



'My Great Hope Is the Sisters'

text by Jose Kavi with photographs by John Mathew



At 10 years old, Amrita Kumari has made up her mind: She wants to become a doctor. Her road will not be easy; Amrita is in the first grade, whereas most children her age have attended school for at least five years. But such obstacles have not stopped her from dreaming.

"I want to treat people and make them healthy," says Amrita. Her father, Amit Kumar, looks on with pride from the kiosk attached to their hut, from which he sells toffee, chips and other snacks.

Amrita lives with her three siblings and parents in a slum east of the Indian capital of Delhi. Her tiny hut — consisting of one room with a tarpaulin roof and walls lined with torn clothing — sits on the edge of a sewer. Children in tattered, dirty clothes with unkempt hair and distended bellies play around three dozen such huts that constitute the area called Reti Mandi — "sand market," perhaps referencing the heaps of sand opposite the sewer.

Pigs and dogs walk in and out of the huts as women cook outdoors on charcoal ovens made of mud. Men wrapped in shawls, bent with age, sit in corners, idle. Youngsters huddle around in an open space playing cards or watching games on mobile phones.

Reti Mandi is located in the Ghaziabad district, home to many who work in the capital, and functions as a bedroom community to Delhi. However, those who support themselves as day laborers — including Mr. Kumar and his neighbors — often have only meager shanty dwellings to their name.

These poor Dalit groups — members of the lowest caste, also known as "untouchables" — contain the majority of illiterate

people in the district. Yet, out of its 3.32 million people, about 78 percent of Ghaziabad's population is literate — slightly better than the national average of 74 percent.

Surrounded by his two daughters and two sons, Mr. Kumar shares his dream: Find an escape for his children from the squalor in which he has spent 25 years. Poverty had kept him away from school, but he is determined to go to any length to ensure his children enjoy a higher quality of life.

"I do not want them to be like me — eking out a living collecting scraps or garbage. The only option is to educate them," the 35-year-old Hindu says.

"My great hope is the sisters," he adds, referring to the Sisters of Destitute, a Syro-Malabar Catholic congregation of women that has worked among the underserved people of Ghaziabad for the past 23 years.

Sister Sumitha Puthenchakkalackal, who heads the sisters' social service wing in the region, says the district's slums put their charisma to the ultimate test. Founded in 1927 by the Rev. Varghese Payyappilly, a priest of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Archeparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly, the community is charged to work and witness the Gospel among the sick and destitute.

"Our aim is to help the integral growth of people, especially the destitute, through human development activities," Sister Sumitha explains.

In this work, she says — offering services, creating opportunities and bolstering the hopes and dreams of people such as Mr. Kumar and Amrita — the sisters find their greatest joy.

The Sisters of Destitute began working among the Dalit people in 1993, after establishing a house in Mariamnagar

Sister Sumitha Puthenchakkalackal serves a midday meal in Ghaziabad.

for
90
years



“It is a heartbreaking experience, visiting some of the Sisters of the Destitute and witnessing their work,” writes M.L. Thomas, CNEWA’s regional director in India. These sisters live and work among the poorest in India’s densely populated neighborhoods and slums.

Through the years, CNEWA has supported the sisters in a number of ways. In the Delhi slum of Reti Mandi, we provide medicines and food. Thanks to our benefactors, we also support the sisters’ work with tribal children in the hilly regions of Idukki in Kerala in southwestern India, and assist in the formation of novices.

“I think CNEWA’s mission is to spread the love of the church,” Mr. Thomas says. “We must strengthen the hands of those who devote their lives to spreading the Good News ... and who are extending those hands to give a peaceful embrace to those in need.”

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(“Mary’s town”) in Ghaziabad, some 25 miles east of downtown Delhi. The Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church’s first religious congregation for men, first built up the local Catholic enclave in early 1980’s and invited other religious congregations and lay Catholics to join them.

The sisters erected the Jeevandhara (“life stream”) Welfare Center in 2003 as a rehabilitation center for physically disabled girls. Attached to their provincial house, the center’s establishment commemorated the golden jubilee for the congregation’s apostolates outside Kerala.

Soon, the sisters increased their outreach to poor residents of their neighborhood, says Sister Rania Kureeckal, who works as a nurse in the district hospital, a government-run institution. She recalls pleading with their provincial for permission

to work among the poorest of the poor.

“Our provincial had a soft spot for the poor, especially the people of the slums. She was concerned about their situation and wanted to help them come up in life,” said Sister Rania, a regional superior based in Deendayalpur, located about two miles from Mariamnagar.

She says the sisters started visiting slums in 2003 to conduct informal classes for children and adults with the help of a Carmelite priest. They would leave the Mariamnagar convent in the morning, visit areas such as Nai Basti, Bombay Colony, Nat Gali and Vikalang Colony before returning home in the evening.

However, they realized they could not participate completely in the life of the community with such an arrangement. So, three sisters, including Sister Rania, lobbied their superiors for permission to live with the community.

► An elderly woman in Ghaziabad rests against a building.

► Children gather to recite morning prayers before school.

After much discussion, they rented a one-room house at Masjid Gali (“mosque lane”) in the middle of Deendayalpur, a neighborhood where the government had resettled slum residents.

“We wanted to stay with the people and become part of their lives,” explains Sister Rania.

Enthusiasm was one thing; actually living it out, they learned, was challenging beyond expectation. “Some said we had made a rash decision. But our provincial was supportive and guided us,” she recalls.

They spent their first day in prayer.

“We prayed a lot, as there was no security in that vulnerable place. Our main weapon was prayer.”

Sister Rania recalls being startled from prayer in their first night by the cries of a woman. They slowly opened their rickety door to see a man dragging his wife by her hair and kicking her.

“We tried to intervene even though we were scared to death,” she says. Fortunately, they were able to talk to the man and halt the abuse.

She recalls another incident that rattled some nerves. They used to hold a clothing fair, distributing used clothes collected from Christian schools.

Once, their novices had come for the event, while Sister Rania was attending to urgent matters elsewhere. The crowd surrounded the young women and snatched the clothes out from their arms. Terrified, they fled, leaving behind all they had been carrying.

This event did not dishearten them. “It opened our eyes to the

people’s acute destitution; they were that desperate even for clothes,” Sister Rania says.

The hardships of the life they had chosen extended to every aspect of living.

“We used to sleep on the floor and ate what the people had — just rice and lentils. We drew water from a common hand pump,” says Sister Rania.

After six months in a rented house, the sisters bought a small plot of land on a nearby street, where they built a three-room house. Each day they would attend a morning liturgy at their Mariamnagar convent, a half-hour walk away, and then return to the neighborhood after breakfast.

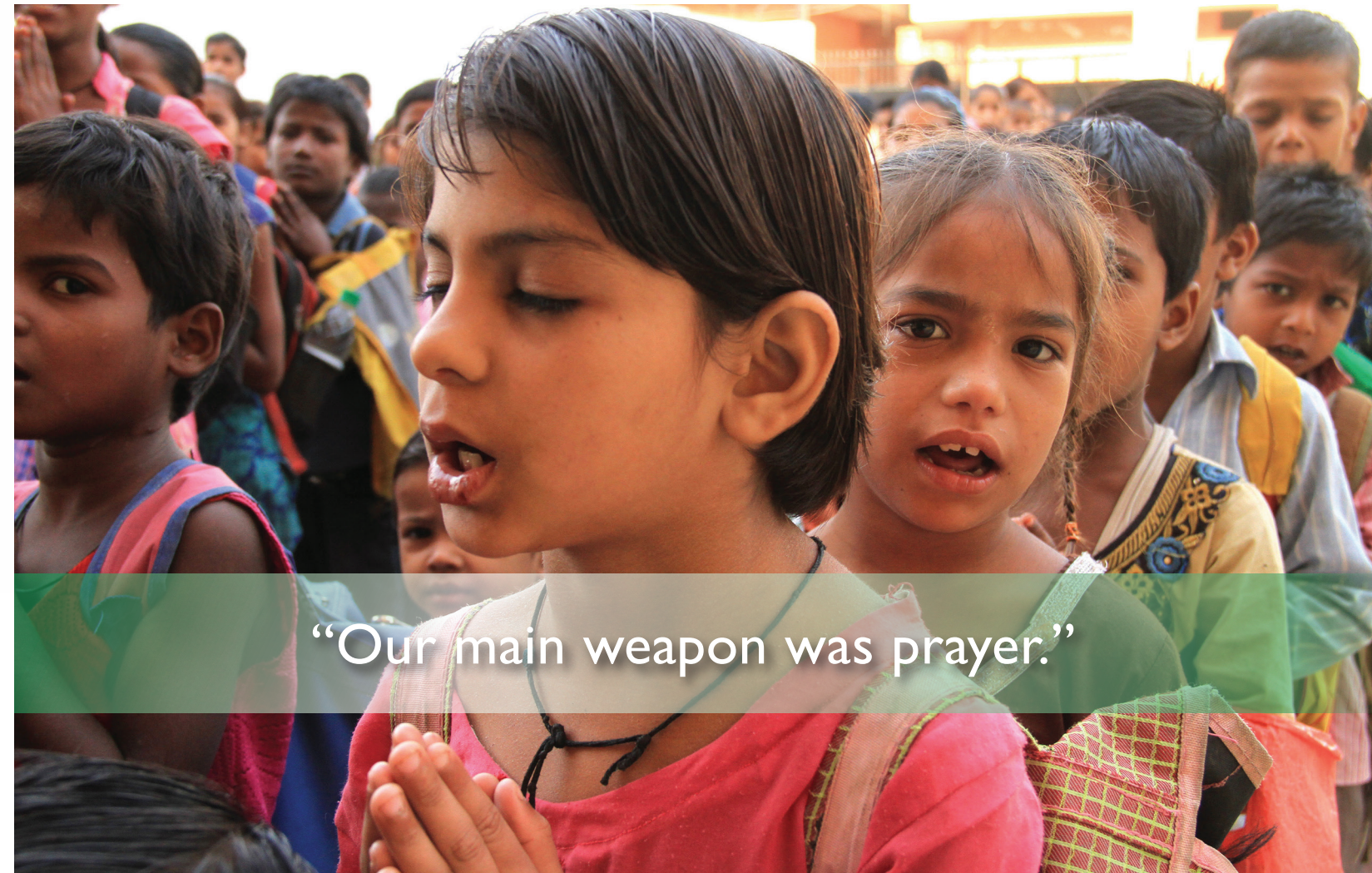
Settled in their new environment, the sisters refined their focus on the needs of the community. Education became central to their ministry.

“Most people work as rickshaw pullers, day laborers, rag pickers. Some indulge in begging,” Sister Rania says. For this population, education is seldom on the horizon.

The sisters encouraged the parents to seek school admission for their children and appointed teachers to conduct special classes in impoverished neighborhoods. They also helped children complete the enrollment process for nearby schools.

St. Joseph’s Higher Secondary School in Mariamnagar, managed by the Carmelite fathers, currently enrolls more than 100 children from Reti Mandi — including Mr. Kumar’s sons and daughters.

At the same time, the sisters also began to teach informally, forming groups to reinforce the dignity of women and the importance of literacy, and hosting classes on a variety of topics in the narrow-laned neighborhoods.



“Our main weapon was prayer.”



A school attendant distributes milk in an underserved neighborhood of Ghaziabad.

Sister Sumitha says after nearly eight years of experimenting with such informal schooling methods, they resolved to open a more traditional school adjacent to the convent. The construction of the four-story school began in January 2016; by July, they had begun teaching classes up to the second grade.

“Here they are serious about teaching,” says Binita Sharma of Nai Basti, a mother of three students of the school. “Our children have become much more disciplined in four months.”

Mrs. Sharma adds that she withdrew her children from another school to seek admission in this

one. “They used to sit idle in the other school, and learned nothing.” Moreover, this new school is closer to home and costs only a fraction of their previous tuition.

Her children stand nearby, grinning. Tanuska, her eldest girl, and Prince, her son, want to become teachers; her younger daughter hopes to join the police.

Sister Sumitha says they plan to admit Reti Mandi children to the school as of the next academic year, beginning July 2017.

Due to life circumstances, the children often demonstrate erratic attendance. “The children would disappear for months when their parents go to their native villages,” Sister Sumitha explains. Because of this, the sisters decided to follow the curriculum set forth by the National Institute of Open Schooling,

The open school system is an Indian government project launched in 1989 to provide education in remote areas with a flexible learning method to help improve the country’s literacy rate. Inspired by the initiatives of Jesuit Father Thomas Kunnunkal, the project aims to reach millions of children who cannot attend regular schools for various reasons.

The project also aims to deliver education to some 10 million disabled children outside the education system and a UNESCO-estimated 287 million illiterate Indian adults. The system has tutored and distributed tenth grade degrees to nearly a million students since the beginning. Currently almost two million students are enrolled today.

The results in Ghaziabad have impressed even the teachers. Kalpana Bisht, who teaches in the Montessori section, says the children were initially unruly and mischievous. “But now, they have become attentive in the class.”

Sister Sumitha finds disciplining the children a Herculean task, but worth the trouble.

“They used to come to the school in the same soiled dress they wore at home. It took months to convince the parents and children about the importance of neatness and hygiene.”

While the school provides uniforms to tuition-paying students, Sister Sumitha says they plan to introduce uniforms for all students next year, including those unable to pay.

The school also provides a protein-rich meal to help prevent malnutrition among students. The children forget formalities at noon; after lining up to collect their mid-day meal, they eat squatting on the dusty ground, laughing and socializing.

While strongly focused on education, the sisters’ work seeks to address a broad range of social needs. As one of their first acts after settling in the slum, Sister Rania says, they opened a TB-DOTS center — a tuberculosis treatment and control strategy recommended by the World Health Organization — in a hospital managed by the Missionaries of St. Joseph in Mariamnagar. The sisters have recruited health care workers to provide services to residents.

They also organize evening prayer meetings called satsang, where participants read from the Bible and sing hymns accompanied by drums.

Although the area is predominantly Hindu, Sister Rania says, they find the people appreciate



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their efforts. Ajit Pradhan, a local official of the Bharatiya Janata Party — the dominant political party of India, which adheres to an ideology of Hindu nationalism known as Hindutva — says the sisters’ faith is no cause of worry.

While the party promotes legislation designed to prevent conversion from Hinduism — many so-called nationalists fear Christian charity and community outreach could be attempts at proselytization — Mr. Pradhan says he has known the sisters since they began working in his neighborhood 15 years ago.

“They come here to teach our children and distribute medicine. We never suspect they have come to convert,” he says.

Mr. Pradhan, who has completed 12 years of schooling, says only 10 percent of people in his enclave pursue an education. He is convinced only education can bring his people out of their misery.

“All want to educate their children, but they cannot afford fees; they have no money,” says the community leader.

Mr. Pradhan hopes the sisters will open a boarding school. “We have to take the children out of this setting. There will be no change in them if they have to come back to the slums after classes.”

He says he can channel at least 400 students to the sisters, if they take the lead on such a project.

Whatever its merits, such a project remains constrained by the realities on the ground; resources are scarce, Sister Sumitha says. “Who will meet the expenses?”

Despite the scope of the problem, the sisters will continue to work with the people of Ghaziabad to find a solution, as they have done for more than two decades. Through these monumental efforts, the dreams of children such as Amrita may yet come true.

Jose Kavi writes about social and religious issues in India from New Delhi.

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