from the neighboring villages were soon requesting the Jesuits for similar schools.

Gradually a second, and then a third, school opened in the surrounding villages. In 10 years, the Jesuits had schools in almost every village in the region. They wanted to ensure that every child had access to a decent education if they wanted. By now, serving the rural poor had become the preferred option of the Jesuits, even shunning opportunities to be in the urban centers.

While these schools were taking root in and around Jakhama, two other Jesuits moved north toward Tuensang and Kiphre to set up a network of schools in villages and small towns located along an arterial road that connects the eastern part of the state. These schools, not unlike the ones around Jakhama, served people who had never imagined their children would ever have access to a decent education. In fact, many did not have any idea of what good all-around education was.

Hope is not just about trusting that the things that are deeply desired will someday be realized. It is also about getting what one realistically never anticipated. In 1977, the Jesuits started a teachers' training college nearby. They wanted to ensure the village schools were staffed by trained local teachers. They also set up an agro-industrial institute in another village. Agricultural and vocational training were a part of the Jesuit educational plan for the region. But, unfortunately, this did not resonate well with the parents who desired an education that would prepare their children for government jobs, if not a professional career.

In 1985, the Jesuits established their first college. With many students going in search of college education elsewhere, the Jesuits felt the need to offer tertiary educational opportunities within the region. They established a college in Jakhama where they had accidentally landed some 15 years earlier. By this time, however, there were many who felt that the Jesuits should be in the urban hubs, establishing the kinds of educational institutions for which they are reputed. But the rural thrust did not change.

It is important to recognize how these rural Jesuit institutions have inspired the tribal students and their families. Let me quote Apong, a middle-aged resident of a small village in Arunachal Pradesh, who echoed the sentiment of many parents. He put it succinctly, "We know you all could have gone anywhere. But we are so grateful you chose to come to us. If not for you, I would probably have been dead by now. I am not sure what would have become of my children.

I imagine they would have continued living like me and our ancestors, in abject poverty, drunkenness and ignorance."

Living in a decent brick home now, which has replaced the bamboo structure which once was his home, Apong's eldest son, Sanjay, is a youth leader and secretary to the locally elected member of the state legislature. Jesuit alumni from other tribal villages are doctors and professors, bureaucrats and politicians, engineers, teachers, and researchers. They are in a host of other professions that neither they nor their families could ever have imagined or anticipated.

Spread across five of the seven states of northeast India, the 31 Jesuit schools of the Kohima Region continue to serve the rural poor. But it has not always been easy to focus their educational efforts almost exclusively in villages. Without any income-generating schools to support their plans for future expansion, or to subsidize their financially deficit village schools, the Jesuits have had to constantly depend on outside help. The pressure, and the temptation, to have a few urban schools has been strong. But the Jesuits have successfully held their ground. What was initially a consequence of unanticipated and unfortunate circumstances is now intentionally embraced as the preferred option.

Hope, as I mentioned earlier, is not about getting what one anticipates. It is also about getting what one would never realistically expect. And hope is one thing the Jesuit schools of the Kohima Region have given the rural poor of Northeast India.



Paul Coelho, S.J., principal of St. Xavier's College in Umoid, Meghalaya, stands in front of the chapel on land acquired for the college. This article first appeared in *Jivan* magazine: *Jesuits in India*.



Fr. General Arturo Sosa, SJ, visits St. Paul's School, site of the beginnings of the mission serving the rural poor. Fr. Anand Pereira, SJ, Fr. Sosa, Fr. Melvil Pereira, SJ, Mission Superior, and Fr Arul, SJ, former mission superior lead the way. 50 Years ago, three Jesuit priests founded the Kohima Mission in Northeast India, situated above Myanmar and Bangladesh. It was the occasion for Fr. General Arturo Sosa, SJ, to visit the expanded Jesuit Mission and celebrate their accomplishments.





Construction on Xavier College Umoid in southwest Khasi hills was delayed by the pandemic, and canceled Don Doll, SJ's visit to photograph the latest construction.



Architect rendering of the Girl's Residence



Over 2700 alumni, students and friends attended Fr. Sosa's Jubilee Mass on the Loyola College Campus



Fr. Sunny Augustine, SJ, Loyola college principal greets students.



Fr. Paul Coelho, SJ, welcomes students in a temporary classroom.

**The Kohima Mission decided to continue its service to the rural and under served Garo and Khasi peoples in Meghalaya.**



Fr. Raymond D'Souza, SJ, founder of the Kohima Mission "wraps" Fr. Arturo Sosa, SJ.



Fr. Walter Fernandes, SJ, author of 70 books, shares his **History of the Kohima Mission** with Fr. Arturo Sosa, SJ, and fellow Jesuits.



Loyola College is situated in the rolling hills of East Garo Hills District in Williamnagar, Meghalaya. In a few short years they have enrolled over 700 students. Fr. Sunny Augustine, SJ, is the administrator. In the nearby high school, they serve another 648 students.



Stone obelisks are erected for historic events. Original founder of the Kohima Mission, Fr. Hector D'Souza, SJ, unveils the honorary plaque.

Photographs  
by  
Don Doll, S.J.





*At the Jubilee Mass celebrating the Kohima Mission's 50 years, Archbishop James Toppil, Fr. General Arturo Sosa, SJ, and Mission Superior Fr. Melvil Pereira, SJ receive the offertory gifts of the women.*

photograph by Don Doll, S.J .

The page was added so you would have  
the proper caption,

DDsj