News



Little Handmaids of the Church Sr. Elizabeth Tripura and students of the Shanti Rani Girls Hostel are pictured at Alikadam Upazila in the Bandarban district, one of three districts in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts. Tripura is in charge of the hostel. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)



by Stephan Uttom Rozario

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In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, or CHT, of Bangladesh, several congregations have served amid ongoing violence tied to rebellion against state forces for people's rights.

The three administrative districts of Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari in the CHT had a tribal majority even after 1971. Some tribal people engaged in armed struggle beginning in the 1970s, intending to achieve autonomy and indigenous rights in their areas. Torture, rape and eviction of the minority tribal people by the army and settlers were common.

"We work in fear when the hills are disturbed; our Christian people are also displaced without any form of resettlement. We were afraid then, but by God's blessings, there was no attack on us," said Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Rose Sulekha Chambugong, whose congregation established the first missionary-run school and hostel in the hilly Chittagong region.

Born in the northern plains land of Muslim-majority Bangladesh, the Garo tribal sister said, "We are working here for the education of the tribals and their social development, so they love us a lot, and at the same time, they help us instead of causing any problems."

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, several congregations have served amid ongoing violence. The congregations run educational institutes, girls hostels and health centers, and do pastoral works.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the leader of the hill region, Manabendra Narayan Larma, disagreed with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nation's leader who wanted to identify the country's citizens as Bengalis. Larma told Rahman, "You cannot impose ethnicity on others. I am a Chakma, not Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh, a Bangladeshi."

Since then, the problems with the state of the hill region started, which at one time turned into a civil war. Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti was formed against the entry, land occupation and residence of Bengalis in the area and to maintain their culture and autonomy. According to The Associated Press, in 1997 a tribal organization and the government signed a peace accord to officially stop the insurgency, but violence continues.



Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Rose Sulekha Chambugong serves the Eucharist during Mass. Chambugong's congregation established the first missionary-run school and hostel in the hilly Chittagong region. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

Presently, the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions is working alongside the Little Handmaids of the Church, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Associates of Mary Queen of the Apostles, and Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, running educational institutes, girls hostels, health centers and doing pastoral works. The sisters run three schools, six health centers and more than 10 girls hostels in three administrative districts of the hill region.

"When we first came here, there were no war-like problems, but the hill terrain [has] water and transportation problems, food problems. Through this, our sisters have worked here," said Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Benedicta Pereira, now working as the head teacher of the school in Bolipara Parish, a remote area in the hilly Bandarban district.



Our Lady of the Missions Sr. Benedicta Pereira is pictured treating a patient at their dispensary. Pereira works as the head teacher of the school in Bolipara Parish, a remote area in the hilly Bandarban district. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

The sisters run a hostel for 150 girls and a school for Indigenous Christians and non-Christians. Every year, on average, 40 students graduate from their school and pursue higher education in different institutions. The sisters are also involved in pastoral work.

"We go out to the villages for about two weeks. Because there are no vehicles to travel from one village to another, it often takes a whole day to go from one village to another on foot," Pereira said.

Holy Cross Fr. Shital Hubert Rozario, the parish priest of Our Lady of the Presentation Church in the Bandarban district, said, "The hard work [that the] sisters are doing in this CHT remote area is undoubtedly admirable. The sisters are working through many difficulties, especially walking for hours to villages, fear of attacks by various

insurgent groups [and] various restrictions from the government at various times."

Priests often accompany the sisters, providing support and protection in case of any danger.

"We have one to two priests in a parish, but the villages are far away, and [they are sometimes] doing official work for the devotees of the parishes. In that case, the sisters do most of the work of providing religious education and pastoral care in the villages," Rozario said.



Fr. Shital Hubert Rozario baptizes a girl in Our Lady of the Presentation Church at Bolipara, Thanchi, in the Bandarban District. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

The local Little Handmaids of the Church also work in this remote, hilly area. They provide education and pastoral work for women, children and girls.

Sr. Elizabeth Tripura, in charge of Shanti Rani Girls Hostel and Shanti Rani Health Center in Alikadam Upazila of the Bandarban district, said they preach the message

of Christ where the Catholic Church is absent or the message of Christ has not been heard.

Three Little Handmaids of the Church came to work in 1996 in Alikadam Upazila, a mountainous area. They faced a challenge that one party was a separatist group that prevented the sisters from working.

"They thought we would make Christians. The obstacle of this party was [dealt] with love, [as] we also have to work together with the hill people. Again, we did not know anything about the Tripura language, so [learning] this language became vital for us." Tripura said.

Tripura recalled that they had to carry national identification cards from one place to another. They could not go to reserve areas and walked 40–50 kilometers daily. They were also not allowed to teach Christ's word.



Sr. Elizabeth Tripura consults with a woman. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

Permission had to be requested from the local administration or army, and identification was required at each checkpoint. If it was not obtained before going to a village, they were sent back.

Tripura told Global Sisters Report that when she came to the highlands in 2002, a girl was shot by a Naga People's Front party (an insurgent group) member. The sisters brought the girl for treatment and treated her. Later, the army came and took the sister and interrogated her.

"We have fears or obstacles, but we move forward with faith in Christ. As a result of our evangelization, the people of the hills today have made a lot of progress, especially in the education sector and medical care. We had to go to the villages and accept many sacrifices for the development of these people. We owe it to our sisters that we have been able to show people a lot of light."

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Currently, one of the problems of the mountain people is that they are often unaware of their land rights. Many do not own land in writing according to the law, and settlers usually take their land.

Sisters have made them aware of their land rights and are trying to convince tribes that they should not leave one place and go to another. However, they are used to living like nomads, staying in one place for two or three years and moving to another. In some areas, land is in their name, but most still do not own land.

Henry Tripura, 24, is studying at a university in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.



Sr. Benedicta Pereira is pictured with two catechists during her routine pastoral work. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

"We, two brothers and two sisters, studied in the church hostel. We would not have come as far as we have today without the sisters going to our area and doing basic education and hostel facilities," Tripura, a Catholic, told GSR.

"We had a lot of land, but many places have been taken over by settlers [who moved from the plains to the hills]. Those who are educated have taken care of themselves, but there are uneducated people in the remote areas who are still living temporarily."

In many places, government restrictions allow tribal people to stay but not to establish permanent settlements or permanent plantations.

"There is a dearth of good education in our CHT, although the sisters and priests have gone and brought about some change. At the same time, we lack awareness, which cannot be improved in one day. Hopefully, it will change gradually," Henry

Tripura said.