

St Michael's Church, Damra

St. Michael's Church, Damra is situated in the Goalpara district of Assam, about 120 kilometres away from Guwahati and just 4 kilometres away from the Guwahati-Tura-Goalpara national highway. Garos, Assamese, Rabhas, Bengalis, Boros and Nepalis are the main communities living in and around Damra. Native languages of Damra are Assamese, Bengali, Garo and Boro. Damra is the last township of Assam bordering Garo Hills and plays an important role in connecting the people of Assam with those of North Garo hills of Meghalaya.

In the olden days people used to come down from Garo hills to Damra market to sell their goods and to buy materials for their daily living. Agriculture is the mainstay of their livelihood. Land is indispensable to them for their livelihood and as such they remain dependent on the plot of land they hold. Many people in this present time have taken up rubber plantation, which has become a source of livelihood.

The parish of Damra has an area of approximately 900 sq kilometres and a total population of 191751 in the Dudhnoi Assembly constituency. The Catholics however, number only 4215 in 700 families living in 31 villages. The main Tribal groups in the parish are Garos, Rabhas and Boros. Though it was earlier in the diocese of Tura, it was given to the Archdiocese of Guwahati when it was erected into a Diocese in August 16, 1992.

The early history of Damra mission is associated with the Salesian Fathers from Guwahati, who in the 1930's visited some of the Garo villages of South Kumrup as well as the South East part of the Goalpara district of Assam. By then there were a few Catholic presences in the villages of Loskorpara, Damas and Kharkutta on the boarder of Assam. The work among the Garos received much attention when Fr. A. Pianazzi was appointed by Mgr. L. Mathias as assistant Parish Priest in Guwahati in 1931 and put in charge of the Garo communities while at the same time caring for the Catholic communities in Goalpara district.

By the beginning of 1940s, Damra Region had nearly 15 Villages where there were Catholic presences. To visit these villages Fathers from Tura had to walk on foot to Resubelpara or travel by bus from Guwahati to Daranggiri and then proceed to Karkhutta. Since it was very difficult to care for the people from so far, Frs. A. Bucci SDB and J. Costa SDB insisted with Fr. Urget SDB, the then provincial to open a new presence at Karkhutta for the new Garo Catholics. Meanwhile Frs. Pianazzi and Costa who looked after the Tura community felt the urgent need for a new Mission centre at Damra.

Immediately after the Second World War, Bishop Stephen Ferrando decided to open a centre for the Garos at Karkhutta, where a church already existed with two rooms. Fr. Denis Troncana, who was selected for the new venture could not assume responsibility due to his advanced age. Consequently, Fr. H. Colzani who was to be the assistant to Fr. Denis was selected for the pioneering work of the new mission.

Fr. H. Colzani reached Karkhutta on 8 May, 1946. According to Fr. A. Becker, the new mission was called after St. Michael, because at that time the feast of Archangel Michael was celebrated on 8 May. A few months later, Fr. Colzani shifted the centre from Karkhutta to Damra as it was found more conducive for the growth and expansion of the mission. Thus, a glorious era dawned in the annals of the history of Damra parish. Damra had a large weekly market which was a meeting ground for the Garos from different regions. Besides, it is the gateway to North Garo Hills.

Damra mission was one of the earliest catholic establishments in the Assam valley. It served as a launching pad for several other mission ventures. From here the missionaries visited and established other centres like Rongjeng, Resubelpara, Tikrikilla, Williamnagar, Nangalbibra, Mangsang, Songsak, Mendipathar and others.

Original purpose of founding the new mission was to look after the needs of the new Garo catholic communities of Damra region. Main thrust of the missionaries was evangelization and it could be understood in the triple dimensions of finding the scattered Christians around Goalpara region and tending them, evangelizing them and involving in charitable and developmental works like health care, schools, and boardings. Fr. H. Colzani and Fr. George Stadler, who joined the mission as parish priest and assistant had to face immense land settlement problems, hostility from the locality and malaria attacks. In spite of the difficulties they marched on placing their trust and confidence in God and in Mary Help of Christians.

In 1950 with the transfer of Fr. G. Stadler from Damra, Fr. Batista Busolin arrived. Since literacy and education was a felt need for Garos, Don Bosco M.E. School (Garo Medium) was established on 1 February 1951. The demand for a high school forced the Fathers to open a high school on 1 February 1956.

Fr. Willy Scoots took charge of the mission on 8 April 1957 and continued to work up to 1965. It was during those years, the present presbytery, Don Bosco hall, staff quarters, Nirmala Convent, Nirmala girls' hostel, and Nirmala M. E. School were constructed. Don Bosco High School received recognition in 1958 and it was affiliated in 1960. Education department granted permission in 1959 to present candidates for the matriculation examination.

At the request of Archbishop Stephen Ferrando SDB Nirmala Convent was started in 1960 by the Society of Christ Jesus (Spanish Sisters). The sisters began a Garo Medium M.E School and a charitable dispensary. In 1975 the Institution was handed over to the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. In April 1977 an English Medium M.E School was added to the present institution to cater to the education of all.

During this period Fr. Dominic Curto toured extensively in the western and southern regions of the parish and established new centres, which have become parishes today. Meanwhile Fr. Alexander, a diocesan priest, toured Karkhutta and Mariampur regions of the parish. From 1965 Fr. D. Curto took charge of the mission. It was in that era that the present school building was

constructed. Fr. Martin Calligharis who was the Headmaster of the high school contributed his share to the growth of the school. Fr. John followed Fr. Martin in 1966. When Fr. Joseph Maliaeckal assumed the responsibility of the school there was great pressure from the local people to open M.E School in Assamese Medium. Accordingly an M.E School in Assamese Medium was opened in 1956 and a High School in 1971.

The Year 1964 saw a sudden growth in the parish population as large numbers of displaced Garos from Bangladesh settled down in different corners of the parish. Fr. Marrochino worked among the displaced Garos from 1967 to 1969. He regularly visited them and spoke to them about Christianity and baptised many of them. He supplied rations and distributed clothes to them.

Sad day descended upon the flourishing mission of Damra when Fr. D. Curto was compelled to leave Assam due to an order from the Home Ministry expelling foreign missionaries of this region. Subsequently Fr. E. V. George, a diocesan priest, took charge of the mission in 1969 and continued till 1971. In 1974 Bro. Barnabas Haw became headmaster of the Assamese medium M.E. School. With the erection of the diocese of Tura, and with the encouragement and help received from Bishop Marengo, Fr. George was able to carry forward his apostolate among the Rabhas.

Fr. A. Victor took charge of the parish in 1971 and served till 1986. During that period Damra mission witnessed great growth and expansion. Some notable events of the period were the ordinations of Fr. Arthur Marak on 13 April 1980 and Fr. Denis Toju SDB on 13 January 1985. Due to political turmoil and a desire for development large groups of non-Christian Garos entered the Church in 1983. The work among the Rabhas initiated by Fr. E.V. George had gradually expanded and Fr. Kuriala, headmaster of High English School from 1975 continued the apostolate among the Rabhas in Matia Majerburi and Borbakra and started new presences among the Boros in Borgum and Bandershi.

During the tenure of Fr. Kuriala, the school and the mission faced extra ordinary challenges and constant tension created by a section of students, who demanded conducting *saraswati puja* in the mission and school premises. In all those years of tension and turmoil the Garo Catholic community defended the rights of the mission, even at the risk of their lives. It was their support and timely interventions that helped to overcome the hurdles.

Fr. Maria Selvam, a volunteer from Madras province of the Salesians toured the Catholic communities extensively and undertook many developmental projects for the people. Fr. Jose valiaveetil followed up the good works of Fr. Maria from 1980 to 1986. He revived the youth of the parish.

Fr. Augustine Karottupuram became Headmaster of High English School in 1985 and Fr. K. A. Thomas (senior) assumed the responsibility of the parish in 1986. During that period there was a growth among the Boro catholic population in some areas of the parish.

Fr. V.U. John was appointed assistant parish priest in 1986 and in 1989 Fr. K. A. Thomas was replaced by Fr. Paul Panachikkal as parish priest. After four years of systematic touring Fr. V. U. John left for Boko and Fr. K. A. Thomas (junior) arrived in January 1990. Fr. U. V. Jose arrived in March 1990 and worked till July 1993, touring the villages extensively. He learnt Rongtani Rabha and published two gospels in the Rabha language. Fr. K. A. Thomas (junior) left the mission in February 1991 and was replaced by Fr. Michael Bhengra as headmaster of the Don Bosco M. E. School. At the departure of Fr. K. O. Augustine, Fr. Cornelius Panna assumed charge of Don Bosco High School. Fr. Augustine's efforts to dialogue with the local people helped much in creating a peaceful atmosphere in the school. Fr. John Chellantara became assistant parish priest in February 1993. He took great interest in learning Garo and toured the villages. In February 1995 Fr. John Chellantara left for Barpeta and Fr. E. P. Augustine replaced Fr. Michael Bhengra as headmaster of the M.E. school. Fr. George Ollickal of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas joined the community as assistant parish priest in May 1995.

With the coming back of Fr. A. Victor to Damra Parish as Pastor in 1998, the mission witnessed lot of new developments in the field of faith formation: the Catholic Youth Association (CYA) was reorganised and in October 1998 a large number of youth participated in the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Tura Diocese and a seminar on evangelisation for educated lay people of the parish was held in the month of November. With the coming of Fr. Johnson Parackal in July 1999 as headmaster, the school was led to new heights.

To build the faith of the people of the region "All Goalpara Jubilee convention" was held at Damra parish from 19 to 22 October 1999. Over 2000 people took part from six neighbouring parishes. On 14 February 2000, Fr. Victor opened "Colzani Memorial English School" for the poor Catholics of the Parish. It was named after the first Parish Priest of Damra Mission. Fr. Busoline who began his missionary life in Damra in the year 1950. He came to Damra on 4 June 2000 to celebrate his Golden Jubilee of Apostolate in Garo Hills while on 10 June Fr. Victor celebrated his Golden Jubilee of "Mission Life" in Northeast India. Bosco Reach Out, a developmental wing of the Salesians opened an office in the parish premises to look after the social service of the parish. In 2002 Fr. Andreas Panna replaced Bro. Benjamin Kujur as assistant headmaster. On 15 January 2003 Fr. A. Victor was transferred from Damra Mission to Garobadha and Fr. Barnabas Mardi joined Damra as Parish Priest. In June 2004 Fr. Crospier Sangma (diocesan priest) came to stay in Damra, sent by the Archbishop to study the feasibility of opening a new parish at Matia. In 2004 Fr. Christopher Warlarphi joined Damra as assistant headmaster and assistant parish priest.

On 27 March 2005, Pre-Novitiate course started at Damra with Fr. K. J. Joy in-charge. On 15 January 2006 a new village church was blessed in Dabli. On 25 May 2006, Fr. C. A. John came to Damra mission as the new parish priest and Fr. Victor Tigga came on 7 June 2007 as the new headmaster replacing Fr. Johnson. When Fr. Christopher was transferred to Mizoram Br. Solomon Swer came as assistant headmaster and warden.

On 8 March 2009, St. Alphonsa's Parish, Tillapara was inaugurated, bifurcating from Damra Parish and Fr. Arokia Samy was installed as the first Parish Priest. Holy Mass was presided over by Fr. Varghese Kizhakevely, Vicar General of Guwahati Archdiocese.

On 5 January 2011, ethnic clash between broke out between the Rabha and Garo communities and the Catholic faithful went out of their way to bring peace and harmony between these communities. The missionaries did lots of relief work and peace meetings were held in the school premises to bring peace and understanding between the two groups.

In view of giving higher education to the children of the villages the provincial administration decided to upgrade Don Bosco Colzani Memorial School. Hence, on 9 July 2016 Fr. V. M. Thomas, Salesian Provincial of Guwahati laid the foundation stone for the new building.

Presently, the mission is headed by Fr. Milon Narzary with Fr. Nicodim Aind as headmaster and assistant parish priest and Bro. Benedict Sangma as assistant headmaster. The parish organizes weekly masses and conducts annual retreats and *Sabhas* in the villages. The parish youth are also followed up with adequate care. Every first Friday the Catechists of each village come together for meeting and animation programme. The sisters engaged in the pastoral ministry help the faith formation of the people through regular family visits and village tour. The parish conducts regular Sunday Catechism Classes by the Sisters and teachers.

A glance at the bygone years of Damra mission helps to understand the enormous work undertaken by the missionaries in the region. It places on record their uplifting work among the tribal communities and their all round development. There is a steady growth in the number of people who accept Christianity.

It is a matter of great joy to note the developments brought about during the last seventy years. The mission has given birth to twenty vibrant and responsive parishes. Its educational and developmental activities have grown in leaps and bounds, transforming the lives of the people. All these have been possible due to the untiring zeal of the missionaries who pioneered the mission and those who followed in their footsteps.

*** *** ***