

Two students pose for a photo on the grounds of the S.F.X. Greenherald International School in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The school is the first English-language school in Bangladesh after the country's independence in 1971. (Uttom S. Rozario)



by Stephan Uttom Rozario

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Dhaka, Bangladesh — June 20, 2023

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Sr. Virginia Asha Gomes, 76, is a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, popularly known as the RNDM Sisters, and the principal of S.F.X. Greenherald International School in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

Born in Bangladesh in 1947, Gomes grew up in India because her father's job took them there. After completing her studies, she started her career as a headmaster's secretary in a church-run school, but she always wanted to become a missionary sister, inspired by her time in a missionary school and growing up with sisters in hostels.

Gomes entered the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions in 1980, taking her first vows in 1983 and final vows in 1988. She was one of the three secretaries of the community in Rome from 1990 to 1994 and head of the Bangladesh province from 1999 to 2005. Since 2005, she has been the principal of S.F.X. Greenherald International School.

Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions in Bangladesh have run educational programs since 1883, but S.F.X. Greenherald International School is the first English-language school in Bangladesh after the country's independence in 1971.

After a yearslong delay because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school celebrated its 50-year jubilee in February, when Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in a speech that she hopes to see the school as the epitome of academic excellence and a place for students to become the future of the country.



Sr. Virginia Asha Gomes has served as principal of S.F.X. Greenherald International School in Dhaka, Bangladesh, since 2005. (Uttom S. Rozario)

In Bangladesh, the Catholic Church runs one university, 11 colleges, and more than 500 primary and high schools, offering education to about 100,000 students a year, most of them Muslim, according to the Bangladesh Catholic Education Board.

Recently, Gomes spoke to Global Sisters Report about the school's history, its students, its future and more.

***GSR*: The school recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. What is the story of the beginning of the school?**

Gomes: RNDM Sisters have been here since 1883. Chittagong, a port city, was our first location in the country, and from there, we came to Dhaka in 1912. We are the

sisters of the school, of education.

It operated in English until 1971 and was a Cambridge affiliate starting in 1954. In 1971, the government announced that English-language institutions would be closed. At that time, we had about 50 foreign sisters in Bangladesh.



Under the direction of Sr. Virginia Asha Gomes (middle), these sisters run the school. (Uttom S. Rozario)

How did RNDM Sisters start S.F.X. Greenherald International School, then?

After the liberation, soon after 1971, when all English-language schools throughout the country were asked to convert to Bengali by the government, the English-speaking community in the country suddenly felt out of place. The Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh approached the government of Bangladesh to open an English-language school for English-speaking children. Grasping the complexities of the problem, our respected father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, immediately responded.

The Ministry of Education in the country approached the RNDM superiors in Dhaka. RNDM sisters also tried to address this issue with grave concern, though they did not have any infrastructure for an English-language school at that time. The previous English-language school was transformed into a Bengali institution per the government's decision.

This property was purchased by RNDM Sisters in 1954 but was not used — 16 acres of land. This school started its journey on Sept. 12, 1972, with foreign children in a very light tin house. Our sisters used to rent space in the house of Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad during the liberation war. Sisters had no money then. This school was developed with great difficulty.

Foreign RNDM sisters were in charge of the head of this school until 1997, after which the first Bengali sister, Renu Costa, took over as the head of the school. In between, Sr. Triza Costa took charge. I have been responsible for the school since 2005.

What kind of changes have you made during this time?

I came to Greenherald in August 2005. By 2009, I introduced A-levels in the school at the perpetual request of the parents and guardians of O-levels graduates. With 18 students we started this section, and by God's grace, **we flourished both in the quality of education and the number of students in the academics of A-levels.**

Why is this school known as the best?

We always say we live in oneness. We say we worship oneness, and we live in the spirituality of the Holy Trinity. No divisiveness is taught here. My theme is "virtue of knowledge," which we have established. Those who do not have this virtue will leave. After graduating, our students are studying at top universities in different countries.

We think our values, our discipline, our responsibilities to the students make us different from other institutes. Children don't want to leave this school. Our children are well taken care of; there are 50 attendants to look after them. If children become ill at the facility, their care is not available elsewhere. Here, the results are good.



S.F.X. Greenherald International School students attend a school assembly. (Uttom S. Rozario)

Another important thing is that we pay a lot of attention to teaching etiquette. We try to make good people. We work hard and find peace in seeing the results there.

Not only that, but we want to teach that it is better to be rich in mind than to be rich in money. The uniform is a symbol of unity, and we value it. We also emphasize extracurricular activities.

Religious dogma has increased in today's world, but our children do not have this religious dogma. They all mingle with each other; no one can know who belongs to which religion. Religious education is given at home, not in our schools. We teach children the humanity in them, which will act as a big regulator in the formation of the country and society in the future. And I think our contribution in this regard is quite good.

Who are the students of this school?

In the beginning, our students were mainly from the elite category; i.e., the children of various embassy officials. There was no rule for Bengalis to study English here.

Since 1982, the number of foreigners has decreased, and now, students of all classes are studying here. Most of the kids can afford it. Many times, if a student has financial problems, then the sisters help them. Without taking their monthly fees, the school helps them survive by providing moral support.

The study is a bit expensive here because this is an English-language school, as the books are very expensive and our qualified teachers are well paid. Since the study is costly, children from solvent families come here to study.

We cannot take more than 100 children each year. Given about 700 applications, we can only take 100 students because we only have two sessions.



Students play sports at S.F.X. Greenherald International School from an early age. (Uttom S. Rozario)

So, only rich people can study in your school?

No. We have an evening charity school for a Bihari camp's children. Soon after the liberation war, the Urdu-speaking Bihari community was sheltered near our school in several camps. We RNDM sisters offer those children primary education without any fees on our campus. Besides teachers, our students volunteered to do community service among these marginalized poor children. It's not only education; we give them nutritious food weekly.

How has this school helped build the Catholic Church in Bangladesh?

We never preach Christianity. We make good people through education; we give the knowledge that good people need to have. Since we are Christians, we are trying to make a good person with Christian values. Everyone knows that this is a Catholic missionary-run school and the education here is good, so the name of Christ or Christian values are being propagated. Everything we do or say comes from our beliefs. I respect all religions when I preach education. Our goal here is to live in unity.

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What is the future of the school? Do you have plans to upgrade this school to a university?

We are not in favor of opening a university because students can study in universities in different parts of the world after studying here. We are providing the foundation; they will explore themselves in different places. Moreover, many people do not want to teach at the grassroots level. If we don't make a foundation, if we can't teach children values or make them human, then we fail. A university can teach many people. Taking responsibility for character formation is important, and our Catholic Church thinks so.

You have been in charge for more than 17 years. How much longer will you be with the school?

I am ready to do whatever our superior or congregation wants. I am a vowed nun, ready to work wherever my community sends me. I have no plans of my own. However, as long as I am in charge here, I will carry out my duties faithfully.