

St. Thomas Church, Bhalukdubi, Goalpara

St. Thomas Church, Bhalukdubi carved out of Gojapara parish was established in the year 1998. The catholic population of the parish consists of Garos, Adivasis, Rabhas and Boros. Majority of them are Garos and they are spread across 10 villages.

A year prior to its establishment, the centre was spotted by Fr. George Olickal MST who came to the place to reach out to the catholic population of the area. Later, he looked for a suitable place and started the mission in a temporary house. He began a nursery school in the same year. In September 1999 Fr. George was transferred and was succeeded by Fr. John D'Souza. On his transfer, the Capuchin Fathers took over the mission and rendered their service until July 2012. Fr. Kuriakose Kattoopara, Fr. Sebastian and Fr. Sam Zacharias of the Capuchins, who worked during this period, are remembered for having done much for the development of the mission.

The Garos who constitute the major portion of the Church are mainly from the place, but there are also migrants from Bangladesh. During 1964 trouble and during the war of 1971 many Garos came away from Bangladesh. At Matia in Goalpara the Indian Government gave them security and protection. In the course of time many of them went to other places while a few stayed back. Among those some were Catholics and others became Catholics later on. Garo and Assamese are the two main languages used for communication.

The Catholic community of the place is faced with troubles from the migrant Muslims from Bangladesh. Lack of security and support made many of them flee from the place. Two of the Catholic Communities - Chokdara and Khutamari have abandoned their villages and looked for shelter elsewhere. The churches built in those villages remain to speak of the Catholics presence today. But, as time goes on even those are likely to disappear.

The Catholics are faced with the trouble of losing number of girls who contract marriage with the Muslims. With the marriage they are forced to join Islam. A number of them have returned to their families while others settled in other places where they found acceptance.

Poverty, unemployment, lack of education and alcoholism are some of the major problems of the Catholics in the parish. The parish takes initiatives to alleviate the sufferings of the Catholics by giving scholarships to poor children. The social service team of the Archdiocese has taken steps to help the people through the formation of self-help groups and making provisions for drinking water through '*Tara*' pumps.

Faith formation of the faithful is taken care through faith formation programmes organised in the parish. They are formed in various groups such as Marian Sodality, St. Joseph's Sodality, ICYM and SCC. There is regular Sunday Catechism for children. All these programmes are directed by Fr. Crospier Sangma, the parish priest and supported by Fr. Ilaiya Raja HGN, assistant parish priest.

Ursulines of Mary Immaculate (UMI), Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary (SCJM) and Missionaries of Charity (MC) are working in the Parish. The UMI Sisters are engaged in the School and pastoral works. They run Nirmala Hospital, Goalpara of the Archdiocese. The SCJM has a Women Development Centre and the MC has a Centre to take care of aged women and mentally challenged people.

As the Church completes a decade of its existence, it shows forth the changes brought about in the locality through its various ministries. Education and health sector have played a vital role in bringing concrete transformation in the lives of the people. In the days to come it will continue to play the major role towards progress and development.

*** *** ***