News
Q&As

Sr. Sujata Jena, center, is pictured in Rome when she was honored by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, with Sr. Christi Thekkumpuram, right, assistant director for the Catholic Sisters Project of the Migrants and Refugee Section of the Vatican, and Francesca Donà, left, regional coordinator of the Asia, Middle East and Oceania Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. (Courtesy of Sr. Sujata Jena)

by Leopoldina Reis Simões

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Sr. Sujata Jena, 43, has been a final-professed sister of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the past 10 years. Her roots are in the Gunupur Parish in the Diocese of Rayagada, India, and she holds a master's degree in social work and a bachelor of law degree from Utkal University.

As a journalist, she collaborates with Global Sisters Report and was the recipient of the Best Journalist Award 2021 by the Indian Catholic Press Association, "for authentically and consistently being the voice of people's rights, especially the poor Dalits who are more susceptible to exploitation and injustice."

In September 2024, Jena received applause from the Catholic Sisters Project of the Migrants and Refugee Section of the Vatican — promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development — for her "great courage" and "bravery" and financial support for a project undertaken by her congregation in India to help migrants.

Among migrants, the youth form a disproportionately large segment.

"When we examine the root causes of migration, it becomes evident that they are compelled, directly or indirectly, to migrate in pursuit of dreams and to support their families. They make immense sacrifices, often giving up their happiness to ensure the well-being of their loved ones. Their lives are a testament to resilience, yet they are fraught with exploitation and systemic neglect," the nun said.

Sr. Sujata Jena promoted an awareness program for youth and unorganized workers in Daringbadi, in Kandhamal district, the state of Odisha, India, on Oct. 19, 2024. (Courtesy of Sr. Sujata Jena)

***GSR*: How did it feel to receive recognition of your work from the Vatican?**

Jena: I was honored. While modest in scope, this initiative feels like an award to me, as it has made a profound impact on the lives of interstate migrant workers in Odisha, India.

The project tackles pressing issues such as wage theft, legal rights, the rescue of bonded laborers and trafficked individuals, the facilitation of access to government provisions, and the restoration of basic dignity. It has become a beacon of hope for those who are too often overlooked.

What are you doing at the moment?

I am simply doing what any responsible citizen and baptized Christian would do, nothing extraordinary or out of the ordinary. I am accompanying poor, vulnerable interstate migrants from the rural villages of Odisha who primarily move to South Indian states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in search of employment for

survival. While some are fortunate to find decent treatment, many face exploitation. Their rights are often violated; they may be confined to shelter homes or prisons, denied justice if they die at their workplaces, or subjected to physical abuse — especially women, who are treated like slaves.

I meet their families and listen to their struggles, which is often heartbreaking. In the past five months alone, 18 migrant workers from two districts I've personally intervened in have died in tragic circumstances. Among these, two deaths were due to company negligence, four were suicides, seven resulted from occupational illnesses, two involved workplace accidents, and three workers are still missing. Tragically, all were under 35 years old. Many lose their lives, limbs, or freedom, falling victim to bonded labor or trafficking.

Sr. Sujata Jena reached out to a migrant worker's family in Kerubadi Village, Kandhamal, Odisha, after their daughter-in-law tragically passed away while working as a migrant laborer in Kerala on Oct. 8, 2024. (Courtesy of Sr. Sujata Jena)

These situations and statistics are difficult to listen to.

These are not just statistics but real people, our brothers and sisters, who leave behind families, loved ones and unfulfilled dreams. Witnessing their suffering pains me deeply and compels me to see the face of the suffering Christ in their wounded lives. I feel their pain and take on their cause.

We work to support families by securing compensation and justice from employers and the government. We assist in repatriating the mortal remains of deceased workers and pursue legal cases when necessary. Additionally, we conduct awareness programs about migrants' rights, entitlements and social security provisions. We [also] register them with labor departments, collect data and advocate on their behalf to ensure justice, safety and dignity.

Sr. Sujata Jena conducted an awareness program on women and the law for women living in a slum on Nov. 19, 2024. (Courtesy of Sr. Sujata Jena)

Who are these interstate migrants, and where do they come from?

Interstate migrants are predominantly Dalits, tribals, and individuals from other marginalized and "backward" sections of society. I know the term "backward" has a

negative connotation and is not something I would prefer to be associated with. However, it is recognized in our constitution to categorize the various Indian social class and caste systems.

Within this framework, Dalits are considered even more marginalized than the "backward" classes. Dalit means "the oppressed" or "the suppressed." For me, these terms are not meant to demean anyone but rather to indicate the focus and commitment of the mission to serve these communities.

Most migrants originate from economically disadvantaged states such as Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

High unemployment rates and governmental neglect further aggravate issues faced by youth and impoverished families, including migration, debt, exploitation and inadequate social protection. These migrants journey to unfamiliar places, stay in unsafe conditions, and take on hazardous, degrading and arduous jobs to bring smiles to the faces of their families.

Their work spans construction, underground pipeline installation, driving, welding, hotel service, cooking, masonry and various domestic tasks. However, they often face broken promises regarding jobs and wages, fall victim to deceit by unauthorized agents, endure poor food and accommodation and suffer false accusations. Wage theft is another common injustice they endure.

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How do you minister to these people and their families? Do they come to you, or do you go to their homes and work?

As a religious sister and a concerned citizen, I reach out to people in need. For the past five years, I've deeply connected with grassroots communities through my ministry. During the pandemic, despite being confined to the convent like the rest of the world, I was able to rescue around 3,000 stranded migrants by advocating and networking with labor departments in Kerala, a destination for many workers. The people I've helped often share my contact information with others in need, turning my number into a helpline.

Currently, I have around 5,000 contacts saved on my phone and receive requests for assistance daily. These include young people struggling to find employment, parents unable to afford higher education for their children, elderly or sick individuals in need of emergency blood donations, trafficked individuals and families trapped in bonded labor seeking help for their release.

While I do what I can to help directly, I also focus on connecting people with potential resources, organizations and individuals who can meet their needs. I strongly believe in the power of networking with various groups and individuals who share a similar cause, as we can achieve far more together than we ever could alone. Through these efforts, I strive to fulfill my mission with compassion, helping people realize their dignity and offering hope in times of struggle.

> 'I strive to fulfill my mission with compassion, helping people realize their dignity and offering hope in times of struggle.'
>
> —Sr. Sujata Jena
>
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Apart from migration, what other concerns do you have?

The unjust social fabric, marked by daily experiences of inequality, deeply wounds and challenges me. Even today, millions go to bed hungry. How can we accept a society where tons of food is wasted while countless families starve? For instance, in October this year, two women from the Kandhamal district of Odisha tragically died after consuming mango kernels due to poverty and hunger. Five others who ate the same had severe health issues and were hospitalized. When I visited their families, the women shared that they resorted to eating mango kernels as a desperate starvation coping mechanism.

Despite being one of the world's fastest-growing economies, India ranks 134 out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index. The poor — primarily Dalits, Tribals and "backward" classes — bear the brunt of this disparity. Among them, Dalit Christians and Muslims are especially vulnerable, as they have been denied the benefits of higher education, employment and political representation for over 70 years, unlike their counterparts in other communities.

This systemic exclusion leaves them landless, jobless, resourceless and defenseless. Many are trapped by social media, disconnected from reality and struggling. With no financial stability, most are forced to become migrant workers, living hand-to-mouth.

Sr. Sujata Jena conducts career guidance and counseling sessions for students at St. Joseph's High School, Bhubaneswar, on Aug. 12, 2023. (Courtesy of Sr. Sujata Jena)

How do you see the work of the Catholic Church in India in these matters?

Dalits face relentless persecution and violence for reasons that are often trivial or deeply rooted in prejudice. They are attacked, murdered, lynched, mocked, threatened and restricted for marrying someone of their choice, wearing certain shoes, attending church, entering temples, or even expressing themselves through speeches, songs or books. They are tortured simply for existing in society.

The church in India has made remarkable contributions to education and health care, serving people across caste and creed. However, it has done relatively little to empower the Dalit community. It is imperative for the church and Christians to rise to the occasion and work tirelessly to end all forms of discrimination that strip people of their dignity and life. This is not just a moral duty but a crucial calling in our times to protect and uplift the precious lives of our brothers and sisters.

Is your work recognized and respected by the local civil authorities?

I have had positive experiences networking with the labour commissioner and other government officials of Kerala regarding migrants' rights. Some officers continue to extend their cooperation when we seek their help or remind them of their duties. When I introduce myself as a nun and express concern about specific issues, they often acknowledge the genuineness of my concerns and feel obligated to act accordingly.

However, since my work takes a rights-based approach, it does come with risks. For instance, my Twitter [X] account was once suspended after I posted an article on farmers' rights published in Global Sisters Report. This highlights the reality that no government appreciates its citizens openly pointing out injustices. Working for the voiceless and vulnerable requires courage, wisdom and a readiness to face challenges.

How does being a journalist help you to highlight injustices and abuses?

Media dictates the world, yet in India, much of print and digital media is controlled by ruling or political parties, often spreading a narrative from their perspective that may not be true. It is, therefore, the responsibility of every concerned citizen to challenge and debunk misinformation. Social justice is a foundational principle of Catholic social teaching and a cause I am deeply passionate about, particularly justice for the vulnerable.

I view journalism as a powerful tool to advocate and promote social justice. I am grateful to platforms like Global Sisters Report and Matters India for giving me the opportunity to highlight stories of injustice and exploitation in rural villages, as well as showcase positive initiatives that contribute to building a just and equitable

society.

I believe it is vital to read, write, reflect, educate oneself and question the injustices in society. Journalism helps me not only amplify the voices of the marginalized but also refine my perspective and deepen my commitment to the prophetic mission of Christ.