Q&As



Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians Sr. Rose Paite, who heads the Centre for Development Initiatives, the social arm of the congregation, in Guwahati, Assam, northeastern India (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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Sr. Rose Paite, a native of the violence-hit Manipur state in northeastern India, works for the prevention of human trafficking, especially women and children from the tribal communities of the region.

The 60-year-old nun is in charge of the social apostolate in the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, founded in 1942 as the first Indigenous congregation in northeastern India.

Paite, who lives in Guwahati, the commercial capital of Assam state, directs the Centre for Development Initiatives, the congregation's social arm.

She belongs to Paite, one of the tribes in Manipur where ethnic clashes have raged since May 3. The clashes between the minority Kuki tribe and the majority Meitei community have forced thousands to flee from the state.

She is also a member of the Talitha Kum, a network of Catholic nuns dedicated to fighting human trafficking across the globe.

Paite often visits her native state, even after the violence started. She spoke to GSR Aug. 20 after her third visit to the relief camps there.



Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians Sr. Rose Paite is pictured with children rescued from human traffickers, with a trophy they won at a local event in Guwahati, Assam, northeastern India. (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Paite)

Global Sisters Report: **Please tell us about you.**

Paite: I am from the Paite tribe in Manipur, which is now in the grip of an ethnic crisis. I was born in a Baptist family, but grew up watching Catholic sisters from various parts of India serving our people, especially educating and empowering us. So, I wanted to become a nun like them. This led me to the Catholic faith. I have been a nun for the past 46 years.

What have you witnessed in your state during your recent visits?

I have gone with our project to address the problems and challenges of women and children there, following the riots. The situation there is still volatile. The violence has scattered everyone and a lot of them, mainly women and children, either stay in relief camps or have gone to other states. Their villages have been burned down,

making them destitute overnight.

Churachandpur, the worst affected district, alone has 108 relief camps. I visited some. Each camp has 100 to 500 people who live in really miserable conditions. No government support reaches them. They depend on supplies from NGOs and church groups from neighboring Mizoram state.



Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians organizing a public campaign against child labor in Guwahati, Assam, northeastern India (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Paite)

Your main work has been combating human trafficking in northeastern India. Has the Manipur violence aggravated the situation?

Yes, displaced women and children are always prey to human trafficking. Though we do not have any solid evidence of Manipuri women being trafficked after the riots, human trafficking has always been prevalent in the region. Northeastern India has hundreds of tribes and they have experienced conflicts and unrest from time to time.

Our team has been active in identifying and rescuing women and children being trafficked from the region. Our people spot them at the Guwahati railway station and bus stations in Assam, the main gateway to northeastern India.

Many trafficked women work as maids in various parts of India, some work in tea plantations of Assam while several end up as sex workers. They become victims of human slaveries with little scope for upholding their human rights and dignity.

How does the church in India support your fight against human trafficking, especially at this time of Manipur crisis?

One positive development after the Manipur crisis is that many church institutions across India have welcomed refugees. We act as a link between them. I was overwhelmed by the immediate response of Archbishop Peter Machado of Bangalore, who opened all archdiocesan institutions to our girls and boys so that they could continue their education or find jobs in Bengaluru.

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How do you try to prevent human trafficking?

We are more into prevention than rehabilitation. For rehabilitation, we refer them to the government or NGOs who are involved in such activities. For prevention, we save women and children from traffickers. We have a team who keeps round-the-clock watch at railway stations and bus terminals for vulnerable women and children. Sometimes we seek the police's help. We take such victims to our transit homes and ensure their safe migration after counseling and vocational training.

We target mainly communities that are more prone to human trafficking because of their poverty and vulnerability. We work with 75 tribal communities, the usual source of human trafficking. We organize awareness building programs, create vigilance committees and women vigilante groups in every village. By empowering the communities, we can resist trafficking to a great extent.

We conducted two major surveys in Assam's tea plantations and among domestic workers with funds from donor agencies and universities to identify their problems.



Domestic workers attend an annual meeting at the Centre for Development Initiatives, managed by the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians at Guwahati, commercial capital of the northeastern Indian state of Assam. (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Paite)

What were the findings?

The University of Nottingham has published the survey results as a research book. We surveyed domestic workers from northeastern states in 2020 through our congregation's network in the region. We interviewed 12,000 domestic workers. The study brought to light a huge human trafficking network that supplies women to various works.

We found that 85% of workers were from the marginalized social communities, and they lived in poor working conditions. Almost 99% had only verbal job contracts with no weekly off, annual leave or access to medical services. The survey also discovered a high rate of child labor.

Is their profession recognized by the labor laws? How do they seek justice?

In India, these people are in the unregulated and informal sector, not recognized under the labor laws. They remain the most vulnerable category among workers. According to a government sponsored national survey, India has around 4 million domestic workers. The International Labor Organization puts the number much higher. The country also has around 1 million child workers, who also do not have legal protection. Recently, due to our advocacy, the Assam state government enacted the minimum wages act that also covers domestic workers. No such law exists in several states.



Domestic workers at their annual gathering in Guwahati, Assam, northeastern India (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Paite)

How do these people land as domestic workers in India's large cities?

Many are brought to cities by the so-called "labor agents" who promise them decent jobs. These people are virtually sold in labor markets. India's wide networks of human traffickers supply women and children to work in private homes. Many are bonded laborers with no set rules, protection or justice. The placement agents often take advance money from employers.

Where else do you find victims of human trafficking?

We also work among migrant laborers in Assam's tea plantations. Most of them are trafficked from various states of northeastern India and other tribal regions. We have done a baseline survey among some 5,030 workers of tea plantations living in about 50 villages in Assam, supported by Missio [a European funding partner]. Although most plantation workers were men, many were migrant laborers supplied by human traffickers.

Although our campaign against trafficking began in 2008, the two surveys motivated us in 2021 to work more aggressively.



Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians Sr. Rose Paite poses with the domestic workers who have completed their skills training from the Centre for Development Initiatives, managed by the congregation in Guwahati, Assam, northeastern India. (Courtesy of Sr. Rose Paite)

How does your center address these issues?

The center serves mainly northeastern Indian states. The organization is involved in empowering women and promotion of their human rights, child rights and child protection, skills training for the vulnerable girls, promotion of rural health, care for persons with disabilities and aged, and care for the mother earth.

The center works for 23,000 domestic workers across northeastern India. We promote safe migration among the people in 75 villages of Assam's tea plantations. We educate about 5,000 children of domestic workers and workers of tea plantations, and assist them for safe migration — a more transparent and accountable migration that ensures that the migrant is safe and not exploited.

We also run over 150 tuition centers for school dropouts.

Have you faced any problem from the traffickers?

We work with the railway police, so no challenge so far. The traffickers often escape when we spot them on the railway platforms or bus terminals. But, we have managed to jail two of them.

Do you meet your beneficiaries regularly?

We have around 32,000 registered domestic workers with whom we have regular interactions. We also train them in housekeeping, tailoring and other skills so that they can get a better salary and ensure safe working conditions. Recently, 70 of them completed training in housekeeping, tailoring and home nursing and got better jobs. Among the girls trained by us, around 800 of them were rescued from the railway station or bus shelters. Around 800 were rescued from the railway station. We organize an annual gathering of domestic workers where we discuss their rights and dignity.

What do you do as a Talitha Kum member?

In South Asia, we have an association of nuns working against human trafficking under the name AMRAT [Asian Movement of Religious Women Against Human Trafficking], which literally means "brave." We have around 600 sisters from different congregations as its members. The Arise Foundation of the United Kingdom [an anti-slavery NGO], supports this initiative.