News



Sr. Lourdes Mary Rozario teaches and supervises a class in the Mohammadpur area of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters started the Green Herald Evening Charity School program for Bihari children in 1982. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)



by Stephan Uttom Rozario

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Mohammad Rabbi Ali, 25, lives with his family in the Bihari Refugee Camp in the Mohammadpur area of the capital Dhaka, Bangladesh. Eight members of their family live in a room of 8 feet by 10 feet.

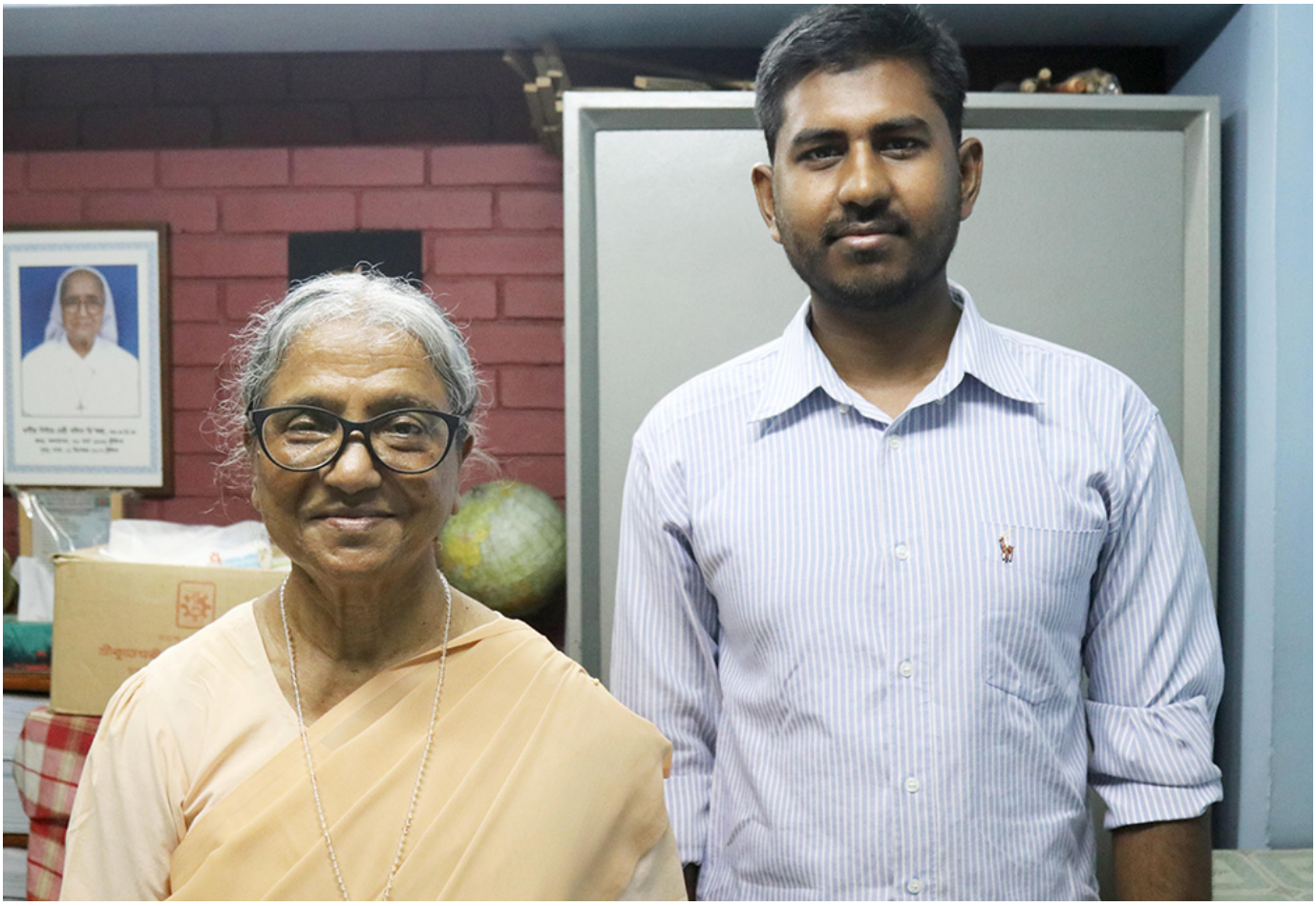
His dream is to one day work in Bangladesh Civil Service and live happily with his family.

"Since I was about 16 years old, I have been supporting my expenses and part of my family's expenses in addition to my studies, which is a great joy and satisfaction for me," said Ali.

"I am now teaching tuition for survival, as well as studying for a job in the Bangladesh Civil Service," Ali added. "The seeds of my dream were sown by the sisters of the Green Herald Evening Charity School. And they gave me the courage to realize that dream and I am trying to make true that dream."

Ali graduated from Dhaka University, with a bachelor of business administration major in accounting and is now preparing to study for a master's in the same department.

Ali thanked the Green Herald Evening Charity School, run by the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters, for this success.



Mohammad Rabbi Ali, 25, a former student who graduated from Green Herald Evening Charity School, is pictured with his teacher Sr. Lourdes Mary Rozario. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

Biharis, the majority of which are Urdu-speaking Muslims, have challenges when it comes to education and being able to speak and understand the Bengali language. Highly educated Biharis like Ali make up less than 2% of the camp population.

"Almost everyone in our camp does daily work like barber, sweeper, motor garage worker," Ali said.

When India was divided into two nations in 1947, Urdu-speaking Muslims from the Indian state of Bihar migrated to what was then East Bengal and now Bangladesh.

In 1971, when the Bangladesh War of Independence broke out, many of the Urdu-speaking Muslims supported the Pakistanis and worked against the Bengalis. After the independence of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh government permitted the Biharis to live in different camps. There are currently around 400,000 Biharis living in 116

camps in Bangladesh.

In 1972, the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters started the first English-speaking S.F.X. Greenherald International School in Mohammadpur, just a few steps away from the Bihari camp.

The sisters saw that there was a Bihari community living nearby, but there was opportunity for education. The sisters later started the Green Herald Evening Charity School program in 1982 for Bihari children to receive free education. Students are also provided with school dress, notebooks and pens. Sisters also provide tiffin, or tea time, after classes.

In this video Sr. Jacqueline Gomes speaks to GSR about the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters' educational ministry for Bihari children. (YouTube/NCRonline)

"The children in the Bihari camp come from non-educated families," said Sr. Virginia Asha Gomes, principal of S.F.X. Greenherald International School. "As a result, parents do not know how to teach them at home. Biharis learn their mother tongue at an early age and after coming to school they learn Bengali. So they lag due to environment, family illiteracy, poverty and environment."

Currently, 150 children from infancy through fourth grade attend the school. The children then go on to study in government schools, with some receiving scholarships from the sisters. In the last 10 years, around 150 students have graduated from the evening school program. Graduates are provided with employment as needed, or the opportunity to receive technical education.

"We have a regular school and our evening school is run by income from the regular school," Gomes said. "Apart from that, many people help these kids and those who passed out of our regular school also help these kids."

One of several challenges sisters face while running this school is teaching Urdu-speaking Bihari children in the Bengali language. Since some parents are not educated or are working, the children do not have the opportunity to study at home.

"We work on these issues. For example, if the children do not study well, the teachers give them extra time. Again, we often call their parents and try to make them aware," Sr. Lourdes Mary Rozario, 78, told GSR.

Having taught at various schools run by the congregation for over 40 years, Rozario is now officially retired, but has been in charge of the Green Herald Evening Charity School since 2017.

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  Geneva Camp in Dhaka’s Mohammadpur area is a densely populated settlement of tens of thousands of Biharis. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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Inside the camp, there are small shops where all kinds of daily necessities from vegetables are available; Biharis are both buyers and sellers. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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During the monsoon season, water accumulates in the camp, and there is no designated place to dump garbage, and garbage is left on the road. In the camp, each family, with eight to 10 members on average, lives in one room, and around 90 people share a latrine. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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In 1972, the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters started the S.F.X. Greenherald International School near the Bihari camp. They started the Green Herald Evening Charity School program for Bihari children in 1982. After class, the sisters provide students with tiffin. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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Along with studies, music and poetry are taught in class. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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Teachers and students sing the national anthem of Bangladesh in the assembly before the start of class. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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Sr. Lourdes Mary Rozario leads the assembly before class every day. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

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Ruksar Akhter Lily, 18, right, and Mohammad Adnan, 19, left, graduated from Green Herald Evening Charity School; they are pictured with Sr. Lourdes Mary Rozario. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

Ruksar Akhter Lily, 18, graduated from Green Herald Evening Charity School with a scholarship and is now studying at a higher secondary level (11th grade). She has two siblings who were also students at this school.

"The teachers here are very familiar, they teach well, they take care, the sisters do observe students," Lily said. "Moreover, the biggest thing is that we don't need any kind of money to study here."

A handful of those who attended primary school with Lily continue their studies, but most have dropped out. Lily managed the cost of her education by working as a tailor.

Lily said that some parents don't understand the meaning of education. After all, they could not afford it because they were poor. "And, in our Bihari community, women's voices are not given much importance. Many people think that girls should

be kept in control, they cannot be given freedom, and they should be married off at a certain age."

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Biharis received Bangladesh citizenship in 2008 by an order of the High Court, but are frequently denied passports, which becomes a barrier in working government jobs.

As citizens of the country, various demands such as employment opportunities, resettlement arrangements, education opportunities, passport rights for employment and higher education abroad are often raised.

Even though the government has assured the Biharis of fulfilling these demands, its implementation is not always seen.

Both Ali and Lily thank the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions Sisters for their life-changing education. Since they received free education with the help of the sisters, they both want to work for their community one day.

"I think if the government would have paid a little attention to our education, we would have been given a quota in higher education, given opportunities in government jobs, then we would have made a good contribution to the economy of the country," said Ali.