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Q&As



Ursuline of Mary Immaculate Sr. Sheeba Jose is a lawyer practicing in the high court of Uttar Pradesh state. (Courtesy of Sheeba Jose)



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For the past 25 years, Sr. Sheeba Jose has brought hope for persecuted Christians, abandoned women and prisoners languishing in jails in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

The 63-year-old member of the Lucknow province of the Ursuline of Mary Immaculate is an activist lawyer practicing in the Allahabad High Court, the top court in the state. Jose has a doctorate in human rights as well as a bachelor's degree in law and focuses on people who have no one to represent them.

Jose also assists women deserted by their husbands and families, and victims of sexual harassment and domestic violence until they are able to be self-sufficient.

Jose talked with Global Sisters Report about threats and criminal cases filed against her from right-wing Hindu lawyers after she defended some persecuted Christians in court.

***GSR*: What inspired you to become an activist lawyer?**

Jose: As a child, I had an inclination to work for the poor, and thus I opted to become a nun despite opposition from my family. I was good at mathematics, and therefore, my superiors appointed me as accountant in one of our schools. As I continued with my school job, I got opportunities to interact with many women who narrated their ordeal — some abandoned by their husbands for not giving birth to a boy child. I decided to do something for such women and children. I joined legal studies in a night college while continuing with my job.

When did you complete your legal studies?

I completed my degree in law in 1995. Soon after that, I quit my accountant's job and moved to Mumbai, [the capital of the western Indian state of Maharashtra] and worked under a senior lawyer for two years as a trainee. I returned to Allahabad after the congregation asked me to work for women and children in the diocese of Allahabad. I took up the assignment and simultaneously started practicing in the Allahabad High Court.

What are the core areas of your legal profession?

Initially, my focus was on cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment and family dispute, mostly dealing with women and children. But soon I found hundreds of prisoners who have already spent 15 to 20 years in various jails in the state. They were eligible for release but there was no one to take up their cases in the court. I began taking up such cases for free. So far, I have succeeded in releasing more than 1,500 prisoners. I keep visiting jails and collect details of such persons and argue their cases. I also file public interest litigations and argue cases of persecuted Christians, mostly Protestants.

As a nun, have you faced difficulty to work in courts and jails, especially since Christians face increased hostilities and persecution in Uttar Pradesh?

Obviously, I was threatened. Four false criminal cases, related to religious conversion and adoption, were registered against me. This was to discourage me from taking up cases of persecuted Christians. Even lawyers demanded me to chant "Jai Shri Ram" ("hail Lord Ram") in the court, but I refused. They also complained against me to the office of the prime minister [in New Delhi]. Three arrest warrants were issued against me but all of them got stayed. I don't bother with such hostility but instead focus on my work. Though I do not go preaching the word of God, my life is a witness to my Christian life.

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Could you please share how your public interest litigation has made differences in others' lives?

Why not? The condition of Nari Niketans (abode of women), government remand homes for women and children, in Uttar Pradesh was improved drastically after I filed public interest litigation. Before, women and children had to live without basic amenities. Similarly, another case led to the improvement of the family courts in the state. More courts were established. Earlier, family courts were congested with tiny rooms. Before filing public interest litigation, I undertake an extensive study of the issue and then approach the high court for relief. The court has ruled in my favor in most cases. The previous government had accredited me as a lawyer to work for

women and children in prison. It helped me know more about the conditions of prisoners and also prisons. It helped me formulate a draft guideline for a policy for the welfare of prisoners that is now in force in the state.

You are the founder-director of Sahyog. What is it?

It is a social forum I founded in 1997 for helping women and children in crisis with the support of Allahabad Diocese. We accommodate mostly women or children driven out from their homes for various reasons such as sexual harassment, domestic violence or abandonment. We provide them food, accommodation and legal help if required. We also train them to learn some skills to make them self-reliant. This forum has helped rebuild the lives of more than 10,000 women and children.

What emboldens you to face such serious threats to life?

I believe I am close to Jesus. I keep all my troubles and tribulations close to the word of God and overcome them with the grace of God. I read the Bible earnestly whenever possible. The words in the Bible, "Fear not, for I am with you," keep me alive and happy. I also explain the word of God to people who come to me. My challenges brought me close to the Bible and now I overcome them with the Bible.

What prompted you to become a Catholic nun?

I am among six children of my parents. My father is an Ayurveda doctor and mother is a homemaker. As a child, I was eager to work for the poor. I had seen Catholic nuns dedicating their life for the poor. So, I decided to become a missionary nun to fulfill my desire to serve others.

What is your message to people, especially those in religious life?

Be close to Jesus. He will take care of you. Jesus has made me what I am today.