

## Notre Dame Presence Among the Rabhas at Gaonchulka, Assam, India



In January 2013, another branch sprouted on the Notre Dame Tree when the Sisters of the Assumption Province, Patna, India, opened a new affiliation in the village of Gaonchulka, under the jurisdiction of Bongaigaon Diocese, in the State of Assam. Two Sisters were assigned to this new community in January 2013 and after six months, one more Sister joined the group.

In this new mission, we come in contact with three ethnic groups namely, the Rabhas, the Bodos and the Santhals. The Rabhas and the Bodos belong to the Mongolean race while the Santhals are migrants from Central India. At Gaonchulka, the mission will primarily focus on education and development of the **Rabha** tribe as they are one of the most vulnerable tribes in this region even today.

In 1977 many families accepted Christianity from the Baptist missionaries, who were the first to start missionary work here. In 1983, some of these families became Catholics. At

present there are 24 Catholic families at Gaonchulka where the Sisters are living. There are a few Catholic families in the adjacent villages belonging to different tribes. They are very devout people. Since the parish church is about 15 kilo meters away, they go to Church only on special occasions. On Sundays, the church services in the villages are conducted by the village catechists. People are happy that the Sisters are now in their midst and can help them with their faith formation.

All the people in this region are farmers depending solely on agriculture for a living. The land is very fertile and receives good rain as it is in the plains of the Bhutan Hills. Apart from cultivating various crops, the men of the family supplement their income by making and selling varieties of household items from bamboos, which are grown widely in this region. The women also contribute by weaving the traditional clothing which they wear.

A small river that originates and flows near the village is like a mother to them. It provides sufficient fish, crabs etc. for all the families of the village from the onset of monsoon up to the winter months. We often see the villagers, irrespective of their age and sex, searching for fish and other items in the water. Everyone gets enough food for their daily consumption.

Though the people are very hard- working, due to lack of transportation facilities, they are not able to get a good price for their agricultural products. This is a cause for their poor economic condition. Lack of mobility has also prevented them from getting good

education or health care. Though there are government-run schools in most of the villages, due to the shortage of committed teachers, most of the population remains illiterate or are barely able to read and write. In a population of 300 adults, only 6 persons have completed their high school education. Besides these, the Rabhas also have had to bear the brunt of ethnic clashes that break out among the different tribes every now and then. Political instability of the State of Assam is most felt at Kokharjhar District where our sisters reside.



At the request of the Bishop of Bongaigaon Diocese, Rt.Rev.Thomas Pulloppillil, the Sisters have already started an English medium school in a two room temporary bamboo structure. The school now has 39 children studying in pre-primary classes known as, LKG and UKG. The Sisters have to work very hard to teach them, since most of their parents and siblings are either illiterate or do not know English. The Sisters are also involved in teaching catechism, holding Bible classes for youth, conducting family prayers and prayer services in the village church along with the catechist. Studying the various

needs of the people here, Sisters see the possibility of rendering their services in education and women empowerment programmes.

The people are very hospitable, loving and caring towards the Sisters. They often share with them their rice, vegetables, fruits, fish and crab. The mission is new and challenging but the simplicity, warmth and openness of the people encourage the Sisters to be messengers of God's goodness and provident care among His chosen people.



Sisters Mary Deepika

Sisters Mary Anita

Sisters Mary Sabeena Soren