

Shrine of Don Bosco, Gojapara

Shrine of Don Bosco, Gojapara, earlier known as Blessed Michael Rua's Parish is situated in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area in Goalpara District of Assam, on the South bank of Brahmaputra, 145 kilometres west of Guwahati. It was carved out from the parish of Damra in March 1997.

The predominant population of the village Gojapara are indigenous Rabhas of whom 74 families are Catholics. The parish has 4636 Catholics in 40 villages of the parish, majority of whom are from the Garo tribe. The village of Gojapara was handed over to Damra with its Rabha catholic families from the Meghalaya Resu parish in October 1985, whereas other Garo villages of present Gojapara parish were under Damra always. Gojapara parish was erected to give a strong presence and commitment to the Rabha community in Rabha heartland and for the pastoral care and development of the Garo catholic community as well as to bring the Good News to all people. It was the endeavour of the Church to emphasize its commitment to the dominant, indigenous Rabha tribal community in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area that Gojapara was chosen to be the headquarters of the parish.

The Parish was started on 16 March 1997 with Fr. Paul Panachikal SDB as parish priest and Fr. Barnabas Mardi as the assistant. The present parish priest is Fr. Augustine Karotupuram SDB and the assistant is Fr. Michael Bhengra.

The parish has a full-fledged school from nursery to class 10 with 1130 students, 35 staff at the centre and a convent of the Handmaids of Mary with five sisters as well as the presence of the Daughters of the Cross, with three sisters at Hatigopa 10 kilometres away. The parish has two hostels at Gojapara with 35 boys and 50 girls.

The parish house, boys' hostel and the playground are situated in a plot of land measuring 20.5 bighas in the name of *Katolic Morisali* (Catholic Cemetery) marked out for the Gojapara catholic community by the government in 2003. This land was occupied by the village catholic community of Gojapara and they handed it over to the Salesians to establish the mission. Accordingly the parish was built.

Don Bosco High School, Convent, Girls hostel and Teachers Quarters are situated across the road, in a plot measuring over 10 bighas. When the parish authorities approached the Assam Government for allotment of this land to the school there was a joint verification done in August 2009 by the Revenue and Forest officials. The forest officials claimed that the land was under Proposed Reserve Forest (PRF). Petitions had been submitted to the DC for allotment of the land to school for educational infrastructure in public interest and it was done.

The parish has a village church at Hatigopa with 9 bighas of land in the name of St. Mary's Church. Additionally, the catholic community had 19 bighas of land under its possession where they had built a school in 1996 which they handed over to the parish. The parish managed this

school called Little Flower School with the help of the Disciples of Don Bosco until 2014. The local community greatly desired to upgrade the school to high school. But the Disciples of Don Bosco were not prepared to meet the educational aspirations of the people and so in agreement with the Archbishop and the Hatigopa catholic community Daughters of the Cross were invited to take over the school administration. On 15 November 2014 they came over and official handing over was done on 9 March 2015 with the signing of MoU between the Provincials of the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Daughters of the Cross, approved by the Archbishop.

On 8 June 2012 Fr. V. M. Thomas laid the foundation for a magnificent church and auditorium. It was blessed on 31 May 2015 by Archbishop John Moolachira, declaring it as Don Bosco Shrine. The parish church was built with local resources, contributions from dioceses of Munich and Köln-Germany, benefactors of Fr. Provincial, contributions from local Catholics, land compensation money from the Daughters of the Cross, FMA Sisters, friends and relatives.

The campus of the parish is beautified with Via Dolorosa, life statues of the Way of the Cross, the Calvary and the Pieta. It has greatly enhanced the piety of the catholic community and the people around. The non Christian Rabha community too is greatly impressed by the church and despite strong anti Christian propaganda the simple tribal people are touched by the religious sentiments evoked by the shrine and the Via Dolorosa.

In order to build fervent communities in and around the villages of the parish, several churches were built: In 2012 one chapel was built at Borjhora village, in 2013 another chapel at Phelbari, in 2014 at Chamaguri village and in 2016 at Chattan, a mountainous village, 15 km away from the parish.

The tribal catholic community is economically disadvantaged but some families have enhanced their income due to rubber cultivation. There is generally good relationship among the communities although the political conflict between the Rabhas and the Garos is casting a shadow on the age-old amity between these two groups. The relationship between the Rabha and Garo Catholics is good as of now.

Today, Don Bosco Shrine stands as a catalyst for reconciliation among the Rabha and Garo communities. The mission emphasises harmony, peaceful coexistence and progress. The people are guided to understand the need to live in peace in order to be on the path of progress.

In the course of six years 210 students passed HSLC of whom 55 passed out with first division. All of them are from Rabha and Garo communities. The area being one of the most backward places of the state, the progression education brings to the lives of people are remarkable. Earlier there weren't many who achieved success from this community, but the present scenario testifies to the great changes that can be brought about in the lives people.

The Rabha community which was once cautious about the Catholic Church has welcomed it with open arms, believing in its goodness and supporting its endeavours. They see the mission and school as indispensable to their progress.