

He Made Assam His Home

The Life Story of an Educationist



Matthew Narimattam SDB

ASSAM

'*O! moor apunar desh...*' (O! my own beloved country) sang L.G. Bordoloi. This patriotic song speaks of the beauty and grandeur of Assam. A land of myths, mysteries, folklores and legends, Assam is rich. Seeing the flames of fire blazing in the land, the Ahoms considered it to be of great wealth and called it '*Golden*'. Later on it was discovered that the fire they saw was from petroleum gas.

Assam is a mosaic of peoples with their rich, colourful and distinctive cultures. The prominent among them include the Assamese people, most of whom the disciples of Srimanta Sankaradeva, one of the greatest religious reformers of the 15th-16th centuries. The others are the Bodos - the oldest inhabitants of Assam, the Ahoms, the war-lords of days gone by, the Tea and ex-tea garden Communities, the Deoris, the Misings, the Karbis, the Chutiyas, the Morans, the Matakas, the Koches, the Rajbhangshis, the Rabhas, the Lalungs and others.

Assam is blessed with vast tea gardens and natural resources like Petroleum and forest products. It is the only habitat in the country for the one-horned rhino at Kaziranga National Park. The golden *muga*, *riha* and *mekhela*, the pride of Assam has no equal in the whole world. The mighty Brahmaputra river feeds the ever green Assam valley.

Nama - as the author will be known in the book, made this beautiful land *his home*



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To
Rev. Fr. Klement
Vaclav, S.D.B.
with love and
gratitude...
Mukul
21-11-2011

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Matthew Narimattam SDB

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DEDICATED

*to the Youth of Assam
who inspired me in meeting
the challenges
of my life of service.*

FOREWORD

"A well written life is as rare as a well spent one." Thomas Carlyle

Nama has spent his life well and it deserves to go down to the pages of history in the form of this book. *He made Assam His Home*. Going through some of the wonderful lived-in experiences as given in this book brought me great joy. He chartered a great life decidedly. When we delve into the depth of his life we can see the richness of his life. A cursory glance at Nama's life as given in this book will take us to myriads of experiences, peoples, life situations, cultures and traditions, religious experiences and core values, music and literature and above all a committed life.

Coming to Assam as an educationist, Nama made himself all things to all people. He came in contact with numerous tribes and cultures. He became one among these various tribes at various periods of his life. By

virtue of his life and service, Assam has become his *Karmabhoomi* for the past fifty years and more. He was able to feel the vibes of every tribe and respond to their needs. In particular, he came in very close contact with the Assamese people, their culture and way of life. He was able to understand their history. It is commendable to know that he speaks Assamese language well and has written books pertaining to Assam, its history and institutions. His love for the people and their language made him produce musical audio cassettes. Perhaps he was the first Catholic priest to interact with the *satras*, a unique institution of Assam and their inmates - the *bhakats* and *satra-adhikars*, thereby gaining an insider's view of their life. Nama's dialogue with Assamese culture and its institutions enriched his God experience. In the process he assimilated to his Christian tradition all that is good and ennobling in them. He was thus able to understand the people deeper and render greater service to them.

His priestly ministry was directed mainly towards the upliftment of the tea and ex-tea garden communities of Assam whom he served with a sense of mission. He was ingenious to find ways and means to uproot some of the evils in their society, especially alcoholism. In this he was very innovative. In this regard he could truly be called a pioneer. He experimented with various

methods in improving the social and economic conditions of the tea and ex-tea garden people, and inculcated in them a sense of cleanliness, hygiene, discipline and a habit of saving. He toiled hard to bring about self-respect and human dignity among them. He challenged their lethargic life to accept progressive ideas.

Nama has also shown an in-depth knowledge and learning about the Bodos and the Ahoms. He identifies the former to the mother-tribe and *Adim vasis* or the original settlers of Assam. He interacted with the *Tai-Ahoms* - a Mongoloid stock, participating in their various *pujas*. He succeeded in discovering the great values among these two powerful ethnic groups.

At a personal level Nama had to face insurmountable odds in life but never succumbed to pressures from any quarter. We find that he has an innate ability to withstand challenges in adverse situations and is able to overcome them. All these situations enriched his experience and led him to greater faith and trust in the Almighty God. As an educationist, the knowledge of the various religious traditions and cultures helped him to serve the people better. He transcended the narrow definitions of religion and faith and thus became acceptable to people of all walks of life. Above all as a

successful educationist he has inspired many a student in her or his life.

This book is a tribute to his tenacious spirit and strong will in the face of adversity - to his remarkable work as an educationist, and a lover of cultures and a friend of peoples. Above all, it is a tribute to a life of sacrifice and religious commitment. His charismatic approach to whatever he did brought satisfaction and contentment to his personal life. God has been the centre of his life. He attributes all what he has accomplished as an educationist to Almighty God. His ultimate desire is to be one with the Almighty, the *Brahman*.

Nama's poem on his golden jubilee of religious life, titled: "*The Sponge Cake*" truly reveals his purpose of life: *life is to be lived* - not to be rusted out or merely to shine like gold; *life is to be fresh like garden rose... to be like sponge cake - for all to share its sweetness and taste*. His *prayer with the sixth sense* reveals the undaunted, fearless and daring Nama, who does things according to his conviction - come what may. His highly praised "*Xunar Axhom*" is a beautiful lyric in praise of Assam by which he has found a place in the literature of Assam.

Here is a man who plunged into the mighty Brahmaputra, and emerged with life full of pearls - a life

Foreword

we can emulate for our inspiration. I wish him every success in the publication of his book. It has been an enriching experience for me to come in contact with him through the pages of this book in its manuscript form. I consider this book as a treasure and recommend it to all who would like to reach out to people.

Fr. Sebastian Karottupuram, SDB., M.Th., Ph.D.
Principal
Don Bosco College, Itanagar
Arunachal Pradesh, India.

PREFACE

A young man asked Socrates the secret of success. Socrates took him to a river, and walked towards the deep water. When the water reached up to their necks, Socrates pushed the young man down into the water. The young man struggled to get out, but Socrates held him down under the water. When he began to turn blue, Socrates raised him out of the water. The first thing the young man did was to take a deep breath. Socrates asked, "What did you want most when you were under the water?" The boy replied, "*Air*." Socrates said, "That is the secret of success. When you want success as intensely as you wanted air under the water, then you will have it."

Well, I may compare my life story in Assam to a voyage across the Brahmaputra, whose waters sometimes flow rather gently, at other times turbulently and unpredictably. To go across the river can sometimes turn out to be a herculean task. Truly in order to get to the other side quite often I had to struggle as intensely as one looks for air under the water. But I was never alone, for into my struggle came help from above, and so it proved to be a success story. Hence the readers will be able to see in this book the progressive realization of some of the goals of my life in Assam.¹

Knowledge of the historical perspective of Assam

A thorough knowledge of the people is a *sine qua non* condition before one launches into any work for their progress. Though not an Assamese by birth, I have made Assam my home and *karmabhumi* for nearly fifty years. As an educationist my postings took me to many parts of Assam, and I interacted with almost all the major Assamese ethnic groups and the tea communities. Exposure to their faiths and cultures was a help to go beyond the narrow confines of my own Religion, Church and Congregation.

Dr. Mahendra Bora, in his foreword to my book "*The Valley in Blossom*" writes: "The author, though he belongs to a different faith and also hails from a different part of the country has never stumbled even for once on any point in tracing the historical perspective of Assam Vaishnavism and in fixing up those tenets of it which have lent colour to the spiritio-cultural life of the present day average Assamese... I marvel at his capacity to combine together with such an ease both theoretical aspect of the subject and the practical manifestations of the same buried under the dungheaps of prejudice and superstition, which seems to me as difficult as combining together the knowledge of both heaven and earth."²

Integration with the people

A deep understanding of the people and culture of Assam helped me to identify myself with them and their way of life. I felt truly at home with the people and they considered me as one among them; nevertheless there were differences in our ways of doing things. It was a complementary process. They gave me their co-operation which led us to our goal. Yes, a horse that pulls cannot kick; a horse that kicks cannot pull. Instead of kicking each other, we pulled together and reached our destination.

By the side of Truth

As I look back at my life story I should say that I was never another man's rubber stamp. Further, when it was a matter of truth and principles, making compromises was out of question. Instead, my decision to stand for truth gave me not a few headaches and heartaches, which however did not last too long because ultimately truth had to triumph. Deep within every human being is good; sooner or later she or he will admire a man of value, not one who has become a success overnight. The richest billionaire in the world is the one who stands for Truth.

The purpose of this book

After a short rap at my childhood days and some of the prevailing customs of the Kerala of my time readers are carried to Tamilnadu, Shillong and Darjeeling. With my arrival in Assam in 1957 my life of service to the people of the state began. From then onwards my life story has been very much interwoven with the different ethnic groups of people, among whom I consider myself blessed to light lamps, burning bright, and from whom I too in turn received illuminating rays of light. My life of service took me to the Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Communities, the different cross-sections of Assamese people - both Vaishnavites to the hilt as well as non-Vaishnavites, their religious leaders, the *satras* a quasi Benedictine type of monasteries, the Ahoms, the Bodos and so on. The purpose of this book is to give the readers who may be of any caste or creed, not merely a theoretical knowledge of the people and their cultures, but an experiential knowledge of the same through my interactions with them. Knowledge of the beautiful cultural heritage of a people will be a means to bind us together into a big family of sisters and brothers living together in peace and harmony. The person of the author and the various ways in which he played the game are surely there, but all efforts are made to bring into focus the people and their culture.

Turning scars into stars

Why do some people succeed while others do not? If anyone has accomplished something worthwhile in life, she or he has done so with *determination, discipline, hard work* and *sacrifice*. "You have a choice in life: You can either pay the price of discipline or regret," says Tim Connor. Beethoven was one of the greatest musicians in the world. He had a great handicap - he was deaf. Some of the best poems on nature were written by Milton - he was blind. Yes, facing arduous problems single handedly can be a daunting task for anyone. There were times when I felt dejected and even rejected. I have gone deep into the nadir of utter powerlessness. But they were generally the times when I rose from my own ash heap and succeeded in doing something beautiful which otherwise I would never have been able to do. It is a law of nature that the struggle and pain needed to come out of the cocoon actually helps to develop and strengthen the butterfly's wings. My own experience was no different.

It is through His power

I am a Christian - a Catholic priest, belonging to the Salesian Society of Don Bosco, an international Society, and I am grateful both to this Society and to the

great Educator Don Bosco, the founder of the Society, because if I am what I am, after my parents, it is because of them. I got from them many values which have become part and parcel of my life. These values have their origin in the Gospels of the Lord Jesus Christ. His inspiring presence has always been my strength. In fact it is He who has done the work through me." Left to me I am", as Sri Sankaradeva has said, 'like water on the lotus leaf; it does not settle for a moment...Thou art my destiny, Thou art my spiritual guide. Steer me across the vale of sorrows."³

There are in this story some typically Christian terms. But I have taken pains to make them intelligible to readers belonging to other faiths

The title of the book

Sri Haren Gogoi, Dibrugarh *Sahitya Sabha* President, while releasing the cassette '*Xunar Axbom*',⁴ in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh on 20th May, 2006, spoke of the producer as one who identified himself with the Assamese people and their culture. Towards the end of his speech, the *Sahitya Sabha* President spoke of the author as "one who made ***Assam His Home***." These words are kept as the title of this book.

Before I conclude I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Cyprian Kallikaden, sdb. Although a busy

Preface

man, he took time to go through my manuscript with patience, making the necessary corrections and giving his comments wherever required. I am greatly indebted to him, and will ever remain grateful for his kind service.

Sincere thanks to Fr. John Pudussery sdb and his team at DBYES, Dimapur who saw to the design, layout and getting the book printed.

With best wishes to all who will have a copy of this book,

Matthew Narimattam, sdb.
15th August, 2008

Notes

1. *Assam*: Although nowadays Assam is written as *Asom* or *Axom*, in this book the word **Assam** is kept.
2. Mahendra Bora: "*Foreword*" to '*The Valley in Blossom*,' p.v
3. M.Narimattam, *The Valley in Blossom*, Spectrum Publications, 1988, Guwahati Delhi - p. 17
4. '*XunorAxhom*' means Golden Assam

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1

KUNJAMMI* AND *MATHAN

MADE FOR EACH OTHER

*Kunjammi*⁵ - yes, that was her name. She belonged to the Palathinkal family and was the first of ten children - eight girls and two boys, to see the light of day. Being the eldest in the family she always had an air of superiority about her. She was of fair complexion, medium height, hair flowing down her neck, the top parts of both the ears hanging down heavy with the weight of two big gold rings which she called '*kunuku*' and the holes in her lobes so large that the string-like skin almost touched her shoulders.

*Mathan*⁶ was a handsome boy, very fond of fun and frolics. As the youngest of four boys and two girls, he had more than enough time for himself. Wrestling was his hobby. It gave his body an athletic form and his skin shone as if he had applied oil all over, giving him an ebony look. He was strong and energetic, but not used to manual work. Quite often he would be trying his wrestling skill with his friends who were very fond of him. They liked him because he had great concern for others, and always stood by the side of truth. He would be the first to come to the rescue of the down trodden and victimised. Endowed with a powerful voice, he excelled in debates and arguments. *Mathan* was proud of his family, which is known as Narimattathil, hailing from Mevata - Kozhuvanal, five kilometers from Palai, district Kottayam in Kerala. The history of the Syro

Malabar Church in Kerala writes of this family as one of its ancient families. It is said that originally the family belonged to the Jacobite Church, but later on joined the Catholic Church. At present there are more than 300 Narimattam families scattered over the districts of Tiruvananthapuram, Kottayam, Idikki, Kannur and Kassaragod. Quite proud of themselves, generally they are truthful, sincere and open. Independent in their outlook they believe they have a power within them to realize their own destiny.

One fine day *Mathan's* father *Pappan* as his children affectionately called him, said to himself, "*Mathan* is slowly becoming something of a hero with his wrestling skill. Better that he wrestles with a girl". In the mean time a broker suggested a certain *Kunjammi* from Palathinkal family at Urulukunnam, ten kilometers from Palai, as the right choice for *Pappan's* youngest son. One day *Pappan* with the broker appeared in *Kunjammi's* house. The former was mightily pleased to see a girl who met all the requirements of a handsome Kerala bride of his time - long hair, long ear lobes almost touching the shoulders, sharp features and fair complexion. *Mathan* on the day of his marriage, standing behind *Kunjammi* in his parish church at Kozhuvanal, under the diocese of Palai, tied the *thali*⁷ around her neck. For the first time he had a look at his

wife, and that too from behind! *Kunjammi* had little knowledge of the implications of marriage, for she might have been hardly fourteen years old, and *Mathan* three years older. After the marriage the girl found herself in a new house made totally of wood and palm leaves. Days seemed to be like night, for there were very few windows and ventilators in the '*antique house*', which at that time might have been at least sixty years old. At night *Kunjammi* slept with the other womenfolk in the rooms reserved for them. Closely chaperoned, her every move monitored by her mother-in-law, *Kunjammi* deemed herself fortunate if she could have a fleeting glimpse of her husband once during the day. That could have been the reason why her eldest son was born, five years after her marriage!

Before his marriage *Pappan* left his ancient home at Mevata-Kozhuvanal, and bought for himself sufficient land at Vakkapalam, approximately two kilometers from Kozhuvanal. It was there that the '*antique house*' called *tharavatu* of many would-be children was constructed. The land surrounding the *tharavatu* was full of shady coconut palm trees interspersed with pepper and coffee plants. A rivulet of crystal clear water with shining pebbles was seen meandering through the farm land. It used to be an ideal place for people who have a love for

an ashramite type of life. There was no extraneous noise of any sort except the amorous cries of cuckoos which carried on echoing and re-echoing from the sky.

Many years later *Kunjammi* and *Mathan's* eldest son used to have nostalgia for this enchanting place. He would love to watch especially the rivulet with its transparent water and luminous little pebbles.

Notes

5. *Kunjammi* - a pet name for girls meaning in Malayalam 'small mother.'
6. *Mathan*, a pet name in Malayalam for a boy
7. *Thali*, In Kerala for marriage the bridegroom ties the '*thali*' around the neck of the bride. Both Hindus and Christians use *thali*, the difference for the latter being a small cross engraved on the *thali*.

Let the Word of God dwell in you in all its richness (Col 3,16)

2

PAPPACHAN

'HE IS MY FIRST GRAND CHILD'

Born under the Sign of Aries

It was 11th April 1933. A baby boy was born to *Kunjammi*. "He looks very much like his father *Mathan*", exclaimed *Ammachi*⁸ the grandma. "But he is too lean...seems to be boneless," commented aunty *Tresiamma*, while clasping the little one in her hands. What a joy ! From the verandah outside they brought *Mathan* and his mother into the room for a family get-together and celebration. Grandpa, the great patriarch of Palathinkal family, rather dark and stout, a man of few words called *Appan*⁹ by his children, seeing the little babe, pronounced in a grave tone, "He is my first grand child and that too a boy. Who knows ! One day he may be destined to be an *achan*, that is, a priest, and so he will be called *Pappachan*. Tomorrow I am going to order for him a gold chain, and after six months I will put an *aranganam*¹⁰ made of gold, around his waist." The Syro Malabar church in Kerala had issued strict orders, forbidding any belief in astrology. But *Appan*'s friend a certain Unnikrishnan one day came to see the little babe. Knowing the date of his birth, and the time, Unnikrishnan told grandpa, "The child is born under the sign of Aries and as such he will have strong will power and determination. He will fight his way through all sorts of obstacles. He will be blessed with great imagination, and will have unconventional ideas. He will be

enthusiastic in whatever he does, forceful, independent, and self reliant." "Will that mean that he will not be submissive to us?" queried grandpa. "Well, it all depends how you mould him," added Unnikrishnan.

He is Re-born

A full month after he was born, the family members of both the father and the mother gathered in the latter's house. *Appan*, *Kunjammi's* father prepared a mixture of butter, honey, milk, turmeric and gold and placed a little of the potion on the baby's tongue. This was followed by a bath with turmeric. Although this custom was not so common among the Syro Malabar Catholics of Kerala, Unnikrishnan, grandpa's friend pleaded with him for this favour. The child was then taken to the Parish church at Urulukunnam for baptism. On the way to the church there was a discussion between the two grandpas *Appan* and *Pappan*. According to the prevailing custom the first-born boy was to be named after *Mathan's* father, which was Emmanuel. But *Kunjammi's* father asked for an exception since the child was his first grand child. Hence he wanted the child to be christened by his name, which is Matthew. A compromise was finally arrived at; he received the combined name Matthew Emmanuel. Baptism is a sacrament by which one accepts the risen Jesus Christ as her or his *Lord*, and is re-born from God, who is addressed truly as *Father*. It is

somewhat similar to *dikha* or to the Vaishnavite *saranam*. Later on Emmanuel was dropped and the name Matthew remained. But as long as he remained in Kerala he was known as *Pappachan* the name given by his *Appan*.

A Bull for a Cow

Being the first grandchild, in his maternal house *Pappachan* was the darling of his grand parents, uncles and aunties. He was approximately three years old, and it was a custom to gift a cow to the child. Accordingly his grandfather, *Appan*, who had many cows in his farm, asked him, "*Pappacha*, I have decided to give you a cow which will give you plenty of milk. You may choose only one from these cows you see." *Pappachan* examined minutely all the animals before him and told his grandpa, "*Appa*, I want that cow yonder there; seeing her udder I think she will give me lot of milk." *Appan* had a good laugh because his grandson mistook for a cow a huge bull kept for breeding purpose !

Appan the great patriarch of Palathinkal family died rather young due to a severe attack of small pox in 1946, whereas *Pappachan's* dearest *Ammachi* - maternal grandma, died on 3rd July 1981. *Pappan*, *Pappachan's* paternal grandfather died on 8th Aug.1957, and *Amma* paternal grandma, passed away on 26th Oct. 1962.

***Mone, Isho! Muttu Kuthu* - Son, Jesus! kneel down**

Pappachan's mother was a devout Catholic and would not miss the Sunday Mass or the holy Eucharist. The little boy also would accompany his mother. To make sure that her kid learns the church manners of when and how to kneel and join hands, the mother would always allot the place for her son in front of her. On one occasion when the time came for 'consecration' during which the sacred host was raised high for the faithful to worship, *Kunjammi* told her son 'Mone, Isho', that is, 'Son, look, Jesus!', *muttu kuthu*, that is, kneel down, for, he was squatting down. Immediately *Pappachan* knelt down, but wondering at the same time how on earth the Priest, an old man could lift Jesus up. "If it is possible for that old man to lift Jesus," said *Pappachan* to himself, "then why not I also become a priest, for I will be able to take Jesus in my hands and lift him up?" A little later came the moment when the priest consumed the precious body and blood of Jesus Christ. At that moment the pious mother motioned to her son who was sitting and nodding, and told him "*Mone, Isho! Muttu kuthu*", that is, 'son, **Jesus**, kneel'. The boy rubbing his eyes looked at the altar in front of him. And what did he see? He saw the same old Priest eating something, which his mother said was Jesus. "Oh ho ! He eats

Jesus!." That means if I become a priest I also will be able to eat Jesus! Well, then I am going to be a priest," said *Pappachanan* to himself.

Pappachan in a kalari

Pappachan was three years and two months old when he found himself in a '*kalari*', which is equivalent to the modern day pre-primary school. It was a thatched house hardly 15' x 12'. There might have been altogether a dozen tiny tots, all carrying dry palm leaves called '*ola*' on which was written the Malayalam alphabet, and a coconut shell with fine sand. The *kalari* teacher was called '*ashan*', a synonym for '*guru*'. *Pappachan* has forgotten the name of his '*ashan*', but he fondly remembers his dear *guru* because the latter was so fond of him that he used to carry him to *kalari* on his own shoulders. In his '*kalari*' together with his friends *Pappachan* used to sit on the ground cross-legged, and after having emptied the sand on the floor, the '*ashan*' taught him him how to write the alphabet on the sand by holding his forefinger.

Primary and Middle School Days

From his *kalari* *Pappachan* joined the primary school at Kozhuvanal. After about three years of study there, since he was happier in his mother's house, he

proceeded with his studies in the Middle School at Chengalam, near Palai. Later on when his family shifted to the district of Idikki, he joined the High School at Kanjar. Study was not a problem for *Pappachan*. More than his schools and books he remembers a few incidents in his life.

Place Flowing with Milk and Honey

Pappachan's mother *Kunjammi* was first and foremost a disciplinarian. She wanted her son to grow up as a disciplined young man. But the boy was not too happy with the mother's discipline. Hence on Fridays as soon as the classes were over, *Pappachan* would come home in haste and throw the books onto the verandah. After munching something he would start a marathon race towards his mother's house some six kilometers away. His non stop race would come to a halt only when he fell into the arms of his grand parents, aunties or uncles. They would be waiting for him on every Friday evening. It was as if he had plunged into a swimming pool of love and affection. For the little kid the place was flowing with milk and honey. There were all sorts of eatables - root articles like '*kizhangu*', '*kachika*', '*chempu*', and '*chena*'; fruits like '*chaka*', '*anikavela*', '*chempenga*', '*kazhuthachaka*', mango, banana, and so on. Above all he got love in abundance. For his return

journey either *Kunjappan* or *Kunjichachan*, his uncles, would carry him on their shoulders. *Pappachan* has a special love for the former uncle *Kunjappan*, the name meaning small *appan* or small father. He is also very much attached to *Kunjappan's* daughter *Paulette*, a Sister belonging to Cluny Convent in South India.

He pays for his truancy

Pappachan was generally regular and punctual at school. But one day something drastic happened. His mother returned from church, and after giving breakfast to her son, sent him to school with his usual tiffin. With no watch to know the time, the poor boy thought that he would reach the school late for which he would receive due punishment. "What shall we do?" he asked his friend *Venu*. "Shall we take our tiffin and then jump into the river on our way and enjoy for ourselves? Then after the tiffin break we will quietly enter the class with our companions without being detected." *Venu* agreed. They swallowed up their tiffin in a hurry and within seconds they were in the river enjoying to their hearts' content. There were two coconut trunks spanning the small river. People were crossing the bridge to and fro, and one of them, seeing *Pappachan*, said to himself, "Is not that boy *Mathan's* son? He must be playing truant." After an hour or so of playing in the water, *Pappachan*

saw the figure of a woman at a distance walking in his direction. "She looks like mum!" "Heavens, done for me! Is it really my mum? How did she manage to get in there? ...Yes, it is she." Standing on the bank, with hands akimbo, *Kunjammi* signalled her son like a general to get out of the river and follow her. "Shall I run away to escape punishment?... But where to? Better go home with her, and be prepared for the worst," he thought. Quickly the poor lad slid into his clothes and leaving *Venu* to himself approached his mother. Without a word she made a sign to the boy to follow her. With water dripping from his clothes and fear causing extra heart beats, the boy followed his mother like a lamb. On reaching the house, the mother told *Pappachan* to kneel down in the hot courtyard. There without a word he knelt down. At about 02.00 P.M. *Mathan*, his father arrived from his shop for his lunch. Seeing his son kneeling in the hot sun and perspiring profusely, he asked his wife, "Why is he asked to do such a cruel penance? What crime has he committed?" "You please ask him," said the mother. Without asking for the reason the father hosted him up on his shoulders and carried him into the house, after which the mother gave him a short massage with coconut oil and bathed him. *Mathan* waited for the bath to be over to take his meal together with his son. This was *Pappachan's* first and last truancy.

He pays for his Smoking

Smoking was not common among the students in Kerala. But one day while going home after the class his friend *Venu* asked *Pappachan* whether he has ever smoked or not. "No! Never!" said *Pappachan*. "Just try once, and you will ever thank me for it," said *Venu*. The latter took a *beedi* and after smoking half of it gave the rest to *Pappachan*. "Let me see what it means to smoke," said *Pappachan* to himself, and smoked the rest of the *beedi*. While smoking the thought of his mother did not come to the boy's mind. But once the smoking was over he thought of the little general. "My mother may get the smell of *beedi* from my mouth," said *Pappachan*. "I know what I will do. On the way home there is a river and I will plunge into it and clean my mouth thoroughly. How will my mother know that I ever smoked?" So saying *Pappachan* took sufficient time in the river to clean his mouth of the smell of smoking.

Convincing himself that he would be able to hide the misdeed from his mother, he reached home quite happy. Would you believe? The first question *Kunjammi* asked was, "Did you by chance smoke today?" "If I say I did not smoke, I can escape punishment," said the boy to himself. "If I say I smoked, the stick is there and I will get not less than three strokes." *Pappachan* paused a while, plucked up courage and replied, "I smoked." And

he received three good whacks above his knees. The pain of the mother's whacks left him, but the thought that he was a courageous boy to get punished for telling the truth has made him happy all through his life. Of course it need not be said here that, that was *Pappachan's* first and last smoking.

The Mother's Class

Pappachan might have been seven or eight years old. One evening he saw a young man coming to his home and asking from his mother for a drink of water. The mother took some water in a bowl and poured it in the man's hands for him to drink. Before even the young man left the house *Pappachan* asked his mother, "Mum, why did you pour the water into his hands? You could have given him the water in a bowl to drink." *Kunjammi* was not too happy with her son's question. She made him sit down and began her lecture. "My dear son, you are too small to understand many things," she explained. "Here in Kerala we are all Indians, but we differ. Among us there are many ethnic groups. You will find here and there people who are called *Vanian*, *Paravan*, *Chettiyar*, *Mavilar*, *Karimpalar*, *Paniyar*, *Pulayar*, *Mukkuvar*, *Naikkar*, *Vannan*, *Komaran*, *Thiyar*, *Velan*, *Kaniyan*, and many others. They do not enter our houses, nor do we give them food in our plates," said the

mother. "To which of these groups does my friend *Venu* belong?" asked *Pappachan*. "He is a *Velan*," replied the mother. "And suppose I bring him home?" questioned *Pappachan*. "You know what I will do? I will share my food with him - we will eat from the same plate!" said the boy without the least fear. Recalling to mind what Unnikrishnan said of her son, the mother thought it wise to end the class there.

An Inner Call

One day while *Pappachan* was on his way to school a thought - an extra terrestrial one for that matter, flashed in his mind: "I shall leave home incognito and go to a forest," said the boy to himself. "There I will sit like a *rishi* and pray - I will be with God...Nobody will disturb me," he mused. But then a terrestrial or mundane thought also found its way to his mind: "Who will give you food?" *Pappachan* asked himself. "What will you eat?" ... "Yes, that is also true," he said to himself. "There will be nobody to give me food...Mum will not be there, and I will die of hunger. Better I drop this idea at least for the time being." Nevertheless the thought of sitting and praying like a *rishi* never left *Pappachan* completely. Nay, he had a great desire for it. This incident, took place when *Pappachan* was about eight years old.

“Onnum Illa Acho” - Nothing, Father

Pappachan was eight or nine years old. According to the customary practice it was time for him to receive 'first communion'. Before receiving the Risen Jesus Christ into one's heart through first communion it was necessary to make the 'first confession'. After repenting for one's sins and confessing them to a priest, one is forgiven from the sins committed, and is deemed worthy to receive the Risen Lord Jesus Christ in Communion. A Sister was appointed to take classes for all the children who were to receive first communion. *Pappachan* too got admitted to her class. The children were taught to examine their conscience and see what sins they had committed. The Sister drew up a list of sins which children generally commit, and which they had to commit to memory. They were then expected to say this list of sins to the priest during the confession. *Pappachan* took his place standing in the queue for confession. He saw an old beefy dark bearded priest sitting behind a partition, called *confessional*. When his turn came *Pappachan* knelt down at the confessional and signed himself with the sign of the cross. Before he could say anything at all the old man quizzed, "*Eta nee enna papam cheitada?*" that is, "You boy, what sins have you committed?" Rather frightened with this unexpected question, the boy forgot what was taught by

the Sister and said the actual truth, "*Onnum illa Acho*," that is, "Nothing, Father." Chiding him with a grunt, the old man signalled the Sister, saying, "Come and take him away. Let him examine his conscience." The Sister took *Pappachan* back and asked him to go and say from memory the list of sins she had taught him. He did as per her instruction, and received the absolution given by making the sign of the cross, which he thought was a signal to go! And he left the place and the confessional with a sigh of relief.

"*Ishoe Nannī*" - Thank you, Jesus

Pappachan was not a sanctimonious type of boy. However the picture of himself sitting like a *rishi* and meditating would come to him now and then. In reality he had a love for prayer. "And for that I may have to be a priest," the boy thought. A priest dressed all through in white flowing garment was for the boy someone belonging to the upper world. He went to the extent of thinking that such people may not even have the need to attend to the call of nature!

At that time excepting perhaps one, he did not come across priests who really loved children. Hence *Pappachan* was not much attracted towards priests or priestly life. However, being a priest may give him a

chance to 'hold' Jesus Christ and spend time in prayer, he thought. "To whom shall I reveal my desire? Who will help me to be a priest?" *Pappachan* wondered. After that incident during his first confession he had no more courage to meet any priest. In the mean time a boy from his neighbourhood, studying in Don Bosco Aspirantate at Tirupattur, in Tamil Nadu, had come home for his holidays. He told him that he could arrange with some Fathers to go to Tirupattur. "Okay," said *Pappachan*, without much hope.

Days passed by. In order to go anywhere to become a priest, would require permission from the parents. There is no problem with Dad, but what about Mom? "Although she is a disciplinarian, she loves me," said *Pappachan* to himself. "Will she give me the green signal?" Anyway, one afternoon on his return home from the school, *Pappachan* plucked up courage and told his mother, "Mom, may I ask you something?" "What?" asked *Kunjammi*. "Mom, I would like to go to Madras," said the boy. Suspecting something fishy, she growled, "For what?" "Mom, I would like to be a priest," said *Pappachan* who happened to be the eldest son. *Kunjammi* was preparing for the family some tasty *chaka puzhuku*¹¹ and *meen kootan*.¹² She left her *chakapuzhuku* in the pot, and ran toward her son with her long ladle called '*thavi*'¹³ in her hand, saying, "I will

make you an *amma*," that is, a "mother!" *Pappachan* nimbly ran and from a safe distance, told his mother, "I will pray to Jesus and He will make your stony heart soft." "My heart will never become soft," said the mother. "You will never go. No. Nowhere! You are my eldest son and I cannot live without you," added the mother with her eyes moistened with tears. The aroma of *Kunjammi's* Kerala fish curry - *meen kuttan*, and *chaka puzhuku* brought *Pappachan* back to his mother, and immediately she gave him a plate full of the delicacies. While gulping down his food, *Pappachan* said to himself, "Mom's heart may not be as stony as she thinks... Let that be. What I like is her food. She is an excellent cook."

A couple of months passed. The boy *Pappachan* would be going to school, but most of the days crying. "There is no one to help me. What shall I do?" he would say. "Lord, do something with my mother's heart." Some three months after the above incident *Kunjammi* went for a retreat, that is, a spiritual animation in her Parish Church. On the third and final day the preacher warned all the parents present saying, "If you fathers or mothers have children who have a call from God to be priests or religious, and you put obstacles on their way, do not expect to get God's blessings for your families." *Kunjammi* returned from the church sad and perturbed.

Two or three days passed. "There is something wrong with my wife," said *Mathan*. "What happened to you? Why are you so sad?" asked *Mathan* to his wife. "If he wants to go," she said to her husband, "let him go...I have no peace." Then some tears rolled down her cheeks. *Pappachan* who was standing nearby heard his mother's words and said, "*Ishoe nanni*," that is, thank you Jesus.

Within a few days a post card reached *Mathan*. In it was written the date on which *Pappachan* should be present at Aluwa, a town near Ernakulam, Kerala. *Mathan* took his son to Aluwa. There were some 90 boys who had gathered there from different parts of Kerala. The centre of attraction was a bearded priest in glowing white garb. *Pappachan* had never seen a man like him. He talked something in English. All the boys were very much attracted towards him because he had a charming smile. He laughed and talked with the boys.

After a month *Mathan* received another post card in which was written: "Your son is selected. He should reach Aluwa on 2nd June, 1949 with the following articles..." The father got the necessary items ready for his son. 2nd June 1949 dawned. But when *Mathan* and his son were ready to depart, the suitcase with the clothes was not to be found. The mother refused to give it. The father stood aghast. "No need of my suitcase, I

am leaving," so saying *Pappachan* started to go. At this the mother came and after giving the suitcase to the father caught her son, and hugging him tight cried and soaked him with her tears. From Aluwa with some of the selected boys *Pappachan* started his maiden train journey to Tirupattur, in the state of Tamil Nadu.

It was for the boy the beginning of a long journey to unknown lands. "*Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you.*"¹⁴ By these words God spoke to Abram to leave his country Haran and to set out for Canaan. He had a plan for Abram. The same God has now whispered to the little boy *Pappachan* to leave his home and loving parents and to follow Him, for he had prepared a plan for him...

To begin with, *Pappachan* had to fall in love with books, and at the same time, learn the value of a life of discipline.

Notes

8. *Ammachi* in Malayalam is an affectionate word for mother

9. *Appan* in Malayalam means father.

10. *Aranganam* generally made of gold, worn around the waist of children.

11. *Chaka puzhuku* in Malayalam means a curry made of unripe jackfruit

12. *Meen kootan* in Malayalam means Kerala fish curry.

13. *Thavi* is a type of large ladle made of empty coconut shell

14. Genesis, 12,1

3

STUDY AND DISCIPLINE

A WAY OF LIFE

On 3rd June 1949 *Pappachan* entered the Don Bosco Aspirantate at Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu. From his entry to the aspirantate *Pappachan* is called all through his life as *Matthew Narimattam*. However in this book he will be known as **Nama** which besides being a short form of the name has also a religious significance - '*Namo*' ...

In the land of '*uppumavu*' and tamarind

In Tirupattur, a small town in the district of Vellore, Tamil Nadu, it was a wonder for Nama to behold the arid and semi desert regions with tamarind trees dotting the horizon. He would marvel at the semi-clad dark men behind their bulls, which patiently walked along as they drew huge buckets of water from deep wells for the purpose of irrigation. Years later while travelling by train, Nama saw the once desert-like land now turned into verdant farm producing coconuts, mangoes and other fruits in abundance. This made him appreciate the Tamil people for their spirit of hard work. Seen also were silent donkeys carrying patiently heavy loads of clothes on their backs. Nama took a fascination for these humble, patient and gentle creatures. This fascination for donkeys remained with him all through his life.

To adjust himself to the new types of food like *uppumavu*,¹⁵ tomato, etc., was rather difficult for Nama.

He was afraid of a certain Bro. Thomas who would be walking in the dining hall with a small bell in his hand. With that bell he would hit Nama on his back for not eating all the food placed before him. Likewise, standing for his turn in a queue in front of a long row of latrines was another problem for Nama. Again, for a boy used to taking bath leisurely, to be out of the bathing room in just two minutes at the clap of hands, required learning a new skill. He was very fond of his rector Fr. John Med and his Assistant Brother John Kespret. The former was an expert in square ball game. It was not easy to catch his bullet-like shots. Nama liked the game very much, although he would never attempt to catch a ball from his Rector. Bro. John the Assistant was as kind as one's own mother. To escape getting bad remarks like '*10 points*' for speaking Malayalam instead of English from Fr. Dennis, the Head Master, Nama would approach the gentle Bro. John who would tell him not to be afraid. With his characteristic smile which flashed through his milk-white teeth, he would give a pat to Nama and say, "I will see to it. Be happy." On the whole life in Tirupattur was very enjoyable and Nama had no problems. Although he came after passing class VI in Kerala, he had to repeat the same class since he did not have sufficient knowledge of English.

In the '*Ri Khasi*' of '*Khuwai*' and '*Khublei*'

After one year in Tirupattur out of the twenty two boys who were recruited for the province of Calcutta of that time, only T.V. Anthony, P.J. Abraham and Nama were selected. They went home for their vacation after which with another group that joined them in Calcutta, they finally reached Guwahati. It was definitely a historic and tedious journey. Nama, the smallest of the whole lot, was not keeping well during the journey. He needed rest, and so Fr. Pianazzi the leader of the group, after sending the other boys by bus to Mawlai, took Nama to Don Bosco, Guwahati. With great love he attended to him. After a day or two of rest and treatment the kind hearted priest took the boy for the last leg of his journey. On the way at Nongpo Fr. Pianazzi took Nama to a hotel and gave him a cup of hot cocoa. More than cocoa the boy remembers the care and concern of this great man, who later on became Rector, Provincial, Missionary in Garo Hills and finally Councillor for Studies in Rome. Nama admired him for his intelligence and wit. He was a great friend of Archbishop Louis Mathias of Madras. One day the former received a letter from his friend, but friendship apart, he could not digest that letter. At once he took his pen and wrote, "Your Grace, your letter is presently in front of me. Soon it will be behind me!" It was one of his classical types of wits.

Life in Mawlai was full of fun and frolic. Nama with some of his friends was in class VII. There were two revered and saintly octogenarians - Fathers Comba and Gutierrez both with long and white beards, the former an Italian and the latter a Spaniard. They would walk leisurely along the verandah, more often communing with each other in silence than through words. The following words of Kushwant Singh could truly be applicable to them: "Over the years I have discovered what enormous energy silence creates, while socialising and useless chit-chat deplete it."¹⁶ There were theologians some of whom like Fr. Balawan a French, who was very fond of the boys. The group consisted of a few matriculation passed boys, but with very little knowledge of English, and others including Nama were juniors but having a better knowledge of English. Bro. Daniel, a Nepali by birth was the Assistant - a very fine gentleman, short and stout, a good football player, with his skill in dribbling deftly the ball. He was the star attraction for Nama and his friends. After becoming a priest, for some personal reasons he opted for married life. He went through very difficult days finding it hard to make both ends meet. Nama has great love for him even to this day.

Nama enjoyed the weekly outings with all his friends. Shillong - known for its ecstatic beauty, and proudly

called the queen of North-East India, Shillong - all green with a great variety of majestic pine trees up on steep mountains and down in deep valleys, Shillong - with its little boats gliding over the blue waters of many a lake, Shillong - with its short but beautiful girls whose mouths filled with *khuwai*¹⁷ and *khublei*,¹⁸ and the whole *Ri Khasi*¹⁹ - the country of the Khasis, with its melodious songs echoing and re-echoing from hill to hill, can never be effaced from Nama's mind.

The year Nama spent in Mawlai, Shillong was 1950. This was the year known for the great tragedy, which shook the whole of North - East India. Nama and his 21 friends were cosily sleeping in the Sacred Heart theological college, Mawlai, in the first floor when the catastrophe struck. Amidst the roar and rumblings came the sharp cries of the children. Bro. Daniel clapped hands asking all to get down to the open ground below. All but one clambered down the stairs to the ground below. During breakfast in the morning the boys were describing the harrowing time they had at night. Nama wondered what his friends were speaking, for he was the only one who knew nothing of the earthquake, and carried on sleeping most peacefully.

The house in Mawlai accommodated the aspirants for one year. After a year they had to leave. Hence Nama

and his friends said *khublei* to Shillong and left for Sonada in the district of Darjeeling, West Bengal. On the way at Nagrakatta for the first time in his life Nama witnessed a war ! Dozens of cocks armed with sharp knives on their legs fighting to death and spilling blood all around stuck to Nama's mind for a long time.

On the cloudy hills of Sonada

Nama and his friends boarded a mini train at Siliguri. Meandering along the hilly terrain the train panting and puffing finally stopped with a sudden chug at Sonada, a township thirteen kilometers from Darjeeling in West Bengal. Waiting for the little party was a thick cloud of mist making it almost difficult to recognize people. It was cold. Yes, cold and mist were going to be Nama's constant companions. But there was also sunshine but a sunshine, which was expert in the game of hide and seek. When the boys would be seeking for it, it was not to be found !

The house with no A.C. or hot water system, it was bitter cold. Nama and his friends had a problem in buttoning their pants. Their fingers began to be heavy and swollen. They refused to come close. Nama was sent to sleep in a dormitory called '*Pumkin dormitory*'. Feeling the bite of the cold too much he pushed himself under some heavy blankets with his shoes on! But in

spite of the cold there was warmth. Remarkable with their love, affection and enthusiasm were Fr. Sheehy from Ireland, Bro. Sylvanus from '*Bhoy country*' in Meghalaya, and Fr. Larrea a Spaniard. Fr. Dal Zovo an Italian - the Rector, was not seen as often as the former ones. But he too had a very loving heart. Never does Nama remember of any scolding from his superiors.

In Sonada Nama had to study for three years - classes VIII to X. All the classes were strictly taken. English was given great importance. Pronunciation, spelling, accents, elocution, and what not - all were taught in real earnest. And Latin? My God! Fr. Sylvanus was a genius in putting fire into the boys in order to make them love this great language. He was very inventive. He prepared on a chart paper a race ground with horses all having Roman names. He baptized his boys with those Roman names. According to the marks obtained in home works: *10 cum laude maxima cum laude*, the horses would start their race. All the students loved Latin. Nama too loved this language and he would always try to get the highest mark possible. But at the same time a good number of students found it tough. To master English and Latin was not an easy task for some students. After a year there took place an exodus of boys from Sonada - about thirty boys had to pack up their bag and baggage and return home.

Life in Sonada was tough. The boys were taught to work hard. Barefooted, even in cold weather they would be seen carrying mud in wheel barrows to prepare football and hockey grounds. In the morning and evening there was also assignment of work within the house. Unforgettable was the scrubbing and cleaning of latrines three times a day - in the morning after breakfast, at noon before lunch and at night after supper. It was repelling for Nama as well as for many others to clean latrine with hands and that too before lunch. But nobody thought of complaining. All were happy. On Sundays there was the so-called walk, which was nothing but a race. Bro. Sylvanus was the Chief Assistant and teacher. He would point to a hill in the distance. "One who reaches first the hill yonder there," he would say, "will get my piece of cheese for tea when we return." And, do you believe, the race starts all for a small piece of cheese! Nama remembers getting thus a piece of cheese once or twice! But there were also anxious moments sometimes. On return two or three companions would be found missing. The hunting party would find the laggards inching their way back all out of breath.

They were days just after World War II. Food was scarce. Hence the boys were divided in two groups - juniors and seniors. The seniors were given a little extra

food while the juniors got less. Unluckily Nama with a good appetite was listed with the juniors. He remembers going in search of wild berries on Sundays during the usual outings in order to satisfy his hunger. But this too was taken in a very sportive way. There were daily games like basketball, '*American war*', '*Square ball*', football and hockey. In a game of *American war* or *square ball* due to the thick mist enveloping the field, the one who throws the ball at the opponent would often miss him. Fr. Sheehy would be telling the students, "Come on lads, down we go for football." And all the students would be seen running down the hill or even rolling down. In case his team was losing, he would say, "*Never say die lads, we are going to win.*" There was speed. There was enthusiasm. There was joy everywhere. Added to these, hard work. There was absolutely no time to grumble or complain. Such unwarranted ideas did not enter their mental vocabulary. There was prayer neither too much nor too little. All the fire came from the animators.

In 1954 Nama wrote his matriculation examination. Among others he also was selected for Novitiate. That meant another journey - a long journey to South India.

Notes

15. *Uppumavu* - A Tamil delicacy, made of *suji* (wheat)
16. Khushwant Singh - *The Week*, June 4, 2006 Cover story, *An honourable man*
17. *Khuwai* - in Khasi language *khuwai* means betel-nut almost a must for every Khasi.
18. *Khublei* - The Khasis wish by saying *Khublei*
19. *Ri Khasi* - In Khasi language meaning the 'country of the Khasis.'

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing the Word of God. (Rom 10,17)

4

'YES' TO A RADICAL WAY OF LIFE

**LIFE TO THE FULL FOR THOSE WITH THE
REQUIRED CHARISMS**

Yercaud is a name, which Nama can never forget. It is a place very dear to him because of its breathtaking beauty. It was the place where he did his novitiate, which is a landmark in his life as a '*religious*'²⁰ in the Salesian society of Don Bosco. He cannot also forget the Master of novices Fr. E. Sola, a truly revered person - a man of God, although called '*fox*' by some of his friends.

Nestling on a hilltop, Yercaud is in the district of Salem in Tamil Nadu. It is only twenty five kilometers from the town of Salem; but the bus takes nearly an hour because of the twenty hairpin bends, which have to be negotiated. All along the way are seen silver oak and eucalyptus trees. The Salesian novitiate was situated about two kilometers away from the town. On one side of the Novitiate house is a steep valley beyond which is seen at night Salem reflecting with its myriads of lights. It is a beauty that Nama can never forget. The novitiate campus as well as the whole of Yercaud was famous for its pears, guavas and oranges. There were also small plots of coffee plantations interspersed with rocks on which one can leisurely sit and breathe in fresh air.

The life in the novitiate was crammed in with many a programme. Apart from the daily meditation, praying of the psalms four times a day, Mass and Conference, the routine also included games, manual work, four hours of class, weekly long walks, theatricals and music. It was a

time for the Novice Master to inculcate into the young minds religious life as it is supposed to be lived in the Salesian way. At all times and in all situations the penetrating and piercing eyes of the Novice Master would scan every novice through and through. Twelve full months are required for a novice to take a decision as to whether he is able to embrace a life with all its implications, and for the Master to examine closely the candidate with regard to his credibility.

Starting off with forty five young recruits, the number gradually dwindled to thirty by the end of the year of probation. These thirty made their *religious profession* on 24th May, 1955 by taking the three vows of *poverty, chastity and obedience*. It was an 'yes' to a *radical way of living one's life*. Their Superior gave them the book of the Constitution of the Salesian Society, which they were asked to follow.

The thirty young men were now *officially religious* belonging to the Salesian Society of Don Bosco. Out of the ten who had travelled from Sonada T.V. Anthony, M.C. Thomas, Thomas Matthews, Sylvester Anthony, V.D. Varkey, P.M. Abraham and Nama, made their profession.

Nama who was called by the Novice Master "*Best Matthew*" - definitely not because he was the best, but

perhaps the Novice Master might have thought that by calling him 'best', the guy would keep his eyes glued on to his goal and not run away in the face of difficulties, for he was destined to play a special role for the cause of God's kingdom especially in Assam. Likewise the Master used to call another novice M.C.Thomas 'Innocent', perhaps thereby placing an ideal before him. Was it because of this ideal placed by his Master that he is now an Archbishop? It may be worthwhile to ask the person concerned for a reply!

Fifty years later the thirty valiant young men who knelt before the altar of God and took the three vows were reduced to eleven. In order to celebrate the golden jubilee of their religious profession eight of them gathered in the old Archbishop's house at Kharguli - Guwahati, hosted by Archbishop Thomas their companion, from 27th March to 2nd April 2005. Out of the eleven three could not be present as they were sick.

Looking back at the fifty years all the eight who gathered to celebrate the golden jubilee of their *Religious Profession* agreed that *to live to the full one's life as religious one needs the required charisms for it*. It follows therefore that those who do not possess those charisms as well as other aptitudes will do well from not venturing upon this way of life. True to its meaning only a few are able to live a radical way of life.

Once the Novitiate was over, Nama had to spend about three years in the study of Philosophy in Sonada, after which were waiting for him another three years with the young. Every step he took forward was a response to God's whisper when he was eight years old.

Notes

20. *The religious* - Used in the Catholic Church for those who belong to an established religious congregation or society.

"For consecrated Christians, giving the Lord control or dominance is often the most difficult thing to do."
(Tim Lahaye)

5

STUDIES AND LIFE WITH THE YOUNG

A TASTE OF PHILOSOPHY IN SONADA

Back in Sonada, for the study of Philosophy and intermediate examinations, life was rather uneventful. There were classes in Metaphysics, Ontology, Logic, etc. Nama does not think that metaphysics ever took him up to the sky! Logic might have been of some help to reason correctly. Nama found a fine gentleman in Fr. Lo Groi, his teacher who meticulously prepared his classes. But as for the Aristotelean manner of dissecting the human mind so mercilessly, with so many divisions, sub-divisions and sub-sub divisions, he had no appreciation. There was Bro. Robert Kerketta who later on became Bishop of Dibrugarh and Tezpur. Nama as well as most of his friends liked him for his Hindi classes. That was the time when very few liked Hindi. As a matter of fact all what some of the clerics learned in six months was to memorise the prayers - Our Father, Hail Mary and Hail Holy Queen in Hindi! All the clerics were happy with him because he was very gentle and would never scold anyone. Even during the game of hockey when some of Nama's friends with stick up in the air would be chasing not the ball but man, Bro. Robert would gently say. "You so and so, if you don't mind kindly stand outside the line there, for five minutes." That was all the punishment this gentle soul meted out to any player violating the rules of the game.

While in Sonada, Nama received a piece of sad news from his home. *Thomaskutty*, his brother, a little more than three years old, was exceptionally intelligent and good. Daily with the help of a walking stick he would trot towards his favourite picture of Jesus Christ on the verandah and tell him, "Jesus, you know that my elder brother has gone to be a priest. Make him a priest soon. If not, I will give you a good whack with this stick. And, remember, I too would like to be a priest. Help me." When *Mathan* decided to go to Yercaud on the occasion of the *vestition* of Nama, *Thomaskutty* insisted on going with him. But since the boy was too small the father told him that it was not possible to take him. One day *Thomaskutty* who had already complained of a slight pain in his throat, told his mother, "Mum, I am seeing a lady clad in white dress in front of me up there. She is calling me, and I am going to her. Where is Papa? Call him." By noon *Mathan* came from his shop as usual for his lunch. *Thomaskutty*, who was in his mother's arms, embraced his Papa and kissed him. He then fell back and passed away. The news was a shock for Nama. He was not able to have a last look at that beautiful face. Even to this day Nama misses those trotting legs and sparkling eyes. *Thomaskutty* was an angel. Perhaps he was too good to remain in this world.

In 1957 the study of philosophy and '*Intermediate examinations*' were over. Nama and his friends Thomas Matthews, T.V. Anthony, M.C.Thomas, and Sylvester Anthony were sent to different institutions in West Bengal and Assam. Nama was destined for Guwahati and Dibrugarh in Assam.

In the gateway city to the North-East

Guwahati, the gateway to the North-East India, situated along the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra under the fiery eyes of *Kamakhya Devi* from her abode on the Kamakhya hills overlooking the sprawling city, can boast of the oldest Don Bosco School in North - East India. It opened its gate for Nama a young cleric. There were in the institution two other clerics - Bro. A.P. Thomas and Bro. A.K. Sebastian. Of the three Nama was the youngest. He knew almost nothing about teaching or looking after a crowd of unruly boys. Making them study for two hours in silence, as the rule demanded, was not an easy task. And yet the work had to be done. Duty is duty ! After supper in the semi dark playground the hostel boys would surround the young cleric and talk indecent language against all recognized standards of morality. If he tried to escape from them, they would prevent him. It was a gherao ! Were some of his superiors or senior clerics nearby? No! Not one was

seen. Well, that was the time. Nama had to learn life the hard way, which later on stood him in good stead. At night most of the hostellers were not interested in sleeping. The one big dormitory with all the boys in it was by no means conducive to sleep. The boys would be rolling marbles from one end to the other end of the dormitory. With the sound of the marbles rolling under the beds on one side and with the trumpet-like snoring of the corpulent Bro. Joseph on the other side, there was 'life' in the dormitory! The three clerics would be standing with a sense of wonder on either end of the hall.

Out of a total of 145 boys in the hostel about 110 were Assamese, and the rest non Assamese belonging to some minority communities. After supper the Assamese youth would be seen running about and playing all sorts of games under the starry sky. The non-Assamese students would form a group by themselves and showed their preference not to play, but to stand and talk in the dark under some trees. When Nama tried to approach them they would move slowly towards other trees with yet thicker foliage. The same thing would have been repeated if he had made another attempt. It was a novel game which Nama had yet to learn !

Strikes in the hostel were rather common. Boxes would be flung down from the dormitory. Slogan

shouting was limited only to the school campus. Once outside the gate the boys would go home like gentlemen. Even at this time the three clerics would not neglect their duty. Like good captains they would be seen in the playground among their '*soldiers*.'

In the Capital of Assam Tea

Towards the end of 1957 Nama was transferred from Guwahati to Don Bosco School, Dibrugarh, in upper Assam. At that time there was only one bus - an old state transport bus, plying from Guwahati to Dibrugarh, and that too had a change at Nawgong, known at present as Nagaon. Nama travelled alone and reached Dibrugarh, covering a distance of 443 kilometers.

Dibrugarh is a town more than 150 years old. The bar association of Dibrugarh started 100 years ago. In course of time Tinsukia district was carved out of the district of Dibrugarh. It is said that because of the tea, ply wood and oil at present, the combined districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia are one of the richest regions in the whole of India. Both these districts together produce approximately 23% of the tea of India. Dibrugarh can also boast of the oldest medical college in Assam - A.M.C. or Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh. The Sisters of Charity who came in 1933 at the invitation of the then Governor served in a hospital near the

Brahmaputra river. After the river washed away their convent and hospital, in 1947 the Sisters shifted to the newly constructed Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh. From 1952 onwards the Sisters took charge of the school of nursing, besides working also in the hospital as nurses. They were very much appreciated both by the doctors and patients. At present the Sisters are no more in charge of the school of nursing, nor do they work in the hospital. Out of the four Sisters at present working in the nursing school, two are tutors.

The British people chose Dibrugarh as one of their centres because among other things the best water in the whole of Assam is found there. The Brahmaputra along the bank on which the town came up had been always and is still a danger. For its life, the town depended on the dykes running between the river and the town. In rainy season the water in the river would reach the danger mark.

According to Bishop O. Marengo, some sixty years ago Dibrugarh was an elite town. The AASU (All Assam Students' Union) agitation at its height from 1979 to 1980 changed partly the culture of Assam as a whole and that of Dibrugarh in particular. Easy life and quick money became the watch word of the youth. They expected the reward of life on a platter. This brought in its wake extortion and vandalism, the effect of which can

be seen even at present in Dibrugarh. At present there is no lack of money in Dibrugarh. With easy money drugs and other evils also have found their way into this town, which for Nama is like his second home. From 1957 onwards he had been watching the great changes taking place in this town.

Most of the business in the town is in the hands of Marwaris. Muslims come next to the Marwaris in business. The Assamese are mainly concentrated in Milan *nagar*, Chiring Sapor and Aluk *nagar*, which are outside the business centre of the town. Muslims, who form a major bulk of the population, are seen in Panchali, Gram *bazar*, Tinkunia, Amlapati, Lalukua Moria *gaon*, Muluku basa, and Kadamani. The Sunni Muslims are more in number than the Shias. But the latter seem to be more liberal and progressive while the former more orthodox. Generally the Panchali Muslims are said to be richer than many of their counter parts. Drug trafficking is said to be mainly in the Panchali belt. The Bengalis who have their own Bengali medium schools are seen in Santipara, Gangapara, Jhalukpara, Borbari railway colony, and Naliapul. Paltan *bazar* has a mixed population of Biharis and Muslims. Many Hindus and a small number of Christians are seen in Gandhi *nagar*. Ambari has a few Christian families. Seujpur and Kaliamari have a mixture of mainly non-

Muslim population. Perhaps with a view to maintain their culture, the Assamese people have concentrated on Mankata and Banipur, which are on the outskirts of the town. A good number of them are Boro Kacharis or Sonwals.

Nama was the first cleric to step into the Dibrugarh parish, hostel cum school. Up to that time the boys had never seen a cleric. With the arrival of the first Salesian cleric in 1957 it may be said that the existing parish school became Don Bosco School. For his consolation there was a Salesian Brother by the name of Barnabas Haw. Both Bro. Barnabas and Nama had to see to the whole work both in the hostel and school. In all there might have been some eighty students, very few being day scholars. For all intents and purposes the jolly good Fr. Visentin was head master practically only in name.

The villa, which at present is the parish residence, was the Bishop's house. The Bishop was Orestes Marengo, an Italian by birth but an Indian in all other respects. He was conversant in thirteen Indian languages. He was a very saintly man and perhaps the greatest missionary the North-East has ever seen. Besides the Bishop there was Fr. Dal Zovo the Vicar General, Parish Priest and Rector with a very loving heart under the guise of a stern appearance. Though he was an Italian by birth, he succeeded to speak English like an English man.

Among other Fathers were Fr. Lopez, a Spaniard - an engineer and builder, Fr. Visentin, an Italian - in charge of the school, Fr. John Svirnelis, a Lithuanian - the house administrator - the fattest of them all, Fr. Aguilar, a Spaniard - assistant parish priest, a singer with an *alto* voice, Bro. Pancolini, an Italian - secretary to Bishop Marengo, and Bro. Michael Cahoj, a Slovak - driver and jack of all trades. Besides there were two more assistant Parish priests who were more often touring the Christian communities - Frs. Cerratto and Righetto. With all the above heavy weights were Bro. Barnabas Haw and Nama twelve in all. Quite a large community at that. Then there was Fr. Larrea who arrived at the Bishop's house in 1953, left for Golaghat in 1955, but returned to Dibrugarh with his Naga Catechists in 1966 and remained up to 1972.

Nama spent the first night sleeping or dreaming - it is not easy to say. On the following morning he went to pay his respects to the Rector Fr. Dal Zovo. The latter told him that with effect from day number three he would start taking classes. "In what language?" asked Nama. "Don't you know our school is an Assamese medium School? And so you will be taking besides English, the other subjects like history, geography and science in Assamese." "But, excuse me, Father," pleaded Nama, "I do not know a word of Assamese." "***You will learn and***

teach", growled the 'English man' rather sternly with a few quick blinks of his eyes, as was his habit. There was nothing else to do for Nama except to plunge himself into the deep. That was the time.

There might have been as already mentioned approximately eighty students. The majority of them belonged to Tea or ex-Tea Garden Communities, and about fifteen Nagas. All were Catholics. At the sound of the bell Nama would enter Class VI - the highest class in that year, to be greeted not with, "Good morning Brother," but with a long "**na-ma-skar** ----" This was followed by some remarks in Assamese. Nama understood nothing of what the students were saying. He began with a class in history. Akbar the Great - yes, that was the chapter. As soon as he said 'Akbar' came the chorus. "*iate ase amar natun Akbar*", that is, '*here is our new Akbar.*' This was followed by a long laughter. Unmindful of everything Nama carried on with his class. He managed to finish his class but not before being soaked in sweat through and through. More or less the same type of drama was enacted everyday. Except a small minority most of the boys were bigger and tougher than Nama. Some of them could have been already fathers with one or two children!

The only free time Nama could extract was during the evening study time when Bro. Barnabas Haw was at the

steering. He would then go across the railway line just outside the gate and with the help of a certain Arup Gogoi he learned how to read and write the Assamese alphabet. Daily he would learn some fifty new words, which are most commonly used in ordinary conversation. With the help of Arup he learned how to use these words in sentences. Within a few days he realized that Assamese was quite akin to his own mother tongue Malayalam. He began to love this language. After two weeks or so the boys knew that Nama was able to understand what they spoke. Not only that he was able to speak. With that order and discipline came into the class. This was followed by a great respect towards him. Within six months Nama with the help of a teacher translated the playlet '*Bishop's Candlesticks*' from English to Assamese and acted it with his hostel boys, himself taking the part of the thief.

With the heavy schedule of teaching, assisting, learning a new language and what not, Nama would reach the end of the day dead tired. Added to all these, both the assistants had to be very vigilant and prevent certain abuses very typical of that time. A boy who buys a new pair of pants would see it cleanly cut with a blade! Who has done it? Nobody would ever own up the crime. Although chewing tobacco was strictly forbidden in the hostel, it was a regular habit with some boys. Quite a few

times Nama would discover this '*precious commodity*' in the most unexpected containers. On suspicion he would press a brand new Colgate and out comes not tooth paste but tobacco powder! At night even after the guys were in bed, Nama had to keep awake in order to prevent indiscipline. But sleep would overpower him. "I am no more able," he would say. "Okay, let me place my head for five minutes on my bed. But I shall not get into my bed." There had been quite a few days when Nama got up in the morning with his head on his bed and the legs on the ground, dressed in his ecclesiastical dress!

Some of the hostellers were experts in hiding themselves in the least unexpected places. One night before night prayers while all the boys were with Nama in the playground Fr. Dal Zovo suddenly appeared; he said something, and then asked Nama, "Are all the boys here?" "I hope so," said Nama. "Look up on to that tree," said the Rector. And, what did Nama see on the mango tree standing closeby? Two clever friends were perching together right on top of the tree and chewing something. You may guess for yourselves what they were chewing!

Quite frequently there were *gang wars* - wars between two groups: half a dozen or so boys belonging to Tea or ex-Tea Garden Communities against the Nagas. When

was the opportune time? After assisting the boys during their supper Nama would go for his meal. Bro. Barnabas Haw, a strong and well-built person used to instill fear into the boys, but he was rather slow to reach the place. Besides on certain days he would be going for some other assignments. This was the opportune time for "*T N War*", as Nama used to call this fight. The usual missiles were steel plates. They would hit the opponents' heads. Blood used to be spilt ! On his arrival at the the boys' refectory Nama would be seeing the war in full swing. Some of the war mongers were highly skilled. They would fall down on the ground to avoid the missiles from the opposite camp, and yet competent enough to send shots, which would never miss their targets. If Bro. Barnabas happened to come, he would make the warriors line up and whack them with whatever object that came into his hands. "This is what they deserve," he would tell Nama.

It might have been in August 1958. Two gentlemen dressed in suit and neck tie came to meet the Vicar General cum Rector Fr. Dal Zovo. Producing some government papers and showing them to the V.G., they said that fake currency was in circulation in Dibrugarh, and that they were sent by the government to check them. Fr. Dal Zovo, an erudite and prudent pastor, convinced after due verifications about the authenticity

of the two '*officers*,' asked Bro. Pancolini, the secretary, to bring down from the first floor whatever money there was in the safe. He brought Rs.50, 000 and placed them on the table in front of his Rector. Sitting before him was one of the two gentlemen. Under the vigilant eyes of Fr. Dal Zovo he said that some of the notes were fake. So saying he separated the good ones from the bad and kept them in two separate envelopes. Bro. Pancolini, who was standing the whole time by the side of his Rector, came outside the office and calling Nama, told him *sotto voce*, "I have a fear! I doubt the identity of the two men in the office. Immediately go and station yourself at the main gate with some strong and well-built hostellers." Nama did as he was told. In the mean time the second gentleman also went in. Both together told Fr. Dal Zovo to keep the envelopes in the safe, and that within a day or two they would return with a senior officer. As per their instruction the Rector told Bro. Pancolini to keep the envelopes with money in the safe. After the two '*officers*' left the office like '*gentlemen*', Bro. Pancolini, the doubting Thomas, told his Rector that he would like to open the envelopes. The latter assured him there was nothing to fear, for everything was done before his very eyes. Nevertheless Pancolini brought down the two envelopes and opened them before his Rector. There was nothing inside the envelopes except

scraps of paper. The '*Englishman*' blinked quickly a couple of times...And that was all he could do.

Nama gave great importance to the game of football, the most popular game in the world. Although he was not a football star, he formed the first Don Bosco football team and gave his lads good training. At that time Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, could boast of being one of the best teams in the town. Nama would have been very happy if his boys had boots, but Fr. Dal Zovo, his Rector was not happy with the idea. However he used to arrange matches with some of the teams in the town.

Towards the end of 1958 Nama had to leave Dibrugarh and return to Sonada, for some two months to write his B.A. But even while preparing for his examinations, he used to think of his boys, football and worse still about football boots! Nama was thrown into a great temptation before Christmas when the Administrator asked him what gift he would like to get for Christmas. Giving in to the temptation he straightaway said, "A pair of good football boots." And he got it. But after getting the precious gift some sort of fear crept in. "What if on my return to Dibrugarh that '*Englishman*' finds out my boots?" he mused. "Well, it may be safer," he said, "to inform him that I have been given the boots as a gift." So saying, he sent a letter to Fr. Dal Zovo.

Within a couple of days came the reply, as short as it could be but with the meaning too clear - "As far as I know football boots are not in the B.A. programme. On your return leave the boots there." "Leave the boots and return! How can that be?" Nama said. "Well, I know what to do. I shall keep my boots right at the bottom of my box. Boots are meant to play, but I shall not play with them," said Nama. B.A. examinations were over and he did them quite well. No sooner had he reached Dibrugarh than his Rector, after the normal pleasantries asked him the much-dreaded question: "Did you bring your boots with you?" "Yes, Father," said Nama. "I brought the boots with me, but they are deep in my box. I have not brought them to play." "Okay," he said. "But mind you, do not forget what you have said." After these magnanimous words coming from a very noble soul there followed a few quick blinks and Nama's anxiety also vanished. At the end to Nama the whole thing seemed to be as easy as blinking his eyes!

By mid 1959 the new Don Bosco hostel cum school was nearing completion. The building was spacious and well constructed under the painstaking efforts of Fr. Zanon, an Italian by birth. The parish school and hostel attached to the old Bishop's house were now shifted to the new building. Thus the new Don Bosco High School was born. The Rector was Fr. Zanon. Besides the

existing Assamese medium there began also an English medium School. Nama the first cleric in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh was now given two companions - Bro. P.J. Thomas and Bro. C.V. George. It may be mentioned here that from 1970 this Don Bosco school building was destined to be the Bishop's house, and the diocese agreed to meet the expense for the land and building of Don Bosco High School at Boiragimat, on Convoy road, Dibrugarh.

For Nama the situation had turned for the better, at least for the time being. There were now well-furnished classrooms, spacious dormitory, refectory and so on. His two companions P.J. Thomas and C.V. George were very good and co-operative. Later on as priests they left an indelible impression in the minds of many Salesians and of people in general. Nama can vouch that the former was truly goodness and kindness personified, a person rarely seen.

Many Assamese students took admission in the new school. Nama and his two companions injected life both into the school and hostel. Students appreciated Nama's classes. The hostel boys were no more what they were in the old Bishop's house or Parish hostel. A refinement gradually took place in most of them. Nama noticed one among them - a good, sober and frail-

looking boy. "Either this guy is genuinely good or too small to join some of the hostel heavy weights," thought Nama. Whatever that might be, an inner voice told him that this boy could be sent to the Salesian Aspirantate to be a priest. The boy was told to remain good and to study hard. From that time onwards he tried to follow up this lad as well as he could. Quite a few times he had to warn a few senior boys to keep their hands off him. ***That boy was Joseph Aind.*** He hailed from Naharkatya parish. In 1957 he had taken admission in class IV in the old Bishop's house hostel cum school. In 1961 before leaving for his theology Nama called his parents Marcus Aind and Elizabeth Nag and informed them that their son seemed to have a vocation to be a priest, and that they should think of sending him to the Salesian Aspirantate. Accordingly Joseph Aind was sent to Don Bosco, Shillong where he studied for six months after which he joined Savio Juniorate in Shillong. ***The boy was destined to be a priest and later on the Bishop of the diocese of Dibrugarh.***

As mentioned above Nama tried to bring up the standard of the nascent Don Bosco football team. Matches used to be played frequently with some of the town teams in the school ground, but always having a previous understanding with the Rector, Fr. Zanon. He was very much interested in these matches because

they brought name to the school. Fr. Zanon had no objection to the hostel boys wearing boots. One fine day a football match was going on, and Nama himself was one of the players. In the middle of the match Raju the watch man came and told Nama, "Fr. Rector calls you." "Done for me," said Nama, for he had forgotten to inform the Rector about this match. He rushed to the office wearing the boots he had brought from Sonada. Fr. Zanon was sitting on his chair in his office, his face as red as a tomato. Before he opened his mouth Nama said, "Fr. Rector, I am sorry - I just forgot to inform you about today's match. As you know, I always used to tell you in advance about any match we play." Spewing anger the Rector sprang to his feet and told Nama, "Away with the team." "Father," pleaded Nama, "You may ask me to do any penance, but please do allow us to finish the game." "I do not want to hear anything," he shouted. Nama went back to the football ground and calling the team concerned, said, "Sorry, I am asked to discontinue the match." Thus ended the match and Nama found himself in extreme grief and anger.

Within a few days Fr. Alessi the Provincial was due to come. Nama made up his mind to tell him that he had decided to leave, and return home. "I do not like to belong to an institution or a Society," Nama said to himself, "whose Superiors do not have a fatherly

heart..." It might have been too quick a decision...Agreed. But in that situation that was what Nama did.

Later on Nama realized that his mistake consisted in generalizing and condemning all because of the mistake of one individual. '*Ab uno disce omnes*' that is, '*from one come to know all*' tends to risk being short-sighted. After a week or so the Provincial came for a short visit. As soon as he came, Nama told him that he would like to meet him. In the evening of the same day Nama went to his office to tell him about his decision to leave. But then something *mysterious* took place. A total *blank* in Nama's mind! The Provincial said something nice and Nama listened... And the meeting ended. It was only when Fr. Alessi left the house that Nama remembered he had not said what he wanted to say. Many years later he understood what that *mysterious* something was. *The One up in heaven* had a plan for Nama, and He would have His Way in spite of People and Events.

For Nama '*Salesian life in practice*' was about to come to an end. It was time to bid adieu to his dear children at Don Bosco, Dibrugarh. From 1957 to 1961 it was a period of probation. Except the one instance cited above, Nama never thought that he was going through a time of probation. He just did his duty to the best of his

ability. He felt joy in working *with* the youth. Life for him definitely was not always easy, but there was joy in accomplishing something difficult. Besides Nama recognized the intervention of God in his life and was happy to live the life he had opted for, and his superiors were willing to accept him. Accordingly on 20th May 1961 Nama made his '*perpetual profession*' whereby he vowed to live in perpetuity in the Salesian Society according to the Salesian way. This was followed by commencing the study of theology, the last leg of his rather long *journey* towards priesthood. Thus on 1st July 1961 he joined the Theologate at Mawlai in the present state of Meghalaya.

Is the weather good, to your liking? Praise the Lord!
Or is it unpleasant weather? **Praise the Lord anyhow!**
"This is the day which the Lord hath made:
We will rejoice and be glad in it."
(Psalm 118, 24)

ANOINTED TO SERVE AND SHARE

A PRIEST FOR ALL

In 1961 Nama entered the Sacred Heart Theological College at Mawlai, Shillong, Meghalaya. But in the same year due to the Chinese invasion all the staff and students had to leave Mawlai. They went down to Kotagiri in the province of Madras where they continued their studies. After two years of study in South India, in 1964 the students who belonged to the North returned to Mawlai, where Nama and his companions continued their last year of studies.

Among the professors were Fr. Sylvanus, the Scripture Professor, known by the familiar name of *Sngi*, the Canon Law Professor, an Italian whom the Brothers used to call '*Gentleman*', and Fr. Paviotti, an Italian by birth, but having an Indian citizenship - an intellectual genius, who taught Indian Philosophy for some time. In the beginning there were two veterans who taught more by their life and love - Frs. Comba and Gutierrez. Nama and his companions were very much indebted especially to Fr. Sylvanus alias *Sngi*. All the students marvelled at his deep knowledge of the Bible. Above all this genius was able to drive home into the minds of the students deep truths in the simplest way. And mind you, although he was head and shoulders above all his companions in Rome as far as studies were concerned, he was as humble as a child. Nama has great admiration for *Sngi* and has gained much from him.

Nama did well in his studies and scored rather good marks. The main subjects were the Scripture, Moral theology, Canon Law, Comparative study of religions, Liturgy, Patrology, and Church history. Most of his friends also found the study of theology easy. However a few found the study tough. There was the example of one of Nama's companions who was quizzed mercilessly in an oral examination by two professors. The poor guy began to perspire and could not answer a word. He was then politely asked to leave the room. Yes, he left. But while trying to get out, instead of opening the door, he opened one of the almirahs in the room! Again, the canon law professor, the *gentleman* relentlessly used to persecute another friend of Nama, because he was rather poor in his performance. Trying to save the latter from the influence of certain students who were not serious about their studies, during the break after supper the '*gentleman*' would be looking for him. The student concerned out of sheer fear of his professor would try to avoid him. There were times when he would purposely sit in the latrine hoping his 'friend' would go in search of some other stray sheep. But while he would be coming out with the sure hope of being left alone, the '*gentleman*' would be waiting in the dark with both arms open to receive his friend. He would then walk with his

lost and found friend hand in hand along the 'bocce ground!'

Nama remembers well the 'gentleman', a very intelligent person. He knew rather well English, but was prone to make often some *funny* mistakes. Once when one of his students disturbed him in his class, he got nervous and told the culprit concerned, "I will '*plick*' you in your examinations." Hearing the thunderous laughter at what he said, and doubting that he might have made one of his usual funny mistakes in English, he asked a goody - goody in the front line, "*Plick ? Pluck? Plick ?* Which is correct?" And the goody - goody well versed in English, said rather softly, "*Plick*"... Now convinced that he had spoken correctly, the great professor pointing his finger at the crowd thundered, "I will ***plick*** you all in the examinations." This evidently called for a great pandemonium by thumping of desks, clapping and laughter. What the heavily burdened students wanted was exactly this. They just wished to ease themselves of their tension.

Spontaneity, which is a must in an educational environment, sometimes happened to be missing in the seminary. There would be generally one or two in the staff, who would expect young men to go through the same mould, thereby forgetting to respect their

individual personality. Among nearly eighty students there were very extrovert young men, while a few were rather serious and introvert. Some were very communicative with their staff; others would be an independent lot. However the vast majority of the students were sincere and good. It was noticed that quite often punishments were meted out to students who were bordering on an introvert type of character and those who had an independent way of thinking. There was the classic example of the gem of a student serious in his studies, hard-working, social minded, and satisfied with the barest necessities. One day this young man was told by his Provincial, "Look here...the staff is 'happy' with you, but you will have to go back to your province and undergo more training to prove your credibility." After saying this he was given his air ticket. Poor as he was, he did not even have a suitcase. Taking his pillow case he put into it the few clothes he had. With that little bundle and an umbrella in his hands the gem of that soul left by air to prove his worth. He accepted the punishment most cheerfully and became a Salesian priest and did great service to the poorest of the poor in and around Chennai. Worn out with his heavy schedule of service to people, and one side paralysed, at present he can hardly take a few steps to the toilet and that too with the help of an assistant. Even in this condition he

readily sits for hours hearing confessions and bringing joy to hundreds of people who come to him. This valiant Salesian missionary is none other than Fr. N.A. Joseph residing at present in Catholic Church, Perampur, Chennai. He is one of Nama's closest friends, whom he had the happiness of seeing after many years on 26th January, 2008. Nama may not meet again his novitiate companion N.A. in this world, but the singleness of purpose with which he lived his life, serving the poor and the emarginated ones in the society not so much by money, but by a life of sacrifice, will ever be a beacon to him.

What about Nama? Was he an extrovert? Yes, he was an extrovert, but quite often he would withdraw into himself as well. He wanted to enjoy the freedom of thinking for himself. Besides as from his childhood days he would sacrifice anything for the sake of a principle. He would claw his way through. Some of his friends seeing him every day might have wanted him to change in the way they wanted. If someone is not what others want him or her to be, the others become displeased, and may even get angry. Thus it was possible that something negative against Nama was conveyed to one of the staff members. Whatever that might have been, when all his class-mates got the green signal for their diaconate,²¹ Nama got a red signal. He was

informed that his diaconate would be delayed. Nama became inconsolable. He cried bitterly, and although some mundane thoughts passed through his mind, he resolved to remain committed to his goal. He could find no instance of straying away from the right path. "Show me the reason for this punishment," said Nama to his Rector. "Give me one day's time and I will meet you," said the Rector. After a day the Rector called Nama and told him, "It was a mistake. You will get your diaconate within a month and you will be ordained a priest together with your companions." Accordingly within a month Nama received his diaconate.

Finally the great day of ordination for which Nama had been waiting for years arrived. All the preparations were over, and the red-letter day dawned. It was 2nd May 1965. The place was Shillong cathedral, and the ordaining Bishop Stephen Ferrando, sdb. a plumpy Italian whom worry and anger never seemed to trouble. Thomas Matthews, T.V. Anthony, M.C. Thomas, Thomas Mattam, and Nama five in all, knelt down before the altar in the towering cathedral church of Shillong, perched on a hill top from where it seems to be blessing all those who pass by. The five young men were ordained and anointed priests to share the good news with peoples of all walks of life. From now onwards they are to live a life all for all. Nama's feelings were those of

gratitude to God, to Mary the Mother of Jesus Christ and to St. Joseph his personal *saint - companion*. His two companions Sylvester Anthony, and Abraham Elangimattam the future Bishop of Kohima, whose names were picked by casting lot, were ordained five months earlier in Bombay during the visit of the Pope on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress.

Nama offered his first holy Mass on 3rd May 1965 in St. Paul's seminary, Shillong. During his first Mass he prayed for the *power of speech* as a special gift from Jesus Christ, his personal God. Slowly in his own good time Nama believes that Jesus gave him this special grace, and he made use of it all through his life to proclaim His Word to people.

Later Nama celebrated his first Mass in his parish church at Nellickampoil, Kerala on 27th June, 1965 in the company of his dear Dad and Mom, his only sister Marykutty, brothers Kunjachan, Kutty and Appachan, cousin brother-priest Fr. Joseph Narimattam alias Appachan who works presently in the United States, and many relations and family friends who had gathered for the occasion from different parts of Kerala.

A priest is ordained for all peoples, irrespective of caste, creed, or status. For Nama the new priest, were waiting the people of Dhekiajuli-Mazbat parish. He

approached them with all his talents and good will. There among the Tea and ex-Tea Garden communities as well as other people, God had a plan for Nama, and that plan had to be realized.

Notes

21. *Diaconate* - it is the last step before the actual ordination to priesthood.

God Himself will provide you with everything you need, according to His riches, and show you His generosity in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4,19)

LASTING REMINISCENCES

**DHEKIAJULI - THE FIRST FIELD
OF APOSTOLATE**

Nama had expressed to Bishop Orestes Marengo his desire to be an active missionary after his ordination to priesthood. The latter knew Nama well from the days spent at Dibrugarh. Hence the great missionary Bishop Marengo, who was transferred from Dibrugarh to Tezpur, appealed to the Provincial Fr. O.Paviotti that he was in need of a young missionary priest. "I would request you to give Nama for me," said Bishop Marengo to the Provincial. Fr. Paviotti could not refuse the request, and so Nama was given the unique privilege of being sent as a missionary to a parish just after the ordination which generally was not done.

Mantra-like words

It is worthwhile to mention here how Nama was sent to the missions. The scene took place in Don Bosco, Guwahati. It was 26th August 1965. Young Nama called for a rickshaw that would take him to a bus stand for his maiden trip to the Bishop's house, Tezpur. Between Nama's mission field and Guwahati there flowed the mighty Brahmaputra River. To see him off there stood his Provincial. Even as the young priest was about to board the rickshaw with his belongings, the Superior called him back said in his ear, "Remember Nama, do not expect gratitude beyond that river." Just that much and no more. But those cryptic *mantra-like* words

always remained with Nama giving him additional energy whenever he was in need of it, while working among people of all walks of life. Those words were not meant for any specific caste or creed. Instead his Superior wanted to tell Nama that as a new priest he was going to start a different type of life in the world, and as such he would do well to expect no gratitude from the people for whom he would be rendering service. By crossing the river Nama would be passing from a phase of life he had hitherto lived to another phase of his life.

Launching into the ministry

Since Nama knew the Assamese language, Bishop Marengo, thinking that he would do well among the Bodos, began to take for him a few lessons in Bodo language. Most of the Bodos besides their own mother tongue, know also the Assamese language rather well. However destiny had something else in store for Nama. Fr. Botto, an Italian, fat and short in stature, a very jolly man, was Assistant parish priest at Dhekiajuli. He died all of a sudden, and so Bishop Marengo sent Nama to Dhekiajuli to fill the vacancy.

The parish of Dhekiajuli comprised the present parishes of Dhekiajuli proper and Mazbat. Apart from a Bodo village, which can boast of having a Bodo Salesian priest Fr. Theophil Ganlari, the majority of the

Catholics of Dhekiajuli parish had originally come from the present state of Jharkand. They belonged to Munda, Oraon and Kharia ethnic groups. In all there were approximately 85 Catholic communities. Each of these 'little churches' having twenty to ninety families had its own catechist and elders called the '*panch*.' There was also the youth wing called the '*sankat*.' The Catechist with the help of the '*panch*' and '*sankat*' saw to the church services on Sundays, settled disputes and regularized marriages.

The Parish Priest was Fr. T.Ugo, an Italian by birth, a very dynamic man. He was busy with an Assamese medium school, a big hostel and overall administrative work. According to the division of work made by him the Parish Priest besides looking after the centre, would visit the five nearby catholic communities and his Assistant Nama would tour all the rest of the communities. When Nama would return from his missionary tour lasting about two weeks he was told he could look after a small flower garden in front of his room. Nama did as he was told. But since there was still time left after the work in the flower garden during the two or three days before his next tour, Nama started writing his first book in Assamese '**Satya Deep.**' Later on a Bodo translation of this book was published by the Udalguri parish.

Know the people

The condition of the people, when they were brought by the British from the then '*Chotanagpur*' in Bihar which now has become the present state of Jharkand,²² to Assam was sub-human. As employees in tea estates their life was reduced to absolute obedience, hardly better than goods and human chattels.

Being employees of tea estates initially the Jharkandis got the name *Tea tribes*. Since in course of time some of them settled down in villages, they were called *ex-Tea tribes*. According to Zephyrinus Baxla the '*Adivasis*' in Assam are also known as '*tea and ex-tea tribes*,' by persons outside their community, and the community members are getting used to such appellations. The rallying point of all the Tea or ex -Tea tribes in Assam is the tea industry and all organizations, like *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh*, *Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association* (ATTSA), *All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam* (AASAA) as well as political leaders with different affiliations have often stood together to defend the rights of tea garden workers. Their identity as '*Tea Tribes*' should empower the *Tea or ex-Tea tribes* to negotiate effectively with the government."²³ The ATTSA has its origin before AASAA.

While writing this book an illustrious and erudite person belonging to an *ex-Tea garden community* himself approached Nama with a request: "Although," he said, "you are free to use any term you like, I would kindly request you to avoid using in your book terms like *Tea or ex-Tea tribes* and *Adivasis* for the labourers working in tea estates as well as those inhabiting outside."

The 20th May, 2008 edition of *Assam Tribune*, an English daily, reported about the Jharkhand Disom Party's plan to move the Supreme Court against 'branding' Adivasis in Assam as tea tribes. Salkhan Murmu, the JDP national president, was speaking on the status of the Adivasis in Assam. The Santals, Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Bhumij and Ho, said Salkhan Murmu, are classified as tea or ex-tea tribes in Assam. He stated that listing them as tea tribes is unconstitutional, inhuman, insulting and derogatory. Demanding that the derogatory terms for the Adivasis living in the state should be stopped, Murmu said that instead *they should be called by the name of their community*.²⁴

As regards the population of the labourers in the Tea estates of Assam, according to Labour Minister Prithvi Majhi, "they are roughly seventy lakhs...This is not an

exact estimate but it is based on the number of tea estates and their population."²⁵

Regarding the languages of the labourers in tea estates, Mangra Oraon writes: "*For the Tea or ex Tea Tribes of Assam we have to consider as to how we could master Assamese, Hindi and English, so that we are able to compete with others in the state, national and international levels.*"²⁶ Nama also agrees with Mangra Oraon. He feels that in Assam especially without Assamese language the Tea or ex-Tea garden communities will not be '*able to compete with others.*' Political leverage, capacity to demand one's legitimate rights, approaching government officials in their offices, relationships with other people, etc. will require fluency in the state language. The Baptist Christians in Assam have understood this. Hence most of them besides using Assamese in their homes, hold also their church services in Assamese language. By so doing they keep their churches open to the wider public.

In this book the *general term* that is used for the labourers working in tea gardens as well as for those who left the gardens and started settling down elsewhere is **tea or ex-tea garden communities or people**; not tea or ex-tea garden tribes. The name *Adivasis* is generally avoided. The reasons are the

following: In the first place the labourers in the tea estates of Assam are not all tribal people, since there are also many who hail from Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and other places, most of whom are not tribals. It is also not appropriate to call the labourers who left tea estates *ex-Tea labourers*; they themselves may not be happy with such a term. Finally all the workers in tea estates and those who settled down outside cannot be classified as Adivasis. Thus it is said that in the dim past the Oraons, who are considered as Adivasis, left their homeland somewhere in South India, and after much wandering reached *Chotanagpur* plateau in Bihar where they settled down. Most of them are now in the present state of Jharkand. Their mother tongue *Kudunkh* has certain similarities with some of the Dravidian languages in South India. Whatever may be the case, Nama feels that the word '*Adivasis*' cannot be a common appellation. As regards *any particular group of people*, the name of that group is used in this book. Thus the Mundas are called as Mundas, the Oraons as Oraons, the Santals as Santals, the Kharias as Kharias and so on. Enlightened tea or ex-tea garden people prefer to keep their identity.

With the above knowledge of the people at hand Nama made a few visits to the Christian communities in the parish primarily to get a firsthand knowledge of their

life. This enabled him to draw up a plan of action for the people with whom he had no earlier experience whatever; besides he was totally new to parish work. The Parish Priest initially gave him a lady's bicycle. Thus either by bicycle or bus Nama began visiting with one of his two *touring Catechists*, (Stanis for Mazbat zone, and Benjamin for Dhekiajuli zone) all the Christian communities. as far as 60 to 70 kilometers from the centre. Personal experience was his teacher since there was very little discussion or planning because the Parish Priest was always busy at the centre. During his missionary journeys especially in the present Mazbat parish he succeeded in acquiring a working knowledge of the mother tongue of the Oraons. Soon he felt that they considered him as one of them. With almost all the Catholics Nama spoke Assamese, which is the language spoken by the vast majority of the people in Assam. He would also break the Word of God and give all his instructions in the same language. The people had no problem whatever in understanding the language. Since Nama spoke Assamese with all, he was accepted easily by the Assamese people. The latter began to realize that the Catholic Church was meant not merely for any specific ethnic group, but for all. The Assamese were at home with Nama and the latter could enter into very useful dialogue with them. His

experience taught him that the knowledge of a language is the key to enter into the life of a people and to communicate with them effectively.

Goal setting: A fuller and liberated Life

It has been said correctly that '*grace is built on nature*'. In other words a certain amount of *openness* is presupposed in an individual for the invasion of God's grace or new life. This takes place when instead of mechanical and routine practices of piety, due importance is given to *meaningful prayers* and to the *Word of God*. A ritual for the sake of ritual, merely *saying prayers* without making an effort *to pray*, receiving Sacraments for the sake of receiving them - these are not going to help one to change her or his life and life style. With an unflagging inner energy which God gave him, Nama made an all out effort to prepare the soil so that the seeds may fall in a welcoming ground, germinate and produce fruits. He taught his people that any prayer worth its name or any Sacrament well received will bring in definitely a *metanoia* or change of one's life. Thus living a life of hatred or bitter jealousy, sacrificing all Gospel values for the sake of money and power, doing injustice especially towards the poor, telling lies, stealing or living in the grip of alcoholism - these cannot co-exist with the Word of God in a person.

She or he will have to try sincerely to *let go of sin* and instead *let in the Word of God*. The loving Father that He is, God wants all his children not to destroy their life with sin, but to live life in all its fullness.²⁷

Further, those who are *open to the Word of God* will get *an awareness* of their life and of their attitudes towards other people, and will try to bring in the necessary changes in their lives. But one of the greatest obstacles in man's life is to have *a mind that is dull*. Such people have eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not hear. "Don't you know or understand yet? Are your minds so dull? You have eyes - can't you see? You have ears - can't you hear?"²⁸

As a young priest Nama already began to see *the Word of God* effecting changes in the lives of people. Yes, God's Word started working miracles. Husbands who exploited their wives began to treat them as equals since they are joint partners. Wives were given a voice. Parents began to impart education to both girls and boys convinced that girls were equally entitled to education as boys were. The laity, especially young girls and boys, began to come to the rescue of the womenfolk exploited by Tea garden authorities as well as by other forces at work and tried to liberate them from their subhuman life. This indeed was true religion. This

was Christian life. This was what Nama's parishioners needed, and it was going to bring them a *fuller and liberated life*. *Progress* and *prosperity* should be their watch word. For all these they had to explore their own resources both as individuals and as communities. They should learn to help themselves. Keeping all these in mind the following were some of the activities which Nama undertook.

1- Be a light to all

All are called upon to be a light to one another, because too many people love darkness rather than light. "Light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil...Whoever lives according to the truth comes into the light so that it can be clearly seen that his works have been done in God."²⁹

In order to dispel darkness and to spread *the Light of the Good News of Jesus Christ* Nama began to publish a monthly four-page leaflet called '*Prem Bani*' or *Good News* in Assamese. He distributed it among the youth that they may deepen their faith and come to know the basic Christian teachings. It was also distributed among people who knew the Assamese language that they too might come to know Jesus Christ.

2 - Education of Children

Nama took a survey of the percentage of children attending schools. He was shocked to know that not even one-tenth of the children attended school. Hence the catechists, the elders and the youth were given the responsibility to see that all the children from the age of four years would attend school. They had to submit reports every month.

3 - Campaign against alcoholism

Nama slowly began to realize that the majority of the Tea and ex-Tea Garden Communities were addicted to alcoholism which was the root cause of their backwardness. Hence he tackled this problem both with love and firmness. The campaign against alcoholism was led by the Catechists, the Youth and the Women's association. They had to submit reports in writing during Nama's visit as to the progress made in each community. Gradually people began to respond positively. Quite a good number of people who were used to making alcohol, which they called '*laupani*' alias '*haria*'³⁰ and drinking it daily, gave up their evil habit and progressed socially and economically. Sociologists may have their doubts as to this. Nama also used to wonder how seemingly impossible things became possible. But there was no denying the fact that almost

an unbelievable transformation started taking place. It was power both from below and from above. Added to this, there was the creation of a new environment having its roots in a renaissance movement, which in turn derived its vitality from a renewal in spirit especially among the youth.

There are people who while speaking of alcoholism among the tea garden communities feel that this being an age-old weakness, it is not easy to eradicate it without attacking the '*root cause*'.³¹ Here it may be good to know to what *these people* attribute the root cause of the backwardness. From his direct involvement and work for many years among the Tea and ex-Tea garden communities in Assam, Nama attributes the *root cause of backwardness to alcoholism*. He also knows that it is an age-old weakness and that it is not easy to eradicate it completely. There were times when Nama too used to get discouraged because after giving up their bad habit and starting a new life in some of the communities more than half would again fall back. Progress and retrogression would be a process going on for months and years. This was more applicable in those communities where there was neither meaningful Sunday service, nor daily family prayer with the saying of the Holy Rosary. Above all the Word of God was not given its importance. Rather discouraged, once Nama

told his Bishop Marengo that he was about to lose the battle. "Remember son," the saintly prelate told Nama, "when you take one step backward, they will take ten steps forward in their evil habit. So carry on doing the good work without getting discouraged or looking for the results of your work." Hence Nama carried on proclaiming the message, and he can testify that in general about half of the alcoholics gave up their bad habit, albeit some among them with a few lapses. There were even some veteran addicts who totally gave up their bad habit, and turned over a new leaf. This gave Nama great satisfaction in his apostolate, and with a sense of wonder he would look more at the one lost and found rather than at the ninety-nine straying and struggling. Even to this day he marvels at what the Lord had done in some of His children. He believes that deep within every man is good, and that at least some of them do not find joy in living too long a life diametrically opposed to the goodness within them.

4 - Youth Activities and Meetings

The whole parish was divided into two zones: Dhekiajuli and Mazbat, and every month on a Saturday evening a meeting was held in one zone. Generally over a thousand youth would assemble for such meetings, which always started with a *Biblical Talk* followed by

confessions.³² During the confession the youth would sing and pray. This was followed by the evening meal. The participants brought their own food. After the meal there would be the *Youth Meet* interspersed with a cultural programme and reports submitted by each community regarding the youth activities in each place.

Nama launched many campaigns with the help of the youth and the elders. In the meeting the youth leaders would submit a detailed report on various developmental and religious activities, like the number of children attending school, the number of people who have not given up their drinking habits, the number of arecanut and other trees planted in the village, the number of houses having at least one bed each, the number of families having latrines and bath rooms, the number of classes taken on hygiene, cleanliness and literacy, the number of people not attending Sunday service, the number of families saying daily family prayers, etc. Girls were encouraged to make pickle, stitch or knit handkerchiefs, veils, etc. and to bring them for the meeting. Prizes were given for the best three. On Sunday morning after the Youth Mass and a simple breakfast supplied by the village where the meeting was held, the youth would decide as to the venue of the next meeting and the activities for the days ahead, and return home.

5 - A Bed for every Family

When on a visit to the house of a woman who had died, Nama was surprised to see her body lying on the ground. When asked to place the body on a bed, he was told that there was no bed in the house. He then asked the people to bring a bed from a nearby house, to which the pathetic response was - no single family in the village owned a bed. How to remedy the situation? Nama hit upon an idea. During the monthly meeting of the catechists he told them that on his next visit to a village, each family had to keep six bamboos ready. In the evening when Nama visited a village he would give a talk on the necessity of sleeping on beds. This was followed by a lesson on how to make a bed with bamboos. The people were told that on the following morning after the Mass he would visit each family and that he would like to see a bamboo bed in every one of them. Accordingly with a few young girls and boys he would go to each family to see the bamboo bed. In one day all the families of one village would finish making beds made of bamboos. In a little more than three months *the project 'bamboo beds'*, was completed in the whole parish consisting of approximately 85 communities. Gradually some of them made wooden beds. Thus for the people it was a progress from ground to bamboo bed and from bamboo bed to wooden bed.

What gave joy to Nama was the fact that people's progress was achieved through their own work and not through easy money from abroad.

6 - Hygienic Life

Old and sickly dogs with no hair were a menace in some villages. They were carriers of sickness. They would be eating excreta and even sharing food from children's plates. After the meals plates would be kept near a tube well for the dogs to clean them. Seeing all these evils when Nama visited certain communities he would ask young boys to search for old and sickly dogs and kill them. Nama would give Rs.2.00 for each dog killed. The lure of money rather than hygienic considerations made the project a great success. But there was also a loss for Nama, for he had to take more time in hearing the confessions of those who killed dogs. They would mention their first sin, "Father, I committed a very serious sin." At the question, "What is it?" the answer would infallibly be, "I killed a dog." It required more time for Nama to explain that the killing of a sick and stray dog is a good action, than the time required for killing one such dog.

Reminiscences

God prepared a daily programame for Nama and he on his part lived each day to the full. Nama could compare

his life with the advice given by a wise old man to a youngster to go around a labyrinth of beautiful palaces, but with a few drops of oil in a spoon, which he had to carry without spilling. On his return the wise man asked him to describe all what he saw. He could say nothing because he saw nothing. At this the wise man asked him to go a second time and see the palaces. When he returned the wise man asked him, "Where is the oil?" At this the youngster said he did not take the oil in the spoon. Hearing this, the wise man told him that if he wants to see all the marvels, he should never forget to take the oil in his spoon. For Nama each day was filled with marvels and he saw them all with a sense of wonder, which his God had given him as a special gift. Here below are given some of his reminiscences:

Reminiscence no. 1 - Trying the speed of his scooter

After six months or so of riding a lady's cycle the Parish Priest T. Ugo, gave Nama a brand new Italian Vespa. In one of his maiden rides along the national high way in front of the Dhekiajuli Church, Nama told himself, "Let me try the speed of this scooter." So saying he accelerated to the maximum speed and found himself in the air. The slippers he wore were thrown some 30 feet behind, and he found himself with his scooter in a pool of

water on the road side. The skin on his left foot was partly peeled off. Luckily or unluckily the Provincial Fr. Paviotti who sent him to the missions, happened to be in the house. Hiding his left foot and with some trepidation he approached his superior. "Sorry, Father," said Nama, "I had a fall and something happened to Fr. Ugo's new vespa." Taking a close look at Nama, Paviotti asked, "I can give you ten vespas; but tell me, what happened to you?" Even to this day Nama thinks that God had a plan for him and that is why he came out alive from that accident. Besides he can hardly forget the great concern of his Superior for him.

Reminiscence no. 2 - Enjoying a horse ride

Kankatta was a village in the present Mazbat parish. Slushy mud all along the path made it very difficult for Nama to reach the village. With great concern the people brought for him a horse to ride on. Mightily pleased, but with some struggle he threw his weight on to the animal. While reaching Kankatta village he found a foot path going around the village. "It will be something grand to have a ride," said Nama to himself. On he went at full gallop. Across his path right in front of his head was a bamboo hanging down. Nama saw it hardly a few feet before he would have been hit by it. But then in a split second he felt as if some power pushed his head

down. He ducked just at the nick of time to save his neck from being broken.

Often people become fascinated with words and pictures, and wind up forgetting the language of the world. The world speaks many languages...Those who have ears they hear...

Reminiscence no. 3 - The dead man eats rice

A 'sick call'³³ came from the village, Boscobari in the present Mazbat parish, about sixty kilometers from Dhekiajuli. The young man who brought the news told Nama that the sick man was a leader in his village. "Who knows whether he is dead or alive by now...Most probably he might have died." It was 03.00 P.M. Nama, a young priest, took all the necessary things for anointing the sick, and knowing that it would not be possible to return on the same day, took also whatever was required for the celebration of the Eucharist. A historic journey began on the scooter. By the time he reached Dhansiri River, it had become dark. Beyond the river was Boscobari the village of the sick man. The current was strong. After having left the scooter in a house on the river side, with the help of a guide who came from across the village, Nama began to wade through the river. Initially only waist deep the river gradually became deeper and deeper. Losing his step on the slippery

stones and sinking a few times under the water, even to this day Nama wonders how he came out alive from that 'dark river'.

On entering the house of the man who was thought to have been dead, Nama saw him sitting down and eating rice quite peacefully. It might have been 01.00 A.M. Nama was tired, but at the same time lucky that he was alive. The inmates were very appreciative of the sacrifice he had made for them. As a sign of welcome a girl came forward and wanted to wash Nama's feet. While she was pouring down the contents, Nama noticed that it was not water, but '*haria*', which, besides being a *sine qua non* drink, was also used for washing the feet of very dear and respected guests. After a cup of tea and some biscuits Nama slept on the verandah of the house. In the morning everything was ready for Mass in the little village chapel. As Nama began to approach the altar he heard a loud cry from the sick man. He fell down with a thud and seemed to have died. There was complete silence in the chapel. Nama intoned a hymn. While the people were singing he said a prayer of *exorcism*³⁴ and the man got up and sat down quietly. During the Mass Nama thanked God for saving him not only from the *dark river* but from the *dark spirit* as well.

Reminiscence no. 4 - A religious bath

There was a marriage celebration at Dhaura village in the present Mazbat parish, and Nama also was invited. It was the village celebration of the marriage of a couple which already had taken place in the parish church. Pigs, goats and chickens had been killed. Preparation was going on in full swing when Nama arrived. He witnessed the couple sitting under a specially prepared canopy made of mango leaves and flowers. A group of some twenty Oraon girls were dancing to the accompaniment of a band. There were hundreds of people who had come also from nearby villages. Towards noon the couple and the band party disappeared. Eager to know where they had gone, Nama asked the Catechist for an explanation. "Father," he said, "You may not like to hear where they have gone or worse still to see what they are doing." "I would like to see everything," Nama said. "Please allow me also to go." And Nama went. He saw the couple taking bath in a river, and the band playing marriage music from the river bank. The Catechist coming near Nama, told him, "This, dear Father, is a special bath, which an Oraon couple takes before their marriage. The boy pours water on the girl saying, "May all the sins of your youth be washed away." The girl performs the same ceremony for the boy. Nama at once understood that it was a preparation for

the marriage, which was akin to a sacrament among the Oraon Hindus. They had an idea of sin, which was to be washed away before one marries, since marriage is something sacred. Definitely this was a praiseworthy custom. The '*religious bath*' was followed by a sumptuous meal for all the participants.

Reminiscence no. 5 - The power of two drops of tears

'*Gharmara*.' It was a village in the present Dhekiajuli parish. After Nama celebrated Mass the people told him that the ex-catechist, a certain Mathias Toppo did not come for the service. "He is a good man," they said, "but he drinks." Hearing this, Nama decided to go with some youngsters and meet him in his house. On the way he met Mathias Toppo. "Mathias, let us go to your house," said Nama. "It seems you did not come for Mass." "Why should I go to Church, Father?" asked Mathias. "You know, I am a drunkard, and I do not think I will be able to get rid of this habit." On reaching his house, Mathias gave Nama a '*pida*⁸⁵ to sit. After a short conversation about his family and farm, Nama told Mathias that if he wanted he could give up his drinking habit. "I shall see about it later on," said Mathias, "but not now." "If you have a desire to give up something evil later on, why not do it now?" asked Nama. There was a short silence...

Nama kept quiet...Two precious drops of tears rolled down his cheeks... After a while he told his wife Josephine something in his mother tongue. At this she went into a room and brought out a big earthen pot with something in it. As she came out Mathias also went into the room and came out with another similar pot. Both of them then proceeded to empty all the contents of the two pots before their pigs. The pots contained *haria*, their favourite drink. That was the end of Mathias' drinking. In Nama's rather long life in Assam this was the only instance of a person throwing away two pots of '*haria*' ready for drinking, and that too of one's own accord with no force whatever. Greater things followed. He bought more land, buffaloes and constructed a new granary. His health improved. Nama remembers having told him after a year or so, "Mathias, you look much younger now...it seems also that some new teeth have filled up the vacancies in your mouth !"

Out of his four boys and two girls, only two were going to school, not the others. Within a year he sent them also to school. Moreover God blessed him and his family with one of his sons, Michael Akasius Toppo who listened to God's call and became an exemplary priest. After serving the diocese in various capacities ***Akasius Toppo is now the Bishop of Tezpur diocese.***

For his reception and first Mass as Bishop in his village Gharmara on 8th March, 2008, Bishop Akasius sent an invitation also to Nama. During the felicitation after the Mass Bishop Akasius narrated to the people the above incident, concluding with the words: *"If I am a Bishop today, I believe it is because God's grace touched my father and his conversion took place that memorable day when our Assistant Parish Priest Nama visited our house."*

While back at Tezpur, Bishop Akasius told Nama an incident which the latter had completely forgotten. It was about a programme which Nama had launched in the parish - *Awards for the healthiest and cleanest children between three and five years old*. "After my father had stopped his drinking habit," said Bishop Akasius, "he began to insist on cleanliness. We also began to eat better food. Once before the annual parish feast, during which the healthiest and cleanest children in the parish were awarded prizes, my father took my youngest sister Siberia to Dhekiajuli town and bought for her a new pair of shoes and dress. Together with other parents who brought their children for the award ceremony, my parents also stood in the line with Siberia. Awards were given to the mothers of the children selected. My father was overjoyed," concluded Bishop Akasius, "when the panel of judges announced his youngest daughter

Siberia among the award winners...Her mother received the award."

A transformation! Perhaps it was seemingly something impossible. But the impossible becomes possible when one is aware of the divine within, and allows it to give direction to one's life. The person then shares her or his newly found '*divineness*' alias '*God's kingdom*' with those in the family, neighbourhood, diocese and the whole world.

Reminiscence no. 6 - The *Gaonburah* with a mission

Nicholas Lakra of Dhaura village, Mazbat parish, was a young '*gaonburah*'³⁶ of some eight villages. Being a headman and always moving from village to village Nicholas had many friends and there was no friendship without a good drink of '*haria*'. He had been in the grip of alcoholism for more than eight years. Whenever Nama visited his village Nicholas infallibly was absent. It was really difficult to get him. But one grace-filled evening when Nama arrived in his village Nicholas happened to be there. Fearing that he may not come for the evening service which consisted of a Biblical talk followed by confessions, Nama sent for him. He came. As was Nama's custom, he patted him on his shoulders, and asked a few questions about his life as a '*gaonburah*';

but purposely nothing was mentioned about his drinking habit. When all had gathered in the church, Nama read a Bible passage on repentance and gave a forceful talk. This was followed by time given for a serious examination of conscience and personal repentance. Confessions began. But Nicholas did not approach Nama - he remained kneeling down. When all had left the church Nicholas came and knelt before Nama. It took some time for him to start his confession, for he was crying. Nama said nothing and allowed him to shed copious tears. Finally he started his confession. It took not less than twenty minutes. Nama absolved him. And that was the end of his drinking habit. Some eight years after his confession, when Nama happened to meet him, Nicholas said that from that day of his confession when he wept for his sins, he never touched '*haria*' or any alcohol for that matter. He looked much better physically. Not only that, Nicholas turned out to be an active apostle going about preaching what God had done in his life.

In the case of Nicholas Lakra what really changed his life was love. Nicholas realized that there was somebody who loved him - somebody who did not advance with corrections and scolding. However, in the last analysis he had a beautiful treasure within himself. Love touched that treasure buried deep in the debris,

and at the touch of love the great treasure surfaced itself. What Nicholas thought impossible became a reality. He also realized his true worth.

Reminiscence no. 7 - A wretch that His Grace saved

The man was Joseph Lakra, a village Catechist in the present Dhekiajuli parish. The people complained that they were ashamed of their catechist, for, he would not only drink, but would be found lying on the road to his village after having vomited, and worse still, he would defecate in his own clothes. However instead of appointing another catechist, Nama believed that Joseph would be transformed and be a good witness. The opportune time came during the blessing of the houses in his village. While going from house to house on foot blessing the houses and praying, Nama would challenge Joseph about his need to change himself. "Yes, I shall give up," he would say, "but not now; I shall do it slowly." At this Nama would counter, "If you will be able to give up later on, why not *now*?" Almost the same dialogue would go on - Joseph rather slow and calculating and Nama gentle but insisting on the same subject. Finally at a time when Nama least expected Joseph spoke up, "*I am tired; this young priest is more stubborn than me.*" Then he said loud, "*Okay, I shall give*

up my drinking." From that day onwards Joseph never reneged on his word till his death some forty years later.

Well, that was not all. Joseph Lakra became a respectable gentleman of the neighbourhood. The Assamese people, who were Hindus, would invite him to their houses and meetings, so appreciative were they at the transformation effected in Joseph. Once he confided to Nama, "I never thought that the Assamese people here would show this much respect to me." Of course, Joseph Lakra had the habit of talking Assamese with the Assamese people. This was the second reason for his being accepted by them into their society. He fitted very well into the Assamese society without at the same time losing his own identity and culture. Besides he used to take every opportunity to speak of Jesus Christ to his Assamese friends. Joseph Lakra shows the Tea and ex-Tea Garden Christians of Assam that by getting inculturated into the Assamese society instead of withdrawing into a ghetto, they can evangelize them. Joseph did not keep his Church for himself, but opened its doors and windows to the greater neighbourhood and welcomed all.

On his onward journey Nama helped Joseph to live a life of prayer lest he might retrogress. Besides, Nama entrusted him with additional responsibilities in his

apostolate. Many people used to wonder whether he was really the Joseph of days past. He was a man who could truly sing, "***Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me...***"

Reminiscence no. 8 - Exploring the power within

Nama loved to be a missionary. He was blessed with a rich field for his work. All the people accepted him as one of their own, and he would not like to lose the great opportunity he had for doing good. However, Nama had a problem. Although he had no involvement whatever in the central team of the parish, he did not mind it. But during the monthly meeting with all the catechists, some 70 to 80 in all, quite often his superior, about whom he thinks well to this day, would disrespect him, nay, even humiliate him. Perhaps he was not aware of what he was doing. However this began to happen rather frequently. "What shall I do," thought Nama. "Shall I meet him in his office and place before him my problem?" Accordingly one day Nama plucked up courage and met his superior and told him that he would like to say something. As soon as Nama began unloading his problem, there came a volley of words from his superior with his long forefinger almost touching his nose. Nama is a person who would always

try not to be a cause of entering into a verbal war. But this time he realized that it was no use lying low. Some power descended on him, and with respect he told his superior, "Father, please keep your hand down; yes, please..." He kept his hand down. "Now speak to me," added Nama, "as you would to a confrere".³⁷ From that day onwards the problem stopped and the superior began to respect Nama. To this day both are good friends.

This was the first time that Nama explored a power, which he had been having. It also made him realize that generally most people have very little self-knowledge and in order that they may get an awareness of themselves, they may need a '*friend*' to challenge them. Undoubtedly it also pays to speak the truth boldly.

Reminiscence no. 9 - An encounter with a Manager

There were some thirty four Oraon families in Mazbat tea estate. They had been cultivating paddy in the tea garden land allotted to them. A new manager came and gave a notice to the people concerned to vacate the land in which they had already planted paddy. The people pleaded with the authority at least to harvest the paddy they had planted. Within a few days the manager sent his tractor to plough the land thereby destroying the

paddy. Nama heard this sad news when he was in a nearby village. Although generally it was a custom to inform the manager in writing as to the day when the priest would be visiting an estate to celebrate the holy Eucharist, Nama immediately set out to enquire about the condition of the people without the customary intimation to the manager. He did not deem it necessary to inform the manager. As he was riding on his scooter along the road in front of the manager's *bungalow* towards the Christian community, the manager came out and asked Nama to stop. Nama stopped. "Without informing me why do you go to visit your Christians?" barked the manager. "I was told that there is a sick man who needs my help," replied Nama. "Who is that sick man?" asked the Indian *sahib*, showing his supreme power over all what he surveyed. Nama had not anticipated such a cross-examination. He knew of no one who was sick either. So what to reply? He had known of an old man, the father of a factory worker who had come from his '*desh*' Jharkand. Since generally old people tend to be sickly, Nama quite coolly relegated the old man to the sick list. "Well, I shall go and ask him whether his father is actually sick or not," said the manager turned into a lawyer. So saying he moved towards the garage to take his car. Seeing this, Nama started his scooter and reached the factory where he

found the worker. Nama hardly finished asking about his father, and that to the question from the manager he should say his father was sick, than the manager arrived. Straightaway he asked him whether his father was sick. Still having some fear whether the son would come out with some other reply, Nama started to say his father arrived from Jharkand and that... At this the manager told Nama, "Allow me to ask - do not interrupt." Nama felt his blood in his veins warming up. Good luck for Nama, the son said, "Yes, Sir, since the day my father arrived here, he has been sick." At this Nama filled his lungs to the full with the fresh and cool air of the tea garden, and putting his chin up told the manager, "Do you take me like one of the workers in your tea estate? I am a Catholic priest, and I know that I have the fundamental right granted by the Constitutions to go and preach without your permission. I need not ask for your permission. Allow me to tell you that we expect to see a better behaviour from managers." The manager meekly apologized, and went back to his *bungalow*. Even to this day Nama wonders how such quick replies came to him as and when required. However the story did not end in Mazbat. About eleven years later when Nama as the Parish Priest of Doomdooma visited the Christians of Tongna tea estate, in the present Tongna parish, he came to know that the same manager of Mazbat was

transferred to the Tongna tea estate where he paid for his callousness. A tea garden worker was ploughing his paddy field. The manager appeared on the spot and told him that he was planning to plant tea there and as such he should stop ploughing and vacate the land. He pleaded saying, "Allow me to cultivate for one more year; I am finding it difficult to make both ends meet." At this he emphatically replied, "no". His eight-year-old son who was standing by his side, moved towards his *sahib*, and catching his feet cried aloud saying, "Sar...Please..." The manager indignantly kicked the boy away. At this the father with a 'dao' in his hands leaped towards the manager and cut off his right hand. Hand for the leg ! Yes, and more - the labourers had a meeting and warned that the said manager would pay with his life if he ever dared to enter the estate. Hopefully the manager learned the lesson that evil recoils on the evil doer one day or other; he will not escape. It will be hanging before him like the sword of Damocles. Of all the evils, injustice committed especially to the poor cries out for attention and redressal.

Reminiscence no. 10 - Nama given a diploma

It was a road in a tea estate in the present Dhekiajuli Parish. After some two years on a lady's bicycle or a scooter, Nama took the Parish jeep to take Bishop

Orestes Marengo, sdb. to a community for Mass. The road happened to be a sharp right angle turn, and Nama still rather inexperienced at driving, had to back his newly found vehicle in order not to get out of the road with his precious burden seated beside him at his left. After negotiating the curve Nama asked Bishop Marengo what he thought about his driving. With a smile came the quick answer, "If you get me back safe I shall give you a diploma for driving."

Reminiscence no. 11 - One of his shortest journeys

Nama was on a missionary tour with the venerable and saintly Bishop Marengo in some of the villages in the present Dhekiajuli parish. Fr. T. Ugo, the Parish Priest brought by his jeep Bishop Marengo and Nama to a village, from where they had to visit on foot four other communities. It was agreed that the Parish Priest would come to the fourth village to get them back to the centre. After the Mass and house visiting in the fourth village, there followed lunch. Nama waited for his Parish Priest to come with the vehicle. But there was no sign of either the vehicle or the Parish Priest. Being a winter evening it was already getting rather dark. There was nothing to do but to walk. A group of youngsters was with them. The Parish was some twelve kilometers away. Bishop

Marengo neither questioned about the distance to the parish nor came a word of complaint from his lips. He had with him hundreds of jokes, which he cracked with the youngsters, and carried on walking. And for Nama that was one of his shortest journeys, a journey that he enjoyed. But more than that he admired with a sense of wonder his mentor Bishop Marengo's readiness to meet any eventuality with the best of spirit.

Reminiscence no. 12 - Eating from the same plate

Every month a meeting of all the catechists of the parish was held. The participants would come in the evening and after the meeting they were served supper which consisted of rice and *dhal*. One day due to some reason the catechist of Dhaura in the present Mazbat parish was absent and Nama had appointed a certain Nicholas to act as catechist, and he attended the meeting in his capacity as the acting Catechist. He sat down with all the catechists with a steel plate for supper. The parish-in-charge took a round to see the catechists. In the mean time Nama sat down in the Fathers' dining room for his meal. Then entered the one in charge and as a bolt from the blue came the words, "Nicholas is not a catechist; since I saw him sitting with the catechists for supper, I took away his plate and told him that supper is served

only for the catechists." Hearing this Nama remained numb, and left the room with his eyes moistened with tears."

Later on when Nama visited Dhaura village he invited Nicholas to eat from the same plate. He relished that day's meal with Nicholas better than one in a five star hotel.

Reminiscence no. 13 - Truth liberates one from Fear

A close neighbour of Nama in Dhekiajuli by the name of Mridul³⁸ Kurmi was known for his authoritarian rule over his wife and teen-age children. But he used to think of himself as a gentle dad, and wrote beautifully the following caption for his family: '*Christ is the head of this family.*' He then hung it on the wall of his dining room. One fine day Mridul had to leave for an emergency meeting in Shillong. After he left, due to the handiwork of one of his children there appeared on the placard *Mridul* instead of *Christ*. But alas! The '*gentle dad*' had forgotten something and to the surprise of all, returned to the house. Together with the inmates, he entered the dining room for lunch. It was hard to express the feelings of the author who had the courage to write the truth. However Mridul was too busy to see the new writing hanging on the wall. If he had seen it, he would have

been afraid to behold the great lie turned into a beautiful truth.

We are afraid of losing what we possess, whether it's power or position. But the fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world are written by the same hand. Truth should dispel all fear. The great cosmic power that pervades every one and everything should liberate man from his fear.

Reminiscence no. 14 - *Gudubhai* the ice cream boy

The day was hot. The students in Don Bosco hostel, Dhekiajuli were told not to buy ice cream from the vendors at the school gate and eat, lest they should get diarrhoea. Seeing from his room rather far away Nama noticed a boy enjoying an ice cream. The former slowly approached the boy who very deftly hid it behind his back. *Gudubhai*, that was the name of the boy, thought that Nama would leave him soon and then he could carry on enjoying his ice cream. But Nama was not the man to leave him. Instead he entered into a rather long conversation with him. While the conversation was going on, the precious water from the ice cream started dropping down behind *Gudubhai*, which perhaps he was not aware of. After thirty minutes or so, there was left in *Gudubhai's* hands only the ice cream stick. "What

is in your hands behind your back?" asked Nama. "It is an ice cream stick, Father," replied *Gudubhai*. "And where is the ice cream?" asked Nama. "Since we were forbidden to buy ice cream, I said I could at least pick up this ice cream stick from the road," said *Gudubhai* with a slight cough. "And what about this water behind you," asked Nama. "I don't know about the water," he said. "Well, *Gudubhai*," what do you like to be?" asked Nama, "an ice cream or an ice cream stick?" "Ice cream" quick came the reply. "Good," said Nama. "You will be a great man. You will become ice cream for others provided you will be your own self by getting rid of fear. " Years later the old ice cream boy confided to Nama, "Father, I am *Gudubhai*, your old ice cream boy - now a Doctor working in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, and drawing a good salary. If I am what I am it is because you told me to be my own self by getting rid of fear. Thank you very much."

Learning to let go and goodbye to Dhekiajuli

The winter night was very cold. Carrying besides the *Mass kit*, blankets and quilt on a bicycle or scooter was not an easy task for Nama. Hence his parish priest gave him an Italian sleeping bag, which stood him in good stead during the cold winter nights in villages. Before Nama left for Kolkatta towards the end of 1969 for his M.A. examinations, he kept all his belongings including

his precious sleeping bag in a wooden almirah in his room. On his return to his beloved Dhekiajuli parish Nama was informed by his Provincial that he was transferred to Dibrugarh. No send off was arranged and Nama's beloved people were not even informed about his transfer. He had to pack up quickly the few belongings he had. When he opened his almirah he found to his surprise that the sleeping bag which he had been using for nearly five years was missing. Reconciled to the situation, Nama left Dhekiajuli by bus for his new destination.

Yes, Nama left Dhekiajuli. He left his first field of apostolate - the Tea and ex-Tea Garden people as well as many friends who for the first time came into his life, a loving lot. They were the days when all the priests in the diocese of Tezpur together with their Bishop O.Marengo, sdb, formed a united team and worked towards the progress of the people. Compared to the days gone by when the people first arrived in Assam from their homeland *Chotanagpur* their social and economic progress was remarkable. This was also attested to Nama by Bishop Marengo. There were poor Catholics in Dhekiajuli parish, but very few below poverty line, and hardly anyone living in utter misery. More than half of the families in villages had adequate paddy field. It was encouraging to see that those who

had given up their drinking habit progressed faster. They began to send their children to school; they dressed themselves better, kept their houses clean and began to save money which often they deposited with the parish priest. Some families among them were even able to keep two children in the parish hostel and meet all their expenses. As regards tea estates, some of them were badly maintained, their quarters not fit for human habitation, and the wages often insufficient for the livelihood of the labourers. Their situation became worse and worse with the easy supply of *haria*.

Thank you mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children of Dhekiajuli parish...Nama truly felt at home with you all. He experienced in his life the meaning contained in the following words: "*Those who leave home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel will receive much more in the present age. They will receive a hundred times more houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children...*"³⁹ Adieu...till we meet again...

"I think of things I cling to...or that I am
possessive of...

I realize that a day must surely come when I shall
see them differently.

So of each of these attachments too I say, "This
too will pass away."⁴⁰

Said a Zen monk:

*"When my house burnt down
I got an unobstructed view
of the moon at night!"*

Notes

22. *Jharkand*: In the formation of the state of Jharkand a few adjustments with the nearby states were said to have been made.
23. Zephyrinus Baxla: The Adivasi Identity in Assam, *Mission Today*, vol. VIII (2006) 21-29
24. Chronologically some of the later 'stories' are brought to this chapter for the sake of the matter at hand.
25. Labour Minister Prithvi Majhi: *Assam Tribune*, dated 28th Nov. 2007
26. Mangra Oraon: *Adivasis of Assam and struggle for swaraj*, p.13, 2007
27. John: 10,10
28. Mark: 8,17-18
29. John: 3, 19...21
30. *Laupani* or *haria* is strong rice beer (alcohol) used especially in tea gardens.

31. Dr. Varghese Palatty: *Mission Today* vol.VIII, Jan-Mar., 2006
The Adivasis in Assam: Problems, Policies and Prospects,
p.17
32. Confession is a sacrament by which the faithful after asking pardon from God for their sins of commission or omission, and a firm resolve not to commit them again, go and 'confess' them to a priest who absolves them.
33. *Sick call*: It is a custom among Catholics to invite a priest when a person is rather grievously sick for the reception of the 'sacrament of the sick;' it is called also 'anointing of the sick.'
34. By *exorcism* evil spirits or demons are cast out.
35. *Pida* is a piece of wood for sitting.
36. *Gaonburaha* means a village headman.
37. *Confrere*: Salesians sometimes call other Salesians as *confreres*.
38. *Mridul* in Assamese as well as Hindi means gentle.
39. Mark: 10, 28 - 29
40. Anthony de Mello, S.J. *Wellsprings, A Book of Spiritual Exercises*, 1984, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, India. P.163

Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."
(Luke 9,58)

MOVING WITH A ROAD-MAP

CATHEDRAL PARISH - DIBRUGARH

Arriving at Dibrugarh on 19th April 1969 Nama worked for two months with Fr. Peter Bianchi the parish priest. On Fr. Bianchi's departure to Manipur to work among the Nagas, Nama was appointed as Parish Priest of Dibrugarh Cathedral Parish.

Dibrugarh cathedral parish comprised the present Dibrugarh, Dhuria, Moran and Tinsukia parishes. There might have been in all about 70 Catholic communities in the parish, the farthest being over 70 kilometers from the centre. Dibrugarh town itself had at that time some twenty Bengali Catholic families. There were besides, a few Anglo Indian, Keralite and a handful of families belonging to Tea and ex-Tea Garden Communities. The vast majority of the faithful in the parish were Mundas, Oraons and Kharias. There were no Catholics from the major Assamese population. Nama was thirty six years old when he arrived at Dibrugarh.

The parish had an old Royal Enfield motor cycle and a Mahendra jeep. Generally Nama used the motorbike for visiting the Catholic communities.

In May 1969 Fr. Philip Kokkapallil sdb, arrived at Dibrugarh as assistant parish priest. He was a simple and good priest who loved the people and would go out of his way to help those in need. He had symptoms of asthma and was rather poor in health. Seeing the

condition of the new assistant parish priest a senior priest told Nama, "Dibrugarh parish is destined not to progress. See the assistant parish priest who is sent here - with his nagging cough he may not last for three months!" But the prophet of doom did not turn out to be correct, for in spite of his sickness Fr. Philip Kokkappallil did great work in the diocese. He was twice the parish priest of Dibrugarh and worked in various other places like Tongna, Jagun, Tangla, etc. He died in September 2005, 36 years after the prophecy!

In 1969 Nama was blessed with a layman destined to do great work in the parish. He was Shri Peter Tete. One fine morning he came and knocked at the parish office door. "I am Peter Tete," said the visitor. "I was with the Jesuits for some time." "With the *Jesuits*! May not be bad," thought Nama. "He could be my *touring catechist*." Yes, he toured with Nama and worked hand in hand with him for the spread of the Gospel.

Robert Kerketta was the Bishop, a cautious and prudent prelate who was rightly christened by some as *Kamaraj*, one of the great chief Ministers of Tamilnadu who was known for his '*parkalam*' policy or delay tactics. In order to give good education to children and to inject life in the parish Nama suggested to Bishop Robert Kerketta about the necessity of opening a parish hostel.

The old parish hostel had discontinued with the starting of the new Don Bosco High School with its hostel in 1959. Bishop Robert Kerketta liked Nama's idea, but at the same time he did not want to cause unnecessary ripples in the community of the Bishop's house where all except two Bishop and Nama, were foreigners. The first floor of an old tea garden type of villa that housed the Bishop's house community had a few vacant rooms. Without making much noise it was suggested to make a few openings between the existing rooms on the first floor for the boys' dormitory. Slowly and prudently all the necessary arrangements were made and a hostel with thirty boys appeared to the surprise of the inmates of the Bishop's house. It was agreed that the children would study in the school run by the M.S.M.H.C. Sisters closeby. It was not an easy task to begin something new, even if it was a good idea destined to do much good in the parish. Objections against the opening of the hostel came from Don Bosco School, now shifted from the Bishop's house to Mulukbasa, Dibrugarh. The then rector Fr. A.P. Thomas reacted saying that since there was already a Don Bosco hostel attached to the school, another hostel in the parish would be redundant. Since Nama had the support of his Bishop there was no question of looking back, and the parish hostel came to be very well appreciated by all. As already visualized the

hostel brought new life in the parish community. Besides the many educated youth well employed in various fields, there are now two diocesan priests who belonged to this parish hostel. They are Frs. Ambrose Ekka and Vijay Minj. This taught Nama the lesson that doing any worthwhile work involves difficulties and even opposition. However one has to learn to read the signs of the time and see what is really good for the people of a locality. Once the goal is set, one should be prepared to move ahead even in the face of difficulties and oppositions.

Most of the Catholics were slow to understand the importance of good education in a well-disciplined hostel cum school. Hence initially Nama had to force parents to send their children to his hostel. Many a time when Nama would see promising boys in some of the villages during his visits, he would bring them in his jeep to the hostel in spite of objections from the parents, and the children crying and making all kinds of unearthly noise. However when the same parents would see the transformation taking place in their children after a few months they were overjoyed.

In 1973 on his transfer when Nama was about to get into the jeep it was heart rending to see his hostel children lying down on the ground and bitterly crying.

The late Shri Cyril Topno one of the renowned Catechists of the diocese of Dibrugarh seeing the hostel boys crying was said to have remarked, "I cannot imagine Tea or ex-Tea Garden people's children having so much affection for a man who happens to be of another *caste*. Perhaps the good Catechist had forgotten a great truth that for children there is no *caste*. For them we are all one belonging to the same family of God, and the one who loves them is their father, mother, uncle, and aunty.

After having put the hostel on its track both Nama and Fr. Philip among other things felt the necessity of focusing their attention especially on two areas: *First*, there were in the vast parish dozens of women suffering due to injustice meted out to them in various ways. Their liberation needed immediate attention. *Second*, there was the great necessity of *value-based education*. Taking these two programmes as his *road-map* Nama began his work of ministry. Although the cases were of varying types, one classic example each is given here below.

1 - Liberation of womenfolk from injustice meted out

Illicit relations and premarital pregnancies were rather common. The village leaders including the catechist

often pointed the finger at the woman concerned, but the guilty boy often went scot free. It was almost the same story among the Jews of old. There was the classic case of a girl in Dibrugarh town. When the girl was three months pregnant, she informed Nama about the matter, giving the name of the boy who happened to be the son of an influential Catholic in Dibrugarh and a close friend of Nama. A '*parish committee*' meeting was called. Generally the boy would be asked to marry the girl with a fine from both the parties. Most of the members of the committee thought that Nama the Parish Priest would try to spare his friend. But Nama clearly made it known that the rule was applicable for all, but at the risk of losing a very close and influential friend. Both the parties were asked to pay the fine as per the existing rule; and the couple at least apparently agreed to marry. But within a few days the boy concerned disappeared through the connivance of his father. Some of the members in the committee felt that since the boy was not to be found, and the girl also was guilty, the case might be dropped. But Nama felt otherwise. He asked the father of the boy to search for him and to bring him back, failing which he would have to pay an amount in cash for the maintenance of the child for a minimum of sixteen years. Nama took this opportunity to form the conscience of the members. After committing a crime

one cannot wash one's hands. Man is responsible for what he does. Redressal is a must; disorder caused must be rectified and in its place order should return. This is the only way to peace and harmony in individuals, families and communities.

2. Education to Values

Restitution of things stolen ... Refund of loan taken either in kind or in cash ... Standing *positively* by the side of truth especially when the author of a crime happens to be of one's own caste ... Whether seen or not seen by others always doing the right thing - never the wrong thing ... Instead of camouflaging oneself, facing courageously any eventuality if one by chance had been doing something wrong, and is '*caught*' for the same... Not heeding to the temptation of carrying on committing evil as long as one is not *caught* ... Never having recourse to telling lies for anything in the world ... Instead of being a hypocrite, trying to be sincere and transparent at all times...Being faithful to the obligations of a citizen or of an employee towards the government or other authorities...Concern for others and willingness to help people irrespective of caste or creed ... These are values which people should learn to inculcate. *Man needs to be educated to values.* Here below is given a classic example as regards education to values.

Dhuria is a village where a new church was being constructed. As the church was nearing completion Nama had to buy tins for its roofing. He informed the village people that he would use the tins of their old church for other *village-churches* and that he would buy for their new church brand new ones. When the roofing of the new church was completed the people of Dhuria had a meeting under the leadership of a certain man called '*Rotto John*'. Without informing Nama the Parish Priest, '*Rotto*' and his men removed all the tins of their old church and had them distributed among the families in the village. As soon as the news reached Nama he informed the catechist of Dhuria that he was going to have a church service in their village. This being an extraordinary visit Nama took with him Michael the driver of Bishop Robert Kerketta. The driver was asked to take with the parish jeep also the trailer. Fr. Philip Kokkappallil knew that the trailer was taken to bring back the tins of the old church. "It will be an impossible task," said Fr. Philip to himself; 'but I wish my Parish Priest all the best,' he added. As Nama reached Dhuria village except for two or three women nobody had assembled to welcome him. Not discouraged, he went to the house of *Rotto John* and told him that he would be staying in his house for the night. But seeing three tins of the old church in his house, Nama asked *Rotto* as to

who brought the church tins to his house. *Rotto* gave out a slight cough and said rather indistinctly, "May be my son." Nama asked him to immediately take the tins back to the church, which he did although rather unwillingly. That night there was a heavy down pour of rain. Nama asked his touring Catechist Peter to take those tins immediately to the bungalow of Beesakopie tea estate on the outskirts of the village. Although it was a dark night for Nama, made still darker with the rain, the catechist accomplished the herculean task of shifting the tins alone to the said tea estate. In the morning of the following day except for a few womenfolk nobody gathered for the church service. The news reached the village people that Nama had taken away the tins which their leader *Rotto* kept in his house. Without the captain the army would be in disarray. While standing outside the church Nama saw about thirty young men with sticks and clubs in their hands marching towards the church. Nama said to himself, "Done for me ! Shall I run away from the village? That would be the greatest shame...What if I am doomed to die - die in the hands of the people whom I came to evangelize? That certainly would be being Christ-like, but at the same time I lack the courage of Christ." Anxious moments passed... But the youngsters were not seen. "Where have they gone?" It was then found out that the guys were more

frightened than Nama. They entered a house and were having a meeting in which they decided not to meet Nama because he, they said, had the capability of convincing people and winning them over to his way. At this Nama got courageous and went toward the house where they had gathered to meet them. But as soon as they saw him approaching they dispersed into the bushes nearby. Nama told his driver Michael to scout the bushes and ask the youth to come out for a meeting with the Parish Priest if they intended to have peace in their village. Slowly one by one all the thirty men came to the spot where Nama had sat down, chewing voraciously as they came a good dose of tobacco. Nama wished them all and asked them to sit down. After all had taken their seats he asked them, "Do you wish to have peace in your village?" To this question all replied, "Yes." But a robust youngster sitting on Nama's left showing his sharp teeth growled, "All the priests in our Dibrugarh parish were bad." To this Nama replied saying that a few including himself could be bad, but if all the priests of the parish from its inception were unworthy ministers, then the Catholic Church had failed in its mission. "But I would like to ask the whole assembly here," said Nama, "what they thought of the statement made by an individual." He then began to ask each one about his opinion. To this one by one all except the one

on Nama's left said that for them all the Fathers were good. At this the youngster for whom all the priests were bad, out of a devilish anger began to dig his fingers into the ground where he was sitting. Seeing him raving and raging, one from the group asked him to behave well. The meeting started. Leaving aside all the discussions, Nama succeeded finally in persuading them that they should keep back the tins from where they had taken them. Another option was there to keep them in their own courtyards. This all did. A few volunteers went about collecting the tins and they were loaded into the trailer. Nama reached back Dibrugarh with all the tins. Seeing him arrive safe, Fr. Philip Kokkappallil gave a sigh of relief.

Teaching people value-based education with one's life is often fraught with risks. Great tact and prudence are required and not the least, courage. This is what Jesus Christ did. This is what Mahatma Gandhi did. After all what is one's life for? Is it for hiding oneself out of fear in order to save it or for living and if necessary, losing it for a noble cause? If people were to opt for the latter this world would be a better world. There are also people who consider themselves a shade better because they do not support the evil; such people lack the conviction and courage to oppose. They tend to

forget that by not opposing what is wrong or evil, they are actually supporting it.

One day Bishop Robert Kerketta calling Nama told him, "You have a broad chest. I would like you to take over the parish of Doomdooma from Fr. Matthew Uzhunnalil." After consulting with Fr. Matthew Pulingathil, the Provincial, the day of transfer was fixed for 16-09-1973. The Provincial Fr. Pulingathil gave Nama the obedience letter⁴¹ with a copy to the Parish Priest of Domdooma.

Nama used to hear that Doomdooma was the biggest parish in the North-East India, and that the people were said to be a discontented lot, well-versed in writing letters of complaints against their pastor. Some unruly youth even tried to use their muscle power against him, but they could not succeed, because he was a very courageous man, who stood by his principles.

Initially Nama had some sort of fear, but at the same time he had a trust in the goodness of the people among whom he had already worked. This gave him some sort of assurance that he would succeed in the new mission field as well. Nama got himself ready to leave...He left Dibrugarh for Doomdooma, but he cannot forget the day of departure especially from his grief-stricken hostel children.

Notes

41. *Obedience letter* is a transfer order given by a Provincial- it is a change from one institution to another.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness, fidelity, gentleness and self control. (Galatians 5, 22-23)

WITH A UNITED TEAM IN A VAST FIELD

**A RICH HARVEST
IN DOOMDOOMA PARISH**

On 16th September 1973 at the age of forty Nama began his apostolic work as Parish Priest and Rector in Doomdooma. The little boy whom God called from the southern tip of *Bharat Mata* was now able to take a glimpse of the snow-capped Himalayan Mountains far in the North. The boy, who wanted to run away from his home at the age of eight to a forest in order to be a '*rishi*', had still a love for forests and life alone with God. Even in the midst of hectic work this thought was going to raise its head and *disturb* the mind of Nama now and then.

Fr. Matthew Uzhunnalil was his predecessor. He was an able and efficient man. He tried hard to rectify certain abuses that had crept especially into the centre which had a big boarding. The Parish itself was very big with approximately 17,000 Catholics. While trying to remedy some of the prevailing evils, a few individuals with vested interests rebelled against their Parish Priest. General discontentment and disharmony were the inevitable results. The main leaders of the movement were said to have been from one or two villages in Tongna.

Fr. Uzhunnalil, a strong and courageous man, would not easily cow down before opposition. He could be rough and tough and would not easily budge. But at the

same time any casual observer could note that the pastoral care of this big parish had begun to suffer. Besides the present parish of Doomdoooma, other centres like Tongna, Philobari, Jagun, Pengaree and Kalatukra formed the vast Doomdoooma parish. At least some of the consequences of the discontentment might have percolated into those places as well.

As soon as Nama reached Doomdoooma he was faced with many complaints. The first one to come with grievances was a certain Vincent Barla the parish clerk who was sacked by Fr. Uzhunnalil for his alleged malpractices. He came stating that he should be reinstated. Nama told him, "Vincent, I would like to help you, but at the same time please understand my problem. Suppose you were in my place and if your previous parish priest dismissed an employee, would you consider it correct to take him back? However dear Vincent,' Nama added, "I am willing to help you. So instead of taking you back, I can help your children in their education as long as they are in our school." With this one stroke Vincent became Nama's friend, and with him all the disgruntled leaders stopped their agitation. Nama had no problems from any one of them. However he was aware of the fact that due to the past tension and problems, some of the people at large were not cordial towards priests. Hence he made it a point to approach

those people who seemed to be indifferent or even afraid of their priests. What he wanted was a loving relationship between him and his flock. Gradually the people became cordial, warm and affectionate.

When Nama arrived at Doomdooma, the hostel boys were divided into two groups - A and B. Group A comprised children from economically well off families; they attended the English medium school run by the M.S.M.H.C. Sisters. Group B children, belonging to minority communities were from rather poor families. The majority of them were studying in the English medium school, and the rest in the Assamese medium residential school managed by the Parish. Group A children enjoyed better food, and were placed in a separate refectory. Group B had to be satisfied with ordinary food. Within a short time, but at the same time after weighing all the consequences, Nama put all the hostel boys into one group or section with the same food, which he tried to improve.

After a tour of most of the Christian communities, and making a study of the Christian life in the parish, Nama chalked out his plan of action, some of which are given here below.

1. Efficient touring Catechists

In Doomdooa parish there were no touring Catechists whose primary mission was to visit the villages and evangelize people. Realising that without good and efficient *touring catechists*, evangelization would be impossible, Nama picked up six young men, and trained them himself. After three months of probation, Simon Tirkey, Paulus Ekka and Alexius Tirkey were chosen as *touring catechists*. These men were sent to villages and tea gardens where they remained generally about twenty seven days a month. Their works of evangelization were the following: *mission catechumens...*, animating and teaching village catechists how to conduct church service, organizing the *village panch* and the *sankat*, preparing children for first Communion, teaching the Word of God and Catechism to people, persuading parents to send their children to school, and campaign against alcoholism. The places where the catechists were sent and the number of days in each place were chalked out with them. On their return to the centre they gave their Parish Priest a report of their work. They then spent two days in recollection, Bible reading and prayer during which Nama used to animate them. Because of their work a great transformation began to take place in the Parish.

People became more fervent, alcoholism showed signs of abating; many more children began to attend school, and the Sunday services became more meaningful.

2. Life among the people and co-workers

During the monthly Catechists' meeting on First Fridays programmes were given out as to when the Fathers would visit the communities for Mass. Generally in a month about twenty three communities were given the chance of having the celebration of the Eucharist. Initially Nama had only one assistant priest - Fr. Andrew Vadakumpadam, a Diocesan priest of Dibrugarh. He was a missionary committed to his work. For touring the villages, although a four-wheeler was available, whenever possible Fr. Andrew would prefer to walk rather than use even a bicycle. Nama and his assistant had to look after more than 90 communities scattered in the present Tongna, Philobari, Pengaree, Jagun and Kalatukra parishes. Nevertheless the people were given the chance of celebrating the Eucharist once in three months. The priest would arrive in a place by 04.00 P.M. and the programme was more or less as follows: Bible reading followed by a talk on repentance in order to prepare the people for their confession, the sacrament of confession *alias* reconciliation, a short

chit-chat with the people to know the condition of the community, supper, and a well-earned night's rest.

Early in the morning: Confessions, Breakfast, More confessions, Celebration of the Eucharist, Meeting, House visiting, Lunch, More House visiting, and Tea. By 03.00 P.M. journey starts to the next village. Generally seven or eight places were covered in one single tour, and then back to the centre. After being with Nama for about two years, 1973 to 1975, Fr. Andrew left Doomdooma. Nama looks back with nostalgia at the fruitful time spent together with Fr. Andrew in Doomdooma.

In the place of Fr. Andrew came in September, 1975 Fr. Paulinus Chempalayil, sdb. Later on came Fr. D.S. Anand, sdb. who became the first Head Master of Doomdooma Don Bosco English Medium School. Fr. Anand was followed by late Fr. K.K.Thomas, sdb. Fr. Paulinus, who believes in less noise and real work, after giving his best to Doomdooma parish, was transferred in April, 1979. All the four confreres together proved to be a united and efficient team. There was neither jealousy nor rivalry of any kind among them. Nama cannot remember of even a single day of tension in the community. According to Nama with no exaggeration that was a period of bloom in the undivided

Doomdooma Parish. This by no means underestimates the work done by other priests either earlier or later, because growth may not necessarily be what is observed by a casual onlooker. The many bifurcations of this parish, perhaps the biggest one in the North-East, commenced after 1980.

Initially when Nama arrived in Doomdooma, the hostel assistant was Joseph Alanchery, a Brother who belonged to the diocese of Kohima. After him the Brothers of Dibrugarh diocese who had been in Doomdooma in Nama's time were: Chacko Kumplamthanam, Francis Lazrado, Alex Kapiarumala, Kuriakose Poovathumkudy, Gregory Dundung, Jose Varghese and Leonard Soreng. Nama was quite pleased with their performance and willingness to be formed. He found them able to relate with people and get discipline from the hostel boys. After the Diocesan Brothers left Doomdooma, in 1979 the Salesian Brothers K.V. George and Matthew Pottukulam arrived as assistants and teachers.

3. Giving a place for the Word of God

From the beginning of his priestly ministry Nama realized that most of the people were used to routine and meaningless prayers which had very little impact on

their lives. The faithful are to receive the sacraments knowing what they signify, and what their purpose is...For this the Word of God has to find a place in the prayers as well as in the administration of the sacraments. He taught the people to have a procession with the **Bible** in the beginning of their Sunday service and to enthrone it in front of the altar before starting their prayers. Those who read or rather *proclaimed* the Word of God had to be taught as to how they should perform this duty. If proclaimed clearly and loud the Word has an inherent power to penetrate into the minds and hearts of people thereby effecting transformation in their lives. Since people had no idea of the Bible, Nama published a book in Assamese under the title: '**Baibelor Parisai**' or Knowledge of the Bible.

4. Youth Meeting on every First Saturday

Christian life is meant to grow. But for its growth the *life of the Spirit* has to pervade the person of the believer through and through and should be reflected in her or his life and life-style as well as attitudes. In a village or tea estate which had some Christian presence and where people for various reasons assembled together, this was made possible to a great extent through the involvement of the youth.

There was already in existence the so-called '*sankat*' or youth wing in almost every catholic community, but it was there only for name's sake. Through the Catechists Nama selected wherever required new leaders and framed new rules for them. The leaders together with all the *sankat* members were asked to attend the gathering at the Centre on every first Saturday of the month.

The time table of the first Saturday gathering was as follows: As far as possible Nama tried to free himself to welcome the different groups as they arrived. When the majority of the participants had reached, they were to gather in the church; and since the youth like singing, there followed some lively devotional songs interspersed with readings from the Bible. Nama then would give a short talk on subjects like *discipleship* - what it means to be a disciple of Christ, *growth in Christian life* - what it means, *faith* - how the youth can *share their faith with others*, *prayer* - how to pray well, *the Bible* - the Book of books - God's Word, *sin* - the universal presence of sin and the evil consequences of the same, *repentance* - what it means to repent for one's sins... The talk was followed by confessions during which certain relevant passages from the Bible were read out. Sufficient time for *silence* was given for the youth to look into their life. After their confessions the participants took the meal which they brought with them.

Once the meal was over, all the youth gathered in a hall for the meeting. Roll call was taken and every group leader read out the reports of the work done in her or his local community. Some of the points which had to be mentioned in the report were: the number of children attending school, the number of people still in the habit of drinking *haria* or *laupani*, developmental activities of the youth like planting arecanut and fruit trees, the number of houses furnished with beds, tables, chairs..., the number of girls engaged in making pickle or weaving...Although Nama and his co-workers were present in the meeting, it was directed by the *sankat central committee* having its president, vice-president, two secretaries and a treasurer. A proportionate number of girls were leaders both in the central and local committees. They were as active as the boys. The central committee also used to visit the local church in order to evaluate the progress of the various work done by the youth and also to animate the church leaders. Early In the morning while confessions were going on the youth had their *group sharing* and *prayers for healing*. The celebration of the Eucharist was adapted for the youth.

Youth in large numbers used to gather for the first Saturday meeting. It was for them *a day of celebration* with spiritual animation and youth activities which they

liked. These gatherings proved to be a very effective means of transforming them into devout Christians and active lay missionaries. Truly great and manifold types of apostolate had been done by the youth. Because of their life and work it was a period when there were many adult baptisms in the parish. Above all many began to experience the joy of being real Disciples of Christ. Moreover through the regular input and training imparted during the meetings the youth tried to make use of the gift of life to achieve their goal in life. *Time wasted is life wasted*, and the opposite is equally true.

5. Search for gold - Tongna

Tongna Tea estate had a big concentration of Catholics. Among the four churches in the estate *Tongna Tin Line Church* with approximately forty families, were all Oraons. Almost all of them had been addicted to alcoholism. Nama's predecessor tried his best to stop this evil habit, but it proved to be of no avail. Hence for some time priests stopped visiting them and there was no Eucharistic celebration or other sacraments for the people. All contacts with the church and priests stopped.

Nama decided to give the people a chance. He made some unofficial trips to the *Line* and found that there were many children - intelligent looking, good and affectionate. There might have been some thirty to forty

of them up to the age of twelve. "This could be a starting point," thought Nama. He knew that dealing with people is more or less like digging for gold. When you go digging for a few grams of gold you have to remove tons and tons of mud and dirt. But when you dig, you do not look for the mud or dirt - you look for gold. In other words even in the worst situation it is worthwhile looking for the positive. "Let me first focus on these beautiful children, more precious than gold," said Nama to himself, "and through them I will approach their parents." And this was what he did. The parents began to wonder how their children could be so sociable and communicative with the priests who never visited them for months and perhaps even for two or three years. Instead of keeping aloof like some of them, their children expressed their desire to go with the priests to the Parish Church at Doomdooma. When Nama told them that there was no place in his jeep to take them, someone among them remarked, "If there is no place in your jeep, take me in your stomach, for there is sufficient place in there !" The children were fond of singing and dancing. One day when Fr. Pauly also had come with Nama, some smart children asked him to sing a song for them. Since singing was seldom in Pauly's agenda, but at the same time to escape the embarrassing situation, he told them that he knew only *foreign* songs and that they would not

understand the meaning. "Never mind...never mind! We want you to sing," they all shouted ! And believe it or not, they forced out of Pauly a song - a song in Malayalam '*Kake kake kudu evite...*'¹⁴² Nama does not remember whether he succeeded to complete his *foreign* song or not ! Whatever that might be, he made the children happy.

Through children to parents...The plan succeeded. Within six months most of the parents gave up their drinking habit, and Nama had the joy of celebrating the holy Eucharist with them. Many who had been living without the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and matrimony received them. It was a day of joy for all. However, prior to this, heaps of mud and dirt had to be removed through prayer, fasting and the proclamation of the Word of God. Two Sisters as well as the *touring Catechists* played a key role in the campaign to which Nama gave the code name, '*Search for gold.*'

"Fellow citizens, why do you turn and scrape every stone to gather wealth and take so little care of your children to whom one day, you must relinquish it all?"

(Socrates)

6. Power in the youth - Philobari

Philobari Tea estate had more than a hundred Catholic families. For reasons not known some of the people had become a rather skeptical lot. The youth especially kept themselves at a distance from the church and priests. Some of them had even stopped going for the reception of the sacrament of confession. When Nama visited this community for the first time, most of the young girls and boys preferred to keep themselves aloof from him. Wondering at this strange behaviour he made it a point positively to approach them... Basically they seemed to be good and smart-looking, but due to some bad examples somewhere a good number of youngsters failed to understand the value of sexual morality. Added to this Sunday was not kept holy. Early in the morning instead of going for the church service which for them gave very little fellowship, some of the labourers found thrill and excitement in the so-called *cock-fight*, which also had pecuniary considerations. Some other people preferred to frequent the nearby market which was a haven for merry-making and enjoyment of all sorts. In order to get out of the monotonous and stereotype life in the estate from dawn to dusk friends would meet and have some very interesting chit-chat over a *batti*⁴³ of *haria* which in the case of certain individuals could go up to four or five even. The Catechist, an old man with a

small group akin to himself, a few aged ladies and some children were generally the only ones attending the Sunday service.

After a firsthand knowledge of the Philobari community Nama realized that there was power in the youth if only it was tapped correctly. Nama made it a point to make them know that he loved them and that he appreciated them for what they were. Thus he gained their confidence. However It may be mentioned here that praising one's children is seldom encouraged among some of the Tea and ex-Tea Garden people. Praising especially a girl, according to them should by all means be avoided. Nama inducted good leaders into the *sankat* and with their help some renewal and developmental programmes were undertaken. One of the main activities of Philobari *sankat* was to attend the first Saturday Meeting every month in Doomdooa. Although the distance to Doomdooa is approximately sixteen kilometers which too often had to be covered on foot, the Philobari youth topped the attendance - list in the meetings. Generally about seventy to eighty girls and boys used to be present for the first Saturday gathering. What gave joy to Nama was not the mere presence of the youth, but he found that almost all those who took the trouble of going to attend the church

service, prayer sessions and meeting in Doomdooma proved to be exemplary and devout Catholics. They became a leaven in their local church.

It took three months for Nama and his team of Sisters and Catechists to execute a programme consisting of house visiting, Bible enthronement, classes for couples living without the sacrament of matrimony, classes for children to receive first Communion, youth animation, and so on. The code name of the programme was '*Onward Philobari Youth*.' As a result of the programme there took place a great transformation in the lives of the Christians. The youth of Philobari perhaps became the most active lot in the whole of Doomdooma Parish.

7. Planning for the future

Eventually a new parish with *Tongna as the centre* had to come. Because of the number of Catholic families in Tongna tea estate, the nearer the centre to the garden the better it is. But except for a plot of land belonging to the tea estate near the market, there was no other convenient place available. Nama contacted the Manager of the estate whether he was willing to dispose of that land for the church. Although the said plot came under the *surplus estate land*, the Manager expressed his inability either to sell or donate it to the church authority. When Nama asked him whether he would

have any objection if he were to occupy the said land, he tried to evade the answer. In the mean time on any day the garden authority might declare the plot as excess land and the public would occupy it. Nama decided to act. He sent his tractor from Doomdoooma and ploughed the whole plot in one single day and succeeded to erect a temporary fencing as well. The present parish church, hostel, school and the SMI Convent were constructed in this land. All were evidently pleased with this centre.

As regards *Philobari circle*, it had to be a parish as soon as possible. A plot of land had been purchased by Nama's predecessor for the purpose. But being rather far from Catholic communities, especially Philobari, Nama thought that the said plot of land was not convenient for the parish church. Besides, there was no access road to the land. Instead Nama was interested in purchasing the land lying along the road to Pengaree, and at the same time very close to the Catholic community in Philobari tea estate. Since the said land belonged to three persons and had no *patta* alias land document, it was not possible to register it. Hence after getting receipts from the owners for the cash paid, Nama took possession of their land. Later on after Nama's transfer from Doomdoooma, the diocesan church authorities purchased almost all the land lying nearby. The parish church, a hostel and a high school

came up on this plot of land. Thanks to the hard work put in by the first pioneering Fathers, the ideally located centre has turned out to be very conducive to prayer and study.

8. The Project that failed

Nama's predecessor Fr. Matthew Uzhunnalil had received from Bagjan tea estate a vast plot of land which was called, '*gutti bari*', that is, land for growing tea seeds. A heterogeneous group of Christians from different places found its way into the newly acquired land which was christened as '*Maria Basti*' or village of Mary. With the '*food for work project*' trucks and trucks of '*bulgur*', '*atta*'⁴⁴ and refined oil were supplied to the people for clearing jungles and constructing roads. Nama had to carry on the work already started. Without any application from Nama there came a representative of *German Misereor*, offering help for the people of *Maria Basti* - a Lift Irrigation Scheme. Nama was not really willing to go for this project, because he knew that the people concerned would not have that spirit of unity, which is a must for any project to be a success. At the same time to refuse the offer given on a platter would not also be correct. Out of about 14 lakhs of rupees granted a little less than half had to be returned by the people from their cultivation and produce. Knowing well the

people Nama kept half the project money in the bank. With the balance the *lift irrigation work* started. Pumps, tanks, motor, pipes, two tractors, a jeep and what not found their way into *Maria basti*. To transport them a bridge had to be constructed. Against many odds the work proceeded rather well. Together with his assistant parish priest the late Fr. K.K.Thomas, a very sincere and dynamic worker, Nama completed the work. But the people preferred their bulls to tractors. They would not also part with their *haria* or *laupani*, which often caused the little ambition they had, to vanish into thin air. To make things worse the floods changed the very configuration of *Maria basti*. The whole project failed, and now if anybody visits *Maria basti* she or he will see hardly one-fourth of the families that had originally settled there. The rest dispersed to other areas seeking an honest livelihood.

It may be worthwhile to state here what a pious and active Catholic woman leader in *Maria basti* confided to Nama: "Father, we are paying for our own sins. If we have been reduced to this plight it is because we did not listen to the Word of God and sinned against Him by our excessive drinking and other sins."⁴⁵

9. The Birth of a new Don Bosco High School

When Nama reached Doomdooa parish there were over 230 boys in the parish hostel. Almost all of them were going to the English medium school run by the M.S.M.H.C. Sisters. Since the Clerics alias Brothers had no work during the day, they were also sent to take classes in the school which they did free of charge. The Convent school had approximately 650 to 700 children from Nursery to Class VI.

All the boys in the hostel were Catholics. They were paying only minimum hostel fees. With the cost of rice increasing from Rs.2.00 to Rs.5.00 per kilogram, it was a problem for Nama to keep so many children in the hostel. They paid their tuition fees like the day-scholars in the school. With a hope to improve the financial situation Nama bought approximately fifty bigas of land in two separate places near the centre. However he found it very difficult to make both ends meet. In the mean time well-deserving Catholic parents would approach him for some concessions for their children, both boys and girls studying in the school. At their request when Nama would approach those concerned for concessions in tuition fees, they were not able to meet the minimum expectations of the parents. Unlike the first Parish Priest and founder of Doomdooa

parish Fr. Gerald Mandeville and Nama's predecessor Fr. Matthew Uzhunnalil, Nama had neither foreign nor Indian propaganda. He had absolutely no time to write letters for money, since he was too busy with his apostolate. Also basically he did not like to depend on foreign money. Thus it became a major problem to maintain the parish hostel and to help the children of the well-deserving Catholic parents. Nama sent a letter to his Provincial Fr. Matthew Pulingathil and placed his difficulties before him. He wrote saying that there was no other way for Doomdooma Parish except by dividing the existing school.

The Provincial wrote back asking Nama to draft a plan giving a viable way of the division of the present English Medium School. At this Nama made the following plan: The Sisters should have sufficient money for themselves and something extra to support their province. They should be able to get that much money from Nursery to class II, which would have more than 400 children. Hence Nama's plan was that Sisters would keep their school up to class II. After the children pass class II they would be admitted to class III in Don Bosco School with a test. There would be only two sections and the number of children sent for test should not be more than 120. The Salesian Fathers would have their School from class III upward. The Provincial

approved Nama's plan and basing on that, he sent a letter from his office in Guwahati to the Mother General, Peachland, Shillong. Initially the Sisters had some problems in accepting the plan sent by the Salesian Provincial. Nevertheless for the good of the Parish and the faithful who belonged to them as well, better sense prevailed, and finally they agreed to accept the plan. Both the parties signed the agreement.

As soon as the news reached Nama he together with Fr. Paulinus Chempalayil made a plan for the new Don Bosco High School building at Doomdooma. Within one year the school building was completed. For nearly six months the children were put up in the parish hall and some rooms. On 24th May 1980 Nama had the happiness of seeing the new school blessed with Fr. Anand as the first Head Master, and in July of the same year Nama was transferred to Don Bosco School, Dibrugarh as Rector and Principal. Thus, for Nama ended a '*way of the Cross*' worth remembering. Tension and sufferings were there, but joy came at the dawn of a new life in Doomdooma Parish. It was the birth of a new babe, but a '*babe*' destined to bring joy as well as pain to Nama.

Looking back at the life in Doomdooma, Nama felt a great sense of fulfillment. A core team of excellent

priests, three exemplary touring Catechists, village Catechists eager to learn, very active and prayerful youth - all formed a united team to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Since there was no sufficient money, life style had to be simple. However, the work went ahead well. With a new Don Bosco High School, the ministry through the school would have a very wide scope. All in all life in Doomdooma at least seemingly was a success. Praise and appreciation came from various quarters. Besides, Nama considered that in the previous places as well, it was a success story. There was the feeling in him that he spent his life doing good as much as he could... that the people loved and considered him as one of them. "I am truly happy for getting a wonderful opportunity to do so much good in the vineyard of the Lord," mused Nama.

Nevertheless a feeling of dissatisfaction began to creep into Nama's inner life. "There is every danger," considered Nama, "to develop a mind-set far from the simplicity of the Gospel way... One carries on doing good as years roll by, while slowly but imperceptibly an admixture of evil creeps into one's life and life-style. False gods like power and pride make big promises. You will tend to become what you think you are. In spite of

your sincere efforts the *vehicle* in which you travel may become a part of you. You may resolve to put all the false gods on the back burner, you may fall on your knees and cry your eyes out, but human as you are, you may miss out your *true God*. Hence why not change the vehicle at least on an experimental basis? Why not try to live among people who have not yet heard of Jesus Christ and His message? Being with them of necessity would compel one to opt for a different life-style. Well said. But how?... "Am I prepared to face all the insecurity which is inalienable with the novel type of work I am visualizing?..." - questioned Nama. Fear like a *cobra* raising its head began to chase him slowly, then faster and still faster in hot pursuit... Finally Nama was not able to take a decision, at least for the time being. The fear of insecurity he faced at the age of eight had not left him.

There was still another problem the existence of which Nama gradually became aware of. He was involved in many good, holy and excellent activities, which gradually began to sap his inner life-giving spirit. He realized that at least quite a few times in his life religious activities tended to be a favourite escape from God. There was every danger for him to handle holy things without himself not growing in holiness. The boy who said to himself at the age of three that he liked to be a

priest because by being one he would be able to hold Jesus in his hands and lift Him up, realized now that there was something much more than that in being a priest of God. Nama was thirsting for that *something*. The God who called him would definitely satisfy this thirst.

Notes

42. A very ancient Malayalam song, meaning: 'O crow, crow, where is your nest...?'
43. A *batti* is a bowl for drinking purpose that contains about half a litre
44. *Bulgur and atta* are wheat products.
45. Nirmala Kujur, age 24

You think you have arms, but remember I am God - not you...
"Stop fighting...Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46,11)

**FLOWERS BLOSSOM IN
'*GARDEN-REFUSE*'**

**A CHANGE OF LIFE IN DON BOSCO,
DIBRUGARH**

During the agitation launched by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) there were no regular classes in almost all our schools. It was a very difficult time especially in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh with the students' demand for a Union in the school. The agitation reached its height in 1980. Hoping that Nama would be able to steer the boat at this time, the Provincial late Fr. Mathai Kochuparampil transferred him as Rector of Don Bosco, Dibrugarh. Nama left Doomdooma on 8th June, 1980.

The Head Master was Fr. T.O. Sebastian, a veteran in school management. The authorities could not give in to the demands of AASU, and so they were compelled to close down the school. The guardians were on the side of their wards, and not with the school authority. There were children neither in the school nor in the hostel. The whole campus was turned into a desolate and barren place. Nama felt lonely. Being used to parish life, and in order to do some good even in a bad situation, he began to visit a nearby tea estate called Hatiali, near Chabua, District Dibrugarh. He approached a group of Oraon old ladies in the said estate. Through his little knowledge of their language he became friendly with them. Gradually after about six to seven months by his frequent visits fourteen families accepted Jesus Christ freely into their lives and were baptised. A church was also built for them.

It was decided not to re-open the hostel which was closed during the AASU agitation. Instead it would be converted into an apostolic school. At this time in the undivided provinces of Guwahati-Dimapur, the aspirantate was in Don Bosco, Maligaon. It was decided to bring the aspirants from Maligaon to Don Bosco, Dibrugarh. Thus with the two clerics Joseph Almeida and Joachim Minj thirty aspirants arrived in Dibrugarh, and in the place of the hostel an aspirantate or apostolic school was born. Most of the children were from Kerala. But gradually Nagas and boys from Tea and ex-Tea Garden communities joined the aspirantate.

Peace came but slowly, and the school was re-opened after about three months. The High School from class V to X for all practical purposes was seen to by its head Master Fr. T.O. Sebastian. Nama looked after the Primary Section from class Nursery to class IV. Since the teachers were exemplary and performed their duties well, Nama had sufficient free time in the school. He made use of the time to write a Catechism in Assamese language. It turned out to be a book well appreciated. The name of this Catechism book is ***Jivanar Sarathi*** (Companion to Life). Later on a second edition of the same book was printed. Finally in 2005 Nama brought out a revised and more up to date third edition of the same book. Nama was well aware that very little

catechism was taught to the people. He believes that as Rector in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, his Catechism *Jivanar Sarathi* was a great contribution to the Church. Truly flowers blossom in '*garden refuse*.'

Nama did his best to look after the aspirants. He tried to give them both a very human and spiritual formation. Since he was not aware of the background of the Naga boys and never worked among the Nagas, he toured some of the parishes in Nagaland and Manipur to get a firsthand knowledge of the life of the people in those parts of the country. Nama might have been rather *unorthodox* in the way he was running the new aspirantate. He felt that in many formation houses the spiritual inspirations tend to be buried under irrational habits and mechanical practices. Hence Nama gave importance to meditation. Besides, the BIBLE was given the central place in his formation, for he believed that the Word of God has an inherent power, which can transform one's life. He knew it from his own experience, and so he provided all the aspirants with a Bible. The behaviour of the aspirants appeared to be natural and warm. Some '*Diocesan Fathers*' who happened to visit Don Bosco also noticed this, because they felt at home with the boys. The boys observed the rules of the house without in any way feeling the burden of these rules. In short they were spontaneous.

In spite of the many good things that happened during Nama's life in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, there would appear dark clouds giving him no peace. "I have come to find peace," Nama used to tell himself. "But I do not think that I possess that peace for which my soul is thirsting." He used to look at the white flowers on a tree near his room and say: "See how beautiful those flowers are. They have no worry, no anxiety. The tree experiences no tension." Other times the following words of Kahlil Gibran used to help him: "Man is like the foam of the sea that floats upon the surface of the water. When the wind blows, it vanishes, as if it had never been. Thus are our lives blown away by Death..."⁴⁶ Everything passes away...Nothing is permanent...Once when Nama felt himself at his nadir, he went and sat in a prayer room. He said nothing, did not feel like praying. His heart was heavy. He remained sitting in the lotus position, his Bible in front of him. After a while he heard a voice from within: "Read." He opened his Bible, and read: "We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."⁴⁷ He felt as if something was penetrating into his eyes, ears, mind, heart and the very entrails. He felt himself very light. After a while when Nama left the prayer room and went down the stair case

to the verandah, there he found a sober and welcoming smile in the face of a person who had broken down all relationships with him for nearly five months, but for whom Nama used to pray daily. Years have passed. To this day he considers Nama as one of his best friends. For Nama this change in the man concerned remains a mystery - a miracle. Yes, things do happen for which the only explanation is: *prayer can make possible what is seemingly impossible.*

* * * * *

Nama had manifold opportunities for doing good as an assistant parish priest approximately for five years and as parish priest or rector for eighteen years. Wherever he was sent, he tried to do his duty as best as he could. However deep within *the call for a life with a difference* had never left him. Gradually a clearer light dawned before him. "I know the Assamese language sufficiently, and have already written some books in Assamese," Nama said to himself. "Now why not try to spread the message of the Gospel among a people who have little or no knowledge of it? But to do this it is not sufficient merely to know their language. One should *know their culture and get oneself inculturated into it.* Will it be possible to live among them in a rented house?" Nama revealed *the call from within* to his

Provincial Fr. Pulingathil. This being a novelty, he was not able to take a decision. However, Nama's companion Bishop Thomas Menampampil of Dibrugarh diocese was pleased with the idea and promised to help him in whatever way he could. Finally towards the end of Nama's term of six years as Rector in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, his Provincial Fr. Pulingathil gave him permission to start his new venture.

On 9th June 1986 Nama completed six years as Rector in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh. He was now 53 years old. He left Dibrugarh for Jorhat ...and so to say, for the whole of Assam... A wandering *sannyasi*... A leap into the dark, a leap that would make him encounter a people about whom he had nothing but superficial ideas.

Notes

46. Kahlil Gibran, *The Voice of the Master* translated by Anthony R. Perris, the Citadel Press, 1958, p.31-32
47. Romans, 14, 7

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
when you walk through fire,
you will not be burned. (Isaiah 43, 1-2)

THE GREAT DISCOVERY

EXPOSURE TO VALUES BEYOND

A welcoming people, gentle and polite, religious minded to the core, the womenfolk adorned less with ornaments and more with simplicity, modesty and purity - these were some of the impressions which Nama had about the Assamese people with whom he had come into contact. However this knowledge of a great people was just like a drop in the ocean. Now he was going to learn much more about them and their rich cultural heritage.

Nama's base was a rented house on the outskirts of Jorhat town, costing Rs.1000 per month, besides another Rs.2000 for all other expenses given by Bishop Menampampil, sdb.

WITH ASSAMESE FRIENDS

Nama straightaway began to visit the Assamese families in Jorhat town. The visit was not as easy as he thought. For one thing when Nama would visit a family the first question generally put was, '*Ki lage?*' - that is, '*what do you want?*,' Nama would find it difficult and rather foolish to answer that question. He would introduce himself as a Catholic priest from Don Bosco. And as to the question - '*what do you want?*' it was rather a problem to answer. For one thing Nama decided to be very transparent and never to tell a lie. Hence he would answer: "I am new to Jorhat and to the

people of Jorhat; so I would like to get acquainted with them..."

1 - With Jiten in dialogue

While visiting a prominent Brahmin family in Jorhat town, and after his usual self-introduction, the owner of the house, his name being Sri Jiten Barthakur, a well educated and solemn looking tall hefty man, asked Nama, "Is your visit with the idea of conversion to Christianity? Secondly, if you do not mind, do you eat beef?" To the first question Nama said that he did not believe in any forced conversion. Any conversion worth the name is an inner rebirth. Conversion according to Jesus Christ is becoming like little children, for, when we become like little children we get a taste of heaven. However, if an individual, say, like you, would like to know about Jesus Christ and his teachings I would willingly help him to know some truths about Christ and his teachings...It is up to him to accept Christ or not. As to the second question Nama replied that from early childhood he was not used to eating beef. 'However, it may be mentioned here,' said Nama, 'there are valid reasons to believe that Vedic Aryans ate beef. Manu the great law-giver encouraged vegetarianism on ground of non - violence.' According to him, added Nama, 'there is no sin in eating beef...but abstention brings great

rewards.' Jiten seemed to have been pleased with Nama's words. He then asked Nama, 'where do you hail from?' To this question he said that he had been many years in Assam although originally he is from the South.' 'You are welcome,' he said. 'You are also welcome to share in our meals whenever you pass this way.' Although the Assamese families are very hospitable, and will almost always offer a cup of tea with a few biscuits or the so-called '*sop*' (*jeera* with bits of coconut) to guests, generally they would not share their rice with them. After the conversation Nama had a sumptuous meal with Jiten and his family members.

After a couple of weeks Jiten who now became quite familiar in his ways towards Nama, told him during one of his visits, "Friend, shall I tell you something? You see, I have read the Gospels, and I love Jesus Christ of the Gospel. But I do not like the Church or Churches, for they impose too many rules and restrictions on people to the extent that that they do not enjoy their God-given freedom. They have to submit unthinkingly to authority, teachings and practices. I know something about you Catholics and your Church. Why are you priests forbidden to marry? It would be so nice to see you a young man coming to visit us with your wife and children. Don't you think that living a single life is an incomplete life? Why all these unnecessary restrictions

against nature? Did Christ lay down such rules? Do you not agree that you are submitting yourselves to a foreign authority, to foreign ways and practices in matters of religion?"

As regards the Church in the North-East and Assam in particular," continued Jiten, "please allow me to tell you that we Assamese peoples would find ourselves like "fish out of water if we were to become Christians. We will have to sacrifice our culture and ways of living, which we cherish so much. Our ways of worship are so much Indian and appealing to us emotionally. Most of your Catholics here in Assam have a culture of their own with some sort of allegiance to outside church authorities. Although people in general take some kind of alcohol, we identify drinking and beef eating with your Church. A few years ago I happened to visit one of your churches on a Sunday. To be very frank, I should tell you that I did not feel at home with the service conducted there." "And as for the North-East," Jiten said, "you will agree with me that we Assamese Hindus are much better than most of the tribal Christians. Promiscuity and drug-taking are much more prevalent in the Christian states of Nagaland and Manipur than in Assam. So, tell me, what can you Christians offer us Assamese people? You could easily offer to us Jesus Christ whom I personally love, but you Christians hide Him within your

churches and church rites - within your foreign garb. I for one would like to see Him not merely in the Gospels, but in you Christians, in your ways of living." Jiten shared with Nama many more things like '*hoodwinking*' as he put it, 'poor people with huge buildings and social works'. According to him, 'you church leaders for us are basically educators, social workers; men who have money just like the waters of the Brahmaputra. Money flows into your convents and churches, and you tend to become very much un-Indian. To me it seems that you Christians are bought off by your Pope and the West with their money in order to be submissive to them. You Catholics, I should say, are first *Roman* and then Indian. Even the Christians in Rome and for that matter in the West, have very little of religion. What are they going to offer us Indians? As regards our religious ways do you see the Asamese people at least in Jorhat, Golaghat and Sivasagar districts a substandard lot? Our priests do not have much role in the peoples' lives. The traditional values, which we have inherited, and the religion which we practise, generally speaking are sufficient for us. Do you think that we will be better if we embrace the Christianity which we see here?"

Nama listened to Jiten with great empathy, and that made him talk freely. Here it may be asked what the response of Nama was. From the very beginning Nama

had decided not to enter into polemics. Listening with empathy may not always mean that one agrees with all what is said. The body language plays a good role. Nama made it clear to Jiten that as it happened in the case of Sri Sankaradeva who was a saint for all peoples and whose *namghars*⁴⁸ were open to all irrespective of caste and creed, but later on his appealing countenance got rather disfigured with the coming of some of his followers, even so Christians also should confess their sins for not revealing the real person of Jesus Christ in their lives. Instead of being discouraged all of us - Hindus and Christians, can and should try to show by our lives the true faces of our great saints. We will do well to look up to our religion in its pure form as originally bequeathed to us and not in its deviated form, if any, which is the work of people with selfish interests. This is perhaps what we all could do. As regards single life, Nama said that there are people like Madhavadeva as well as many genuine Hindu sannyasis and sannyasinis who do not marry for the sake of devotion and of doing some service to humanity. However, Nama agreed that there are individuals both among Hindus and Christians who with wrong motives become priests or sannyasis and prove to be counter witnesses to religion as well as to society. At this point although Jiten showed appreciation for Nama's clarification, yet gently and in a

rather subdued voice, he said, "At least in this part of the world I have still to find real Christian sannyasis or sannyasinis, that is, people whose daily food is prayer and not merely action. It may be my mistake - perhaps you people may think yourselves to be sannyasis, but we find it rather difficult to believe it."

Jiten was very pleased with Nama because the latter listened to him without interrupting even once. At the end he embraced Nama, and with moistened eyes said, 'I love you more than my *ga-a* (I) d'. Nama was surprised. "He says he loves me more than his *girl* (?). Is it possible that he has another girl besides his wife?" thought Nama. It was then that Nama understood what Jiten really meant: "I love you more than my *ga-ad* (god)"

2 - With people in Meditation

Nama had already learned *Zen* and *Vipasana* types of meditation in Patna and Jaipur- Rajasthan, which he found very useful for his life. He had also preached two retreats in Kolkatta province, one in Sonada and the other in Bandel. In the latter he conducted the *Vipasana* type of meditation for about 60 Salesians of the province. All the Salesians were appreciative of this meditation, except perhaps one who thought that sitting cross - legged on the ground was becoming Hindus!

Later on Nama conducted such retreats in Shillong and elsewhere in the North-East for religious-women and men. Now with a feeling that he had something to give to the Assamese Hindus he invited the people near his little rented house for a meditation, which he said was not based on any particular religion. Nama asked the participants (1st) to sit erect...to sit and do nothing...by doing so *the grass grows* and *the spring comes*...(2nd) to begin to breathe long and deep...(3rd) to feel their bodily sensations....At this point he was rather surprised to see them sitting cross-legged with great ease, which perhaps could be a very painstaking task for many priests and religious. A certain lady asked him whether the breathing was to be with the lower abdomen or not. He told the group that the breathing was to be with the lower abdomen. He then guided them to say mentally (4th) *'Let go of my ego - let go of all clinging, of all attachments to name, fame, status, degrees...* to be stripped of everything...(5th) and then slowly try to reach one's own pure self - that self wherein resides *God*, and *to be with Him*. Being with Him, said Nama, means to be with the whole creation - women, men, with all. At the end of the session Nama discovered that the majority of the participants were used to making daily meditation. Nama felt very humble and at the same time also happy. He only wondered whether there was anything, which

he could give these people, which they did not already have, and that whether the priests and religious who teach others make good meditation daily. Nama conducted this type of meditation a few more times.

After his meditation experience with the Assamese Hindus Nama himself gradually began to experience more the effects of his meditation in his daily life. Religious and priests take time for prayer, meditation, recollection, retreats etc., in order to renew their faculties, and then get back into themselves. After this they go out refreshed. This is the basis of transcendental meditation. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi maintains that if we meditate properly for thirty minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the evening we can renew all our faculties. We will then be able to get down to that deep centre of rest within us and then from that centre of rest, we can be more effective and efficient in our work. What actually happens is that almost all of us both in the church and outside of it are involved in the great problem of action, which absorbs us continually at every level. Our main worry seems to be how much we achieve in our prayer - how much we do in our prayer. There is no time for silence that we may be with God. We tend to forget that by *'being still and silent'* we get ourselves plugged into a great power house. The question is how to find that centre of rest and peace, and

to act from there.

When we have learned to meditate we see GOD in all beings: in the whole creation - in the scent and beauty of mother earth, in the tiny little grain of sand, in the little drop of rain water dancing on a lotus leaf, on the branches of trees with myriads of leaves fluttering, in the yellow leaves falling gently from trees and becoming manure to get back into the same trees, in the flowers of varying hues changing in the sunlight, in the little birds chirping and making love, in the animals peacefully grazing on grassy meadows; in people black and white hustling in busy streets and shops, in the serene starlit sky, in the moon peeping like a bride clad in her golden robes. We then truly discover the **Lord dancing** in His creation. Yes, we see the great '*Nataraja*'.⁴⁹ This is possible if we reach in the silence of meditation the centre of rest within us.

And what else are some of the other wonderful results of well-made meditation? People who meditate well are seen to have an inner power. They generally seem to be happy and healthy. They are neither freakish nor do they try to acquire extraordinary signs or miraculous powers. Regarding them it may be verily said that their faces are sculptured, shaped, and silently but surely engraved with the peace they experience within. Their faces

reflect the strength, the spirit and the sweetness of God residing within them.

3 - With '*music*' in hands

In the field of meditation Nama could give very little to the people. "Is there anything else that I can do," pondered Nama, "which will help me to interact with the people and at the same time keep myself busy?" He slowly thought of producing two audio cassettes with devotional Assamese songs. Nama himself would write the lyrics, and for that he would visit people for their assistance. Thus he brought out two audio cassettes, recorded in a studio in Guwahati, perhaps the first by any Catholic - lay or religious, in the North-East: ***Gananjali*** and ***Aradhana***. Now with these two cassettes in his hands Nama could easily approach families as well as the youth. He would make them sing and then explain to them certain truths and their actual meanings. Thus he succeeded in sharing with the people some messages and values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

4 - With friends of different colours

Gradually Nama began to be rather happy with his apostolate. Now the scooter *sannyasi* thought he was doing something for his Master. A few Salesian friends would come to visit him in his rented house. Some of

them would question the meaning of his life and this type of 'unorthodox work' as they put it. Among some ten such friends who visited him at various times, there was one and it was Fr. Leo Heriot, a Salesian of Australian nationality, who encouraged him for his courage to do a new type of apostolate with no fear of insecurity. "Go ahead with your apostolate," said Fr. Leo, "We need people who think differently and are able to swim against the current. We need people who can get out of their schools and be witnesses to our Hindu brethren. Go ahead, friend it is not the amount which you do that matters."

IN THE WORLD OF SATRAS AND BEYOND

1 - Visit to the island of Satras

One fine morning as Nama was standing on the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra at Nimatighat, some thirteen kilometres from Jorhat, he saw a young man dressed in white *dhoti* and *kurta* with his long hair tied behind. His face looked serene and tranquil. "Who are you? From where do you come?" asked Nama. With some sort of ethereal power emanating from his bright eyes, he said, "I live in Majuli Island beyond these waters. We cannot see the island. They say it is the biggest river island in the world...I am a celibate monk. People call us

'*bhakat*'.⁵⁰ There are many *bhakats* like me and we live in *satras*.⁵¹ "What is *satra*? What do you do there? What do you eat? How do you manage without marrying? Do you possess land and money?"... , asked Nama. His friend stopped the torrent of questions, and said gently with a smile, "It is better that you come and see for yourself." It was time for the boat to leave for Majuli and Nama's friend forgetting to say even his name bade goodbye to him and left. "The bird has flown away," murmured Nama. However his inquisitive mind was determined to see the path left by that beautiful bird.

An angel of a man has left me without answering my questions, perhaps no more to be seen," said Nama to himself. "But I will go to Majuli and see for myself those *satras* and *bhakats* there," said Nama. "It looks like crossing an ocean to explore a new continent, but I will go," said Nama, and he did go. The sooner the better it is. So the following day Nama returned to Nimatighat and boarded a boat that took him to Majuli Island. Not knowing any human being, Nama found himself in a very strange land... As a traveller passed by, Nama placed before him his plight. He told Nama about some of the biggest *satras* or monasteries of Assam like *Natun Kamalabari*, *Auniati*, *Dakhinpath*, *Garmur*, etc. "If you like you may go to any one of them," said the traveller. Plucking up courage Nama trudged towards

Kamalabari *satra*, the nearest one for him. As Nama approached the holy place, a '*bhakat*' or devotee came and gently told him to keep his slippers outside the *satra* precincts. This Nama did without any difficulty. Then the gentle *bhakat* asked him whether he had with him a *dhoti*, to which he replied no. "There is no problem," he replied, 'for I can lend you my *dhoti*.' Nama was thus given a *dhoti*, but seeing him struggling to tie this unusual dress for him in an unusual way, his friend truly a friend in need, assisted him to tie the *dhoti* with one corner tucked behind. Now with the *dhoti* and the *kurta*, which he was already wearing, it gave him a new appearance. Once he was in his '*uniform*', the *bhakat* showed him the *kevaliya* or celibate *satra* complex, which was made up of four long lines of Assam-type houses, which together formed a quadrangle. "Each of these lines," said Nama's friend, "is called a *hati*, and is placed under the charge of a *Burha bhakat* or monastic elder. He then introduced Nama to the abbot or *satra adhikara* (*goxhain*). After Nama's *pranam* with joined hands to the *goxhain* and greeting, the latter in return said, "You are welcome...you will be given our food and if you like you can spend the night here." The abbot or *goxhain* resided in the middle of the *hati* in the east. Each of these *hatis* is divided into spacious rooms, which are called *baha*, and each *baha* has two to eight

members who live together and form a small community within a bigger community. One member in a *baha* is in charge of it. Generally a *baha* is expected to be self-sufficient with the paddy from a small plot of land around the *satra*. If a *baha* has sufficient means, the one in charge of it may bring an aspirant or candidate. Generally these boys come when they are small and attend a school outside the *satra*. It was quite charming to see the little ones dressed in *dhoti* and quite involved in the daily chores of the *satra*.

After a firsthand knowledge of the *satra* complex Nama became very much interested in studying more of the *satra* life which seemed to him to be very much similar to the religious life he himself was living, but with some differences. After remaining two days in Kamalabari *satra*, Nama went on to study almost all the other *satras* in Majuli; he had long discussions with the abbots or *goxhains*, *burha bhakats*,⁵² and ordinary *bhakats*. The results of his study are given in his book '*The Valley in Blossom*' - Neo Vaishnavism and the peoples of the Brahmaputra Valley.⁵³ Some of the points traced out in his studies and as given in his book are worthwhile giving here. Here below is given in short an idea about the *initiation* into the Vaishnavite order.

The formal *initiation* ceremony called *sarana* and the

confirmatory *bhajana* are conducted under the supervision of the *goxhain*. The first, viz. *sarana* marks the formal entry of a person into the Vaishnavite order. It is of the nature of an oath by which one promises to lead the life of a true Vaishnavite. The second is marked by a ceremony known as *bhajana*, by which a person is recognized as a confirmed devotee. *Sarana* may be given together to a group of people at the same time. When women are initiated, a screen is kept between them and the *goxhain*. Initiation is given both to the inmates of a *satra* as well as to thousands of disciples scattered in the many villages through the length and breadth of Assam. For the initiation of the disciples outside the *satra*, the *goxhain* with a group of *bhakats* goes to the villages. Women although initiated are not allowed to live in a *satra*, but are permitted to visit the *satras*.

Sarana means resorting oneself to Krishna as the sole deity to take refuge in. It is not equivalent to the 'religious vows,' for, the disciples are not bound by any vow. It may be more correct to say that by *sarana* a disciple's whole being is bound to Krishna. After the initiation a *bhakat* is expected to abide by the rules of the *satra*. He relinquishes the world and accepts *Deva*, that is, Lord Krishna as his personal God and other *bhakats* become his friends in weal and woe. It is by constant

companionship with the *bhakats* that *bhakti* or devotion is nurtured. Finally a *bhakat* accepts the guidance of his *guru*, for without the guidance of a *guru* sentiments of devotion cannot be properly evoked. When a disciple becomes mature and confirmed in faith, he is entrusted with a duly consecrated rosary or *mala* carved out of *basil* or sandal wood. There are disciples who count *japas* like '*Krishna...Krishna* or '*Hari...Hari*' even up to 1000 times a day. As she or he rolls the beads her or his mind is in communion with God.

Here it may be good to mention a word about God for a Vaishnavite. Hindus who profess Vaishnavism worship only one God whom they call Rama, Hari and *Krishna*, the latter being his '*ishta devata*' or personal god. They are not three gods, but one God with three names. They differ from a Saivite who worships Siva especially in the form of '*Siva lingam*' as her or his god. Siva's other names are *Hara* (killer), *Nataraja* (dancer), *Mahesha* (the great Lord), etc. Siva's *sakti* is known as *Devi*, *Uma*, *Parvati* and *Ambika*; *Durga*; *Kali* and *Sitali* - the latter two being the fierce aspects of *sakti*. Only the *Kayastas*, the *Kalitas*, the *Keots*, the *Koches* and some of the Brahmins are initiated in the *satras* - not others, even if they are Vaishnavites. There are some *satras* meant also for married *bhakats* with their families.

2 - Man tends to be what he eats

A celibate Vaishnavite devotee should be a tight rope walker, balancing his way between the twin abysses of laxity and excessive austerity. At present the devotees in *satras* do not eat meat of any kind. Fish may be eaten, but not all kinds of fish. They do not take eggs, onion, and garlic. Liquor is strictly forbidden. So is tobacco. But chewing of arecanuts and betel leaves with lime is very common. Guests are generally welcomed by offering arecanut and betel leaf. To receive a piece of arecanut and betel leaf from a revered person is considered as an act of great favour shown to the receiver.

After Nama's experiences with *bhakats* or devotees - living a simple and detached life, doing humble works, eating food conducive to the life they have opted for, he is inclined to believe that man is what he *eats*; he is what he *does* - both of which lead him to the way he *thinks*.

3 - Freedom within celibate Life

Although the devotee in a *satra* is not bound by any vow, he is expected to live a celibate life. However if he feels like marrying he is free to leave his *satra* and marry. While visiting the other *satras* in Majuli Nama held long discourses with *goxhains* and *bhakats* with a view to know more of their celibate life. In Nama's visit to Auniati Brahmin *satra*, the biggest one, where at that

time there were approximately 600 celibate devotees, the *bhakats* told him that in the past ten years only one devotee left the *satra* with the intention of marrying. From his conversations with the *bhakats* of various *satras* he found out that most of them seemed to enjoy the freedom of the children of God within the celibate life they lived.

It may be mentioned here that devotees living a household life outside the *satras* are not bound by all the rules applicable to *kevaliya* or celibate *satras*. However, they too are exhorted to observe certain rules all of which are not possible to mention here.

4 - Discourse with a 'Burha Bhakat'

Nama's visits to the various *satras* and the study he made took him to an unknown world of life lived with God. He then returned to Jorhat and went to see the *satra* at Titabar. Some of his experiences with the devotees, but especially with a *Burha Bhakat* Kontiram Sarma by name, are worth mentioning here. This man of God, well educated and enlightened left a great impression on Nama. Nama spent about three hours with him. Kontiram Sarma might have been about 80 years old. The latter took his seat on a square mat on the floor. Behind him was enthroned the holy book *Bhagavata*. Nama sat in front of him cross-legged. "You

seem to have been educated in the Western way and may be used to the Western ways," said Kontiram Sarma. "In our *satras* we have no furniture - no benches, no chairs or tables...well, let us come to the point - what made you come to see us here?" Nama introduced himself as a Christian - a Catholic priest belonging to Don Bosco Society and said that he came with the intention of learning something about the *satra* way of life. 'There are so many things, which I do not know,' said Nama. "You said you are a Christian," said Kontiram. "First of all will you tell me something about **Christ?**, asked the revered man. "Although I have read some books including the Bible, it all happened many years ago during my college studies," said Kontiram. Nama was very pleased to give in short the life of Jesus Christ, stressing His sufferings, death and above all His resurrection. He concluded by stating that now the Risen Jesus Christ lives among us. *He is alive.*" Kontiram listened very attentively. "Thank you, *bhaiti* or little brother. I love Jesus Christ and people who live like Him; and have been always moved by his love for sinners... Before I start my discourse let us pray." So saying, he closed his eyes and prayed:

*Aum Bhur-Bhuvah-Svaha
Tat-Savitur-Varenyam
Bhargo-Devasya-Dhimahi
Dhiyo-Yonah Prachodayat*

(Salutations to the *Word*, which is present in the earth,
The heavens and that which is beyond.
Let us meditate on the glorious splendour of that divine
Giver of Life. May He illuminate our meditation.)

After the famous *Gayatri Mantra* Kontiram Sarma
said, "I am not a man who talks much, but since you took
the trouble of coming here, I only would like to say the
following": He then began prayerfully his discourse in
Assamese as follows, and Nama like a disciple sat
cross-legged before him with a pen and a note book.
The saint began:

Aum Bhur Bhuvah -Svaha

The only One the Almighty is with us, He lives in us.
His Word had been always in the world - in all.
The Word is alive, the Word evolves
and rises to new life. *Aum...*

You, my '*bhaiti*' (little brother)
and I an unworthy servant -
We sit at a distance - you there and I here,
This space is an illusion -
We are very close, we are one.
You and I, and the whole creation -
All are closely united, related. *Aum...*

We are one with the One,
if only we shed our ego and reach our true self.
But we fear to lose our ego.

We are like hailstones falling into the sea;
We are frightened to die - die to self;
The hailstones lose their identity,
Yes, a sort of death takes place,
But from death a richer life follows. *Aum...*

We have too many religions in the world,
but very little religious experience.
To experience Him, we should be
like a wood filled with water and worms.
When put into fire the wood squeaks
and perspires - out go the worms.
The same thing will happen to us
when we experience the only One. *Aum...*

Why in the name of religion
'religious' people go about conquering?
All religions come from the same source -
Even as branches originate from the same trunk.
Why then mudslinging?
Why do we ignite animosities among people?
The only One is in all - in Hindus, Muslims,
Buddhists, Christians, Jains. *Aum...*

The one tree allows birds of all hues
to sit and jump and chirp and make love
All the leaves of the same tree
open up to the one sun and receive its warmth.
They grow, become yellow and fall down
to be manure and return to the tree.
There is no rivalry, no fight or bloodshed -
all live for others' enrichment. *Aum...*

Among the four Vedas, Rigveda is the oldest,
and the greatest of the four.
It evolved from 2600 to 1500 B.C.
In 1500 B.C. there evolved the Sanskrit language.
Letters were evolved and Saint Badarayana Krishna
did the monumental work -
He compiled hymns and aphorisms of Veda
into a book form. *Aum...*

The Vedas speak of the Creator,
who protects the world from evils and sins.
He works through His saints the entire world over-
North - south - east - west,
In all climes - hot and cold.
He does this to suit peoples of cultures myriad.
Thus no religion is superior, no one inferior -
All are paths to reach the One.
Some trees and flowers grow well in the West,
but may not suit in the East.
Some plants grow well in our *Bharat*
and may not do well in the U.S.A.
So, why do we compare?
Why do we uproot or destroy? Why frown at?
His face is seen in the Vedas,
in the Upanishads, in the Bible, in the Koran.

Aum.... Aum...Santi...Santi... (long pause)

The discourse might seem to have been rather short,
but with the saint's long pause and prayers in between, it
came to be rather long. As for Nama excruciating pain

began to develop on his knees. So he gently stretched his legs forward. No sooner he stretched his legs than the saint said gently, "*bhaiti*, (little brother) please do not mind - with your legs stretched towards me you are not showing disrespect to me, but to our holy book *Bhagavata* kept enthroned behind me." Nama said, 'sorry', and withdrawing his legs, placed them towards his left side. At this again still more gently the holy man said, 'now you are showing disrespect to our *namghar* which is situated on your left side yonder there.' Silently Nama said to himself: '*with the mystics reason disappears*.' He then stood up. Kontiram also got up saying softly, '*Namo...Namo*'... Then with a smile he said, "It's already noon and all the *bhakats* go to the *namghar*. Let us also go"... The *namghar* was in the middle of the rectangular shaped *satra*. Since it was drizzling Nama opened his umbrella. At this one of the *bhakats* who was going towards the *namghar* told Nama, "May we go like humble servants to meet the great God of ours - let us not open our umbrella." At once Nama closed his umbrella. In the *namghar* the *bhakats* through their *namprasanga*⁵⁴ sang the praises of the Names of Krishna (God). For Nama it was like a Charismatic prayer. He sat, cross-legged near Kontiram Sarma. This venerable old man singing and praising God with the clapping of his hands seemed to be in a

world not of mortals, but of angels. Although *bhakats* are not compelled to go for the *namprasanga* at noon nearly half of the 70 *bhakats* of the *satra* were present.

After the '*namprasanga*' as all got out of the *namghar* Nama got a chance to have a chat with the *bhakats*. Sitting in the open ground under a tree Nama introduced himself to the devotees. He then asked them a few questions as to their life in the *satra*. Without going into the details of the talk, Nama found the whole lot happy with their life in the *satra*. There were young boys from eight to fifteen years, and *bhakats* who were initiated from 20 to 70 years up. They said that their only aim as devotees or *bhakats* was to live a life of devotion to Krishna - to keep his holy Name always on their lips. They said that they did some work such as ploughing and cultivating their small plots of land, besides making baskets, mats, etc.

After the noon day *namprasanga*, one of the *Burha Bhakats* invited Nama to his *baha* for meal. It was a spacious room with no furniture. Ready-made dry cowdung was there. A young devotee mixed some of it with water and rubbed the place where Nama was going to squat. A handful of the mixture was also sprinkled in the room. A square mat was spread out for squatting down. In came hot rice, *dhal* and some vegetable curry -

all in brass plates, as clean as they could be. Nama enjoyed the pure vegetarian meal, simple and tasty.

Cleanliness for the inmates seemed to be something divine. There was no foul smell of anything whatever either in the *baha* or outside of it. Nama found no toilets or bathrooms nearby. When enquired where the toilets were, he was told that when a *bhakat* felt the need to attend to the call of nature, he would betake himself to some bushes nearby where water was available. While sitting he would make sure that he sat facing the north or the south, and kept his mouth tightly closed.

Before leaving the Kamalabari *satra* in Titabur, Nama wished goodbye to Kontiram Sarma. "*Bhaiti*," the holy man said, "Please do come and see us as often as possible. There is something special with your ways and I like them." Once when Nama went to see this holy man and told him that he would be going home and would return only after a month or so, the latter embraced him and said, "By the time you return I cannot say that I will be here in this world." Pointing to heaven and with moistened eyes he said, "By that time I might have already gone to my Maker in heaven." Then the saint added: "My little brother, I am pleased to compare you to an empty tea cup - you are open to receive. Try if you can to hear the clap of one hand. Go beyond words and

actions, beyond people and their faces, beyond yourself and your achievements. See the unseen and untrodden path. Discover the sense of the sacred and of cosmic unity. Always love silence and solitude." That was the last time Nama saw the saint, for when he returned from home Kontiram was no more on this planet - he was with his Creator in heaven.

5 - Beyond *satras* and Assam

After Nama's experience with the Vaishnavite Hindus in Majuli as well as in other parts of Assam like Dekiakhowa *Namghar* near Teok - Jorhat, Bardowa *Namghar* in Nagaon, Barpeta *Namghar* in Barpeta town, etc, he travelled extensively in other parts of India. He went as far as Rishikesh in the North and spent some time there in meditation, after which he enjoyed the breath-taking beauty of that place. He then travelled to Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, the abode of the greatest sage of India - *Ramana Maha Rishi*. He was a saint who was above the narrow confines of any religion. Nama also visited Tirupati, where he witnessed not less than 70,000 people of all sorts from far and near daily standing patiently in long queues only to get a *darsan* of the Deity. He spent some time also at Guruvayoor in Kerala making a study of the devotion of the people in that part of India.

Conclusions

After some of the above experiences Nama has arrived at the following conclusions:

First, God has manifested himself and His ways to man not only through the revealed religions, but also through the ancient religions which came much before. His presence in Hinduism, perhaps the most ancient religion, and the God-experience of so many devout Hindus poses to be a 'positive challenge' to all who live in a narrow, materialistic, hyper tense world of their own.

Second, some of us might have grown up with the feeling that we alone possess the true religion, whatever that religion may be, and that there is no other religion outside ours. It is time that one began to discover God and the divine also outside her or his religion. If we do so, it will make our world a better world to live in.

Third, Nama tends to believe that many of us have to make a sincere effort to be humble servants of each other. Nobody has the monopoly of truth. We are called upon to share our spiritual riches with other people, and learn from them. This will mean that some of us will have to give up our pride and conquest type of approach.

Fourth, Nama believes that trying to 'convert' those who have a rich God-experience and bringing them to a

materialistic and ritualistic type of religion, whatever that may be, will not be beneficial to them - nay it may even be harmful to them.

Fifth, what some of us Christians could do is to '*convert ourselves*' and if the Spirit so inspires, try to become like the '*rishis*' (seers) of old. For this we have to take time to discover the '*Brahman*', the '*Atman*' within us that would reveal to us our '*Ishta Devata*' or personal God Jesus Christ.

Sixth, Nama feels that the clergy in India should try to be Indian and shed much of their Western-ness. Moreover as far as possible they should avoid following a materialistic approach; else there will be pitfalls of losing their inner vitality. A coconut without its sweet and thirst-quenching water and kernel is of no use whatever.

Seventh, the simple and detached life of hundreds of Vaishnavite devotees is a challenge to our materialistic world. Genuine devotees, who may be Hindus or Christians or Muslims, or Buddhists or Jains, are like a dancer or a musician. They have been freed from their ego and respond to the rhythm of nature within and without. They experience a harmony within and outside - with all women, men, animals, birds, leaves, flowers - with the whole universe. Sins especially of greed for money, power, injustice, jealousy, hatred and pride

destroy this harmony. The greatest pollution, which perhaps man does not think of, is the pollution in his own heart. This verily is the greatest global pollution and it is because of this pollution that tons and tons of garbage are heaped up in cities over which both dogs and children scavenge for a morsel of bread. It is because of this inner pollution that our air is not fit to breathe. It is the smoke and fire within man's heart that engulfs our mother earth and brings it to its ruin.

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After his experience with the Assamese people and the *satra* life, Nama came in contact with the Ahoms and the Bodos. Both these ethnic groups have left their characteristic marks on the history of Assam. Nama has great appreciation for these people and their cultural heritages.

AHOMS,⁵⁵ THE FOLLOWERS OF CHAU-HSU-KA-PHA

On his scooter Nama began visiting Teok, and the villages around Amguri. There is a big concentration of Ahom villages around Amguri town. The majority of the people in the district of Sivasagar are Ahoms. They are also seen in upper Assam.

The Ahoms are a Mongoloid stock that originally came from Mogoung in Myanmar-Thailand, in 1228 A.D. They were known as Sham or Shans. They invaded Assam under their leader *Chau-Hsu-Ka-Pha* the great. Nama's journies brought him in contact with the Ahom priestly aristocracy class called the Deodhai, Mohan and Bailung. The Ahoms are called '*Tai-Ahoms*', and their religion is Taoism, which is rather akin to Buddhism. It is a very ancient religion. In order to know more about the Ahoms Nama used to take part in their *Phralong puja* near Amguri. *Phra* means lotus. This *puja* is in honour of their Supreme Being. It is very solemn and impressive. The priests would place 101 oil lamps in a conical shape on split bamboos fixed on to a banana trunk, which appeared to have the symbol of a lotus and is called *kui-leng-lak*. Nama found people offering '*prasad*' consisting of betel leaves, arecanuts, rice, ginger, salt, banana, sugarcane, mustard oil and flowers called *block singpha*. After lighting the lamps and paying due homage to them, milk, butter, ghee, molasses and honey were mixed with water. This mixture was then blessed and stirred with the branch of a *dubari* plant. The participants then drank it and rubbed some of it on their foreheads. After this the people brought arecanuts and betel leaves with some money on banana leaves and placed them around the *kui-leng-lak*. These were

offered to *Phra* before blessings and favours were asked from him. The main priest would stand up and pray in Tai for the well-being of the people sitting around the *kui-leng-lak* with joined hands, calling down God's blessings on them as well as on their families.

Besides the main *Phralong puja* there were other *pujas* like *Umpha puja* and *Lailung kham puja*. For the *Umpha puja* a white and spotless buffalo, a heifer or a young bull, two pigs (one black and the other white), 3 pairs of white geese, cocks and eggs were required. As is generally done, the participants partake of the meat of the victims after they are immolated and offered to their god.

Whatever has been said above shows to prove that many Ahoms still follow their original religion, Taoism. However there are Ahoms who profess Vaishnavism, a Vaishnavism, which is not very orthodox. We may call it an Ahom type of Vaishnavism. Ahoms who adhere to Taoism would prefer to have their marriages celebrated according to their own Tai custom which is known as *Soklong* with 101 oil lamps. This is a rather lengthy and expensive ceremony.

The Ahoms have no caste system. However, they have their own hierarchical system, like the *Bar Gohains*, *Burha Gohains* and *Bar Patra Gohains* who

formed the king's cabinet ministers and belonged to royal families. The *Bar Baruas* administered justice. The office of *Bar Phukans* was higher than that of the *Bar Baruas*. The former governed as viceroys and could sanction the execution of criminals. The *Phukans* commanded 6000 men or *paiks*. The *Katakis* were ambassadors or messengers of kings as regards foreign affairs. The *Kakotis* were scribes (writers). The *Hazarikas* had under them 1000 men, the *Saikias* 100 and the *Boras* 20. Besides the noble Ahoms there were the *Saudangs* who executed the orders of the ministers and also acted as body guards. In general they were socially rather backward. Along with the aristocracy there was the priestly class as already mentioned above.

From his participation in the *Phralong puja* as well as *Umpha puja* and some useful dialogues with Ahom leaders, Nama learned the following: The vast majority of the Ahoms have no bias as such against Christianity. Some of the enlightened people among them seemed also to respect the Christians for their social and educational work. However, very few had any knowledge of Jesus Christ and what it meant to be His followers. The Ahoms have their priests and they play a role in their religion although their role recedes to the

background. It is the peoples' role and participation in religion and *pujas* that stand out, which, it may be remarked here, is in sharp contrast with those of the Saivites where the priest does almost everything. The Ahom *kui-leng-lak* is the symbol of an altar; the people offer gifts to God - they partake of the offerings after they are offered; the priests intercede for the people; the 'mixture' they make and which they drink is for them more powerful and effective than the so-called *holy water*. Above all as already stated, there is full participation of the people in the *puja* from the very start to the end. From what is said here Nama realized that for the Ahoms if our Mass or the Eucharist has to be meaningful, it needs to be adapted or inculturated in the Ahom way and yet keeping its identity and uniqueness. Further, after his contact and study of the Ahoms Nama feels that if we dream of a Church among the Ahoms it has to be a democratical Church where the priest's role should be minimal, where the people and their elders should be sufficiently involved in as many activities as possible. Besides it must be remembered that the Ahoms, unlike the scheduled castes and some of the O.B.Cs in Assam, from the very beginning were a freedom loving people and were masters of their own destiny. Even after their invasion into Assam, in spite of umpteen societies and cultures myriad in Assam, they

succeeded to a great extent to keep their own uniqueness up to date. It is also worthwhile to remember that since their religion is a very ancient one, the majority of them are rooted in their centuries old customs and practices, if not in religion strictly speaking. Hence it may not be very easy for them to do away with their ancient customs and adopt foreign ways of worship. Here comes the necessity of inculturation as already mentioned. Due to these reasons Nama feels that in religious matters the majority of the Ahoms may not feel at home in a priest dominated Catholic Church. Catholic Worship as performed at present may not be easily '*digested*' by them. However Nama feels that if our Catholic worship is truly inculturated into the Ahom culture without losing at the same time its identity and if the *Word of God* is given due priority in all our worship, the Ahoms will make good Christians and will remain committed to Christ.

THE BIG MOTHER-TRIBE

As a young priest Nama used to tour Bodo villages in Dhekiajuli and Udalguri parishes with his mentor Bishop Orestes Marengo, sdb. Bishop Marengo was a person who loved all his sheep. But it will not be wrong if Nama were to say that he had a special love for the Bodos. He spoke their language. Like Bishop Marengo Nama too

nursed very positive feelings towards the Bodos. Although he was not posted in a Bodo parish, Nama had very useful interactions with some of the Bodo leaders, as well as with a few priests in Bongaigaon diocese.

The Bodos are of Mongolian origin belonging to the great Tibeto-Burman family of the Indo-Chinese group. They migrated in the dim past to Assam, and are the oldest tribe in Assam. As such they can be called the real '*Adim vasis of Assam*' or the original settlers of Assam. The Bodos ruled an empire, and put up a stiff resistance against the Ahoms.

The Bodos are the big '*mother tribe*' of many other tribes, both in Assam and in many other states especially in the North-East. The tribes that are akin to the Bodos as regards dialect, dress, manners, etc. are the Dimasas alias the Kacharis from Cachar, the Rabhas, the Meches, the Lalungs, the Tripuris, the Garos and the Deuris. The Chutyas and the Morans do not come under the Bodo umbrella. The same thing can be said of the Misings, who being originally an Arunachal Pradesh tribe have very little similarity with the Bodos.

In course of time there took place a big exodus from the Bodos. The present Koches and the Rajbangshis

were originally Bodos. King Nar Narayan and his general Chilarai were Bodos, and the Bodo people who were their subjects came to be known as Koches and Rajbangshis. They accepted Vaishnavism and were assamesised. By so doing they lost their Bodo identity. At present they are demanding scheduled tribe status. The present Sonwal Kacharis also were originally Bodos. They are a scheduled tribe.

The Bodos who kept their original identity up to the present time are considered as the real Bodos, as we understand. They speak Bodo language, wear the Bodo dress, especially the women their traditional *dokhana*, woven by the Bodo womenfolk themselves, who happen to be the best weavers of Assam. Besides Assam the Bodos are spread over Nagaland, Meghalaya, Nepal and W. Bengal. Very few Bodos are seen in Arunachal Pradesh. There are no Bodos in Manipur and Mizoram.

As regards the religion of the Bodos, they basically worshipped Lord Siva who is known as *Sibrai* or *Burha Bathow*. They also worship a cactus type of plant called *Sijou*. This is the ancient tribal religion of the Bodos. The *Bathow* worshippers offer their God rice beer called *zumay*, fruits, and sacrifice pigeons, ducks, male goats and pigs.

A certain *Kallicharan Mech* went to W. Bengal and brought into the Bodo community the *Brahmo cult*. It was based on Vedic cult without the sacrifice of birds and animals. Besides religion he brought also business, education and social reform. Kallicharan saved the Bodos from Islam and en masse conversion to Vaishnavism and Assamesisation. It is because of him that the Bodos got scheduled tribe status in Assam. Kallicharan represented the Bodos in the Simon Commission, and is considered as the *gurudev of the Bodos*. Generally the Bodos who take *Brahmo cult* suffix *Brahmo* after their names. However, there are also Bodos who keep their own titles and still belong to *Brahmo cult*.

According to Dr. Robin Chandra Brahmo from Kokrajhar and a group of Bodo leaders whom Nama interviewed on 23rd July 2006, a little more than one-third of the Bodos practise their ancient Bathow tribal religion, about one-third Brahmo cult and one-third belong to Christianity. These are the real Bodos and according to Dr. R.C.Brahmo the Bodos number approximately eighteen lakhs. He feels that the official census does not give the correct number of the Bodos. Among the Christians studies made by Nama in 2006 shows that the Bodo Catholics in the diocese of

Bongaigaon number about 15,000 and the total number of Bodo Catholics does not seem to exceed 40,000, whereas the Protestants are more than 300,000.

According to the above-mentioned Bodo leaders whom Nama contacted, the Bodos had their own original script, and some remnants of them can still be deciphered in Dimapur. They feel that some external forces were at work to obliterate the originality of the Bodos. They also stated that although the Bodos use the Devanagiri script, in the heart of hearts they are not happy with it. The name '*Bodo*' according to them seems to have derived from a river called '*bodo*' somewhere in their original homeland. According to Edward Gait⁵⁶ 'the word *Bodo* or *Bodophisa* means sons of the Bodos.'

The Bodos have no caste system. Their titles like Daimary, Basumatary, Mushahary, Narziary, Ramsiary, etc. all ending in *E*, have some reference to mother earth. No one group is superior to another. All are equal and are considered as such.

As regards the character of the Bodos, from his contact with them Nama found them a strong and sturdy people, hefty and well built. The women are as industrious as men and feel themselves equal to men. The Bodos have a rather yellow complexion with large

noses and prominent cheek bones. Generally they tend to be rather hot tempered, but quickly recover themselves. Like many other tribal people they seem to be not very purposeful. They are good at organization. They love music, dancing and social involvement. They are good in using musical instruments, especially the flute which they call *siphung*. They also use the drum (*kam*) and a kind of violin called *serjah*. The Bodos are generally truthful. Unlike some other tribals who may sacrifice truth and have recourse to telling lies in order not to betray one of their own, Nama's experience with the Bodos has shown that they prefer to differ among themselves, but not to tell lies for the sake of the group. This shows their strong and independent character. Generally they do not steal. Nama has found in the Bodo villages of Udalguri district people living without any boundaries like fencing or even small drains or '*nalas*' to differentiate one's property from those of others.

The Bodos are a clean people. In the villages of Udalguri Nama visited most of the families have their toilets and bath rooms. They keep their houses and courtyards very clean. They relish pork, but pigs are not permitted to dirty their courtyards. Nama watched with a sense of wonder girls moving behind their chickens to clean their droppings from the courtyard lest after stamping over them the dirt be carried into the house.

As regards their morality, Nama agrees with S. Barkataki who says that 'amongst the hill tribes the Bodo-Kacharis are the most moral of all'.⁵⁷ Some may have reservations regarding this. However, according to Nama infidelity either of man or woman is very rare, and the unmarried men and girls are more virtuous than many other tribes with whom he had contact. Nevertheless it must be said that no society is free from the onrush of modern ideas. This definitely will bring in its wake some negative traits as well; however especially those Bodos who strictly adhere to their own culture and identity are still morally good. At present the Bodos are trying hard to keep their own culture - dress and language. Thus in the Kokrajhar and Udalguri districts Nama visited, grown-up school girls are not permitted by their leaders to wear sarees or skirts. Instead they have to wear their traditional *dokana*.

Generally speaking the Bodos make good Christians. Unlike some other tribes in Assam among whom the Sunday village service has a rather poor attendance, Nama has seen that the Bodos, both Catholics and Protestants in their villages practise their faith well. On 25th August, 2005 on a study tour of some villages in Udalguri parish Nama saw the great devotion and faith of the Bodo Catholics. During the Mass he celebrated in the village of Sapkaiitti - Udalguri parish, Nama was

moved by the songs and prayers of the people. To date the best devotional songs he ever heard in Assam during the Eucharist were from the people of the said village. In their villages both the Catholic and Protestant leaders confirm good attendance at the Sunday church services. On Sundays there are morning and evening services, whereas on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays evening services are held. According to Fr. Deben the Parish Priest of Udalguri who is a Hindu convert, in all the Bodo villages of Udalguri parish this custom prevails.

The Bodos are generous in their contributions to the Church. In this regard Nama can cite what Rt. Rev. Michael Akasius Toppo, the Bishop of Tezpur Diocese had to say about them: "Among all the plains people," says Bishop Akasius Toppo, 'the Bodos are the most generous people. This is seen in all the offerings they give, especially during the Mass. For the collection towards '*Mission Sunday*' - 2007 in the whole diocese of Tezpur, Udalguri parish having a big concentration of Bodos contributed the highest amount - Rs. 67, 000".⁵⁸

Some may have differences of opinions about the Bodo Christians by stating that they tend to create problems to the Church or priests. 'How then', it may be argued, 'can they be categorized as good Christians?' If

missionaries do not know the Bodo peoples' independent and strong character, there is every possibility of mishandling them. Self-respect and sense of equality are in the very blood of the Bodos. If one does not take them as they are, they may turn out to be like a cog in the wheel. It would be a serious mistake if the Bodo Catholics were equated with some other Catholics in Assam. The Protestant Churches seem to have a democratic approach towards the Bodos, which is in keeping with their character. Because of this reason they seem to have less problems with them.

We hear of Bodo Catholics here and there demanding for a Bodo Catholic welfare Association. Some among the Bodo leaders may be feeling that if their Church authorities can tap foreign resources to get money to put up their residences and institutions, why not also they, since all - both the clergy and the lay people, belong to the same family. This according to one Church leader seems to be quite legitimate and understandable for a Church among the Bodos, because the majority of them are poor, but believe at the same time in brotherhood and equality. According to him the Church would do better not to go for foreign money to put up institutions, which is a cause of division among the people of God. As for Nama, he is of the opinion that this is one of the signs of the time for the Church in India,

and especially in rural areas, to be courageous enough to revert to the Gospel way of life.

Finally, Nama feels that if in Assam the Catholic Church from the start had mobilized its personnel and resources among the Bodos, being at the same time equally open to other ethnic groups as well, there would have been now in Assam a Church that could be proud of itself, a Church that is truly of Assam.

Initially a leap into the dark, Nama was carried along a vista that opened itself to a world of rich cultural and religious heritage. It proved to be a most enriching experience without which Nama feels that he would not be what he is now. Truly it turned out to be the greatest discovery in his life. Nama wanted to share this experience with others. The result is the book "*The Valley in Blossom* - on Neo Vaishnavism and the peoples of the Brahmaputra Valley."

While writing this book Nama interacted with an erudite man Mr. Sonaram Chutiya by name, hailing from Jorhat. During his last visit to this venerable man an incident took place, which by way of conclusion to this chapter is worth recording here.

Sonaram Chutiya⁵⁹ is a well-known figure in Assam. He is a Sanskrit scholar and is well-versed in Assamese culture. Nama used to visit him frequently and had long discussions with him. One day the discussion on Assamese culture lasted for about five hours - from 9.00 A.M. to 02.00 P.M. It was time for lunch, and Mrs Chutiya, a rather old woman with grey hairs and wrinkles on her face came and took away her husband for his lunch. Nama sat down alone for a while when the old lady appeared with a cup of tea in a saucer decorated with a few biscuits and a small banana. After placing the precious commodities on a little round table, she asked Nama, "Son, did you have your lunch?" "Instead of calling me also for lunch," Nama said to himself, "She is asking me this question." Whatever that might be, Nama told the good lady that he did not have lunch, and that her tea would suffice!." The wolf in him was tearing his entrails, and he would have gone at least to fetch the little snack he had brought in his scooter. But that would be very impolite. Standing near Nama with great concern the old lady asked further, "Who prepares your food?" "I see to it myself," replied Nama. "No...No, don't do that," she said. "Are you not married?" she questioned. "No, I am not married and I don't even intend to marry," said Nama. "No, please don't do that," she said with the concern of a mother. "Look here, my

son, I have a daughter. She is at Golaghat and has completed her M.A. I can give her to you - you marry her." Quite elated with the old lady's proposal, and taking himself for a rather young man, but at the same time to escape from a probable temptation, Nama told her, "Mummy, thank you very much, but there is a problem. After marriage when we will be going to my house, I don't think my mother who believes in her caste, would allow the new daughter-in-law to enter her house!" "Oh...Oh...that also is true," the old lady said. "I did not think about that...if that is the case it is better to give up the idea," she said with a sad tone. In the mean time Shri Chutya returned after his lunch and sat down with a deep belch. He might have been wondering what the intimate conversation was. At the end of it all Nama had to leave the old lady with neither her daughter nor a meal.

After thanking his good friends Nama took leave of them. To this day Sonaram Chutya remains very dear to him. What attracted most this venerable man to Nama was not only his wide knowledge, but especially his deep sense of humility. And as for Mrs. Chutya, her unique concern remains unparalleled !

While on his way back Nama stopped under a banyan tree and had his tiffin, which he generally used to carry

with him. Although that day's tiffin consisted of only rice and *dhal*, cooked together with gooseberry pickle, it was one of the most delicious food he enjoyed.

Notes

48. *Namghar* is a Vaishnavite prayer- hall seen all over Assam. Literally '*nama*' means name (of Krishna) and '*ghar*' means house - so, *namghar* is a house or a hall where the name of Krishna (Vaishnavite God) is sung or recited.
49. *Nataraja* is the dancing god Siva
50. *Bhakat* is a Vaishnavite monk or devotee
51. *Satra* is a Vaishnavite monastery, quadrangular in shape with a *namghar* in the centre.
52. *Burha bhakat* means senior monk or devotee and *bhakat* means ordinary monk or devotee.
53. M. Narimattam, *The Valley in Blossom*, 1988, Spectrum Publications Guwahati: Delhi-see chapter 4, p.93 f
54. *Namprasanga* means praises of the name of God
55. M. Narimattam, *The Valley in Blossom*, 1988 Spectrum Publications, Guwahati-Delhi, pp.42 f.
56. Edward Gait, *A history of Assam*, pp 247
57. S. Barkataki, *Tribes of Assam*, p.67-68
58. Bishop Akasius Toppo to Nama , dated 30th Nov.2007

59. *Sonaram Chutya*: Ex-president of *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*, Assam, (1986-87)

When you think you have exhausted all possibilities,
remember this: *you haven't*.

12

WITH THE PEOPLE FOR A BETTER LIFE

MARGHERITA - A HISTORICAL TOWN

Nestling in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh with its famous coal mines and the railway line started by the British to carry coal originally to Kolkata is the Parish of Margherita. It is said that the Italians whom the British people employed for their work used to speak frequently about their beloved queen Margaret. The local people hearing so frequently from the Italians their queen's name in Italian language began to call the Italians '*Margherita*'. Thus, it is said that the Christian name '*Margherita*' came for the place. Besides the coal mines there are several well-maintained tea estates in Margherita. The vast majority of the Catholics of the parish are employed in tea estates.

Fr. Anand was the Parish Priest and the Assistant Parish Priests were Fr. Paulinus Chempalayil, fondly called *Pauly*, and Nama. They were three good friends who could work together, and work they did. One fine day Fr. Anand said that Nama would animate the parish and Fr. Paulinus besides helping in the parish would also see to the purchase of food items for the community as well as for the hostel students.

The first day of parish animation for Pauly and Nama was in Jagun. For a change it was decided not to have the usual confession and Mass. Instead there was a Bible service. The theme was '*holy family*'. After the

service all the people would gather separately in their own respective houses and would spend the whole day in prayer and in answering a set of questions given to them. They were also encouraged to forego one meal. In the mean time Pauly and Nama would visit separately the families listening to what each family had to say. They would then conclude with the enthronement of the Bble, followed by an *arati* and a prayer together with the whole family members. This was a novel type of apostolate and found to be very effective. Pauly had his lunch and the curry happened to be a specially prepared pork delicacy given with great love, but he refused to eat it because of some past experience. Towards evening while returning to Margherita he seemed to be rather hungry. That might have been the reason why he was driving at a rather high speed. On the way there happened to be a military check post with a wooden bar across the road to check vehicles. Pauly seemed to be sure that the jeep would be able to go through, but Nama thought otherwise. "Stop", said Nama, "or else you will go with the wooden bar." With a screeching noise Pauly brought the vehicle to a dead stop. "*Kya nahi dekha?*" (What ! Did you not see?) yelled the sentry standing by the side of the road. "*Dekha. Isliye rokha.*" (I saw. That's why I stopped), roared back Pauly. After this for about six minutes there took place angry exchange of words.

When both the parties were exhausted there was a short spell of silence after which Pauly asked, "*Abhi kia karega?*" (Now what shall I do?) , and the sentry questioned, "*Kya karega?*" (What is to be done?). He then lifted the bar, and Pauly leaning forward, for, he is short of stature, accelerated the old jeep at full speed, spitting out some of the bad words he knew in Malayalam. After reaching back Margherita, Nama asked his friend with a smile, "How was our animation of the parish today?" Pauly just returned a smile for a smile, but a smile with a difference !

After years of experience in other parishes Nama saw for himself that at Margherita also the people went through their practices of piety mechanically. Sunday services were just a routine practice and did not help the people to grow in devotion and faith. Another great drawback among the people was the absence of a meaningful *family prayer*. Besides, the Word of God (the Bible) was deplorably absent from the people and their prayers. In order to remedy this situation Nama brought in a few changes in the Sunday Service as well as in the Family Prayers. The Sunday Service would start with a procession with the Bible followed by its enthronement in front of the altar - singing... *arati*⁶⁰... prostration before the Bible, etc. They then said the usual prayers -

but slowly and meaningfully. Archbishop Thomas Menampampil during his visits to the Christian communities of Margherita Parish was all praise for this meaningful way of conducting Sunday Service. As regards family prayers, in the whole parish there might have been hardly a dozen families where they had family prayers. Since asking the people to say a few prayers at night in their homes would have a quick end, Nama taught them to incorporate into our Indian culture a practice - the practice of enthroning the Bible followed by *arati*, prostration, and the reading of a short passage from the holy Book. Whenever possible, children would be encouraged to have a '*pushparati*'. The prayers as such would be very short - The Our Father...The Hail Mary...if not the whole rosary at least two or three decades of the same. At the end the family members exchanged wishes with joined hands. It was encouraging to see that within four to six months nearly all the families in the parish got into the habit of praying daily. The secret of success was *doing something which the people liked* rather than just saying some routine prayers.

The Sisters of Charity of Saints Batholomeo and Gerosa had a convent in Margherita. The Superior was Sr. Augustina. When Nama and Pauly would be going

for their missionary tours Sr. Augustina would be at the convent gate to wish them success in their apostolate saying that she would be praying for them. This angel of a Sister was not destined to remain for long. For, in 1995 when Nama was in his new mission at Dergaon he received the shocking news that Sister Augustina, truly a Saint, Nama's dear friend, was murdered in her room. Darkness could not bear to see light...A few lines are given here below from the reflections which Nama wrote on this gruesome deed, under the title: '*There is nothing hidden that shall not be uncovered*' (Luke 8, 17)

It was first May ninety five - good Sr. Augustina
cruelly murdered.

"Yes, an innocent lamb," said a voice, "sacrificed
because of sins."

"The law should take its course" - yes, said people
high and low.

But alas! the power of money and might sadly
silenced everything.

No justice done, crime not admitted, no penance
for the awful sin.

Blessed are you people of God, if signs you are
able to read -

Do justice, and confess all injustice done lest sins
on us recoil...

If only you were to spend time in prayer - fasting,
you will be saved.

Yes, *prayer* and *fast* and *meditation* will make you
a *holy people*.

Crave for *power* and *money* will then go, and *light*
to all you will be.⁶¹

Nama was very happy in animating the Parish and even to this day he thinks that the days he spent in Margherita as an assistant parish priest were truly very fruitful. As he was free from all administrative works he could put his heart and soul into the apostolate. The whole time was spent in faith-building mission. There was complete absence of projects and foreign money. Since he neither generated money nor possessed money, the people would approach him for their spiritual needs. The three Fathers Anand, Pauly and Nama together formed a beautiful community - a community of love, brothers who could work together. The three stood together, supported one another, played together, prayed together, and even entered into debates on various topics.

Nama looks back with nostalgia those years he spent in the various villages and tea gardens of Margherita parish, from 15-07-1989 to 04-02-1992. It truly seemed to be the Gospel way of living one's life. The people gave their full co-operation and seemed to benefit from the mission.

Both Pauly and Nama were transferred together and left their beloved Margherita on the same day. Before boarding two separate buses in Margherita town, they bought a long *Erie*⁶² shawl, cut it in two pieces and taking one each left for their new destinations.

Notes

60. *Arati*: a beautiful sign of devotion and respect meant for God or to special guests - can be of flowers (pushparati)/fire/or with both.

61. Written by Nama on 19-09-2005

62. *Erie chadar* - An Assamese shawl. *Erie* worms are grown on leaves from *Era* or *Keseri* trees. The other Assamese silk: **golden Mughra**, the worms are grown on *Som* trees, and *Pat*, worms on leaves of *Nuni* plants.

LEARNING NEW LESSONS

BACK IN DOOMDOOMA

It was Nama's second innings in Doomdooma, as Rector and Parish Priest, from 06-02-1992 to 11-01-1995. It was destined to be altogether different from his first innings.

Change of Situation

It was twelve years since Nama had left Doomdooma. Now after twelve years things had changed in Doomdooma parish. A little more than ten years ago Doomdooma Parish was an extensive area with some 17,000 Catholics; but now the present Philobari, Pengaree, Tongna and Jagun parishes had been carved out of the mother-parish, and the present Doomdooma Parish has become comparatively small. Once without a school - now the centre had the *Don Bosco High School*, functioning well and bringing in sufficient money. With the coming of the school, the centre received an identity and recognition from the public. The Fathers, who were used to living in a poor villa, had now a new residence. Once the Fathers were missionaries in the true sense of the word and used to tour the villages continuously for nearly a week or so at a time; now they tended to go in the evening to a single village to offer the Holy Eucharist and return at night. The touring Catechists used to be with the Christian communities evangelizing them for a whole month; now

they preferred to be in the centre. They used to be happy with the food offered to them in the villages; now they presented their menus like chicken, bed tea, etc. Once the only common mission was the apostolate in the parish; now other priorities had crept in. Earlier although there was one in charge, all the Fathers shared in the administrative work; now there was a strict division of labour. The Fathers who used to be fully available to the people have now less time for them. Above all there used to be love and communion, now there was legalism: yours and mine attitudes.

Nama became aware of the changes that had taken place. He knew he could do very little to change the situation. However, at least he tried to advise the touring catechists to visit the Christian communities more often and to give priority to evangelization. He freed them from other works that they may be totally available for their village apostolate. They did not object to it but in their hearts they did not seem to take it well. This was to be expected because once one gets used to an easy way of life, going back to the disciplined way is difficult.

The Lord Teaches Nama a Lesson

Nama had launched heart and soul into the apostolate among the Tea and ex-Tea garden people in the various parishes he worked: Dhekiajuli, Dibrugarh,

Doomdooma and Margherita. He worked towards the total development of the people who were slow to progress compared to the majority of the Assamese people. They on their side obeyed him, loved him and accepted him as one of their own. Appreciation and praises were showered on him. Although a certain amount of pride was in him, he does not think that he was a proud person, for he attributed the success of his work to the Lord. At the same time there was in him a feeling that he did well, that his parish was one of the best, that his touring catechists were exemplary and that he himself was a role model. The Lord perhaps had a plan. He might have had wanted to teach him a lesson or at least, he wanted him to be purified.

What Nama held most dear to him was the feeling that his people were very appreciative of his work, and it was just there that the Lord struck... News reached Nama from Dimapur, the Provincial head quarters that his parishioners were against him and that they had plans to beat him up. He was shocked to hear the news. A couple of weeks later he received the news that people had gone on deputation to Dimapur to meet the Provincial with a list of complaints against him. It was said that they went not once but three times with their memoranda. To make things worse one of the Provincial Council members sent him a letter with all the alleged

complaints. That meant, Nama thought, his own superiors also did not consider him to be a good missionary; that they neither appreciated him nor gave credit to him for all the struggles and hardships he endured in the parish, and above all for his painful and pioneering work to have a Don Bosco School in Doomdooma. Some of the complaints listed were that Nama was not making the sign of the cross before travelling, that he was speaking in Assamese language and not in Hindi, that he did not look after the hostel boys well, and that he spent time visiting people who were not Catholics. The letter concluded with the peoples' alleged warning that if he did not leave the parish, they would beat him and throw him out of their parish. Hearing all these complaints Nama was hurt deep within. "My own people whom I love and for whom I have given my life, and who in their turn loved me, have now rejected me," said Nama to himself. Although a rather courageous person to face people and problems, Nama found himself weak and not able to withstand the painful agony caused to him. He reached his nadir. Truly the Lord struck Nama at his weakest area. The master alchemist that he is, he knew well where and when to strike. With a sudden jolt he broke both the front legs of his dear sheep, but carrying him at the same time on his shoulders.

Months passed. One full year rolled by since the first news of complaint reached Nama. But no Catholic ever came to harass him. Nobody beat him. The attitude of the people seemed to be just as it had been. He found no changes in them. The work of apostolate also went ahead as usual. Nama does not think that he asked the Lord to remove his sufferings. He thinks that he just lived with them. However gradually he began to experience peace - a peace that is of a different brand.

Since Nama found no changes in the attitudes of both the Catechists and ordinary people towards him, he became suspicious of the hand behind all the deputations and complaints. He came to the conclusion that people would not spend their own money to go to Dimapur three times. Who then supplied the money? There should be a hand behind this drama. Some three months before Nama was transferred from Doomdooma to Dergaon three '*village catechists*' came and confessed before Nama saying, "We are very sorry, Father...We have sinned grievously against you," they said. "Father so and so... gave us money and instructed us to go to Dimapur and complain against you to the Provincial. He dictated and we wrote the memorandum against you. We went three times..."

Deeper realization of the lessons learned

Slowly, but gradually Nama came to understand that envy and jealousy are the two *devils* which cling on very closely to men; yes, they will not spare also his anointed ones.

God made use of a person to make Nama realize that if there is a Don Bosco High School in Doomdoooma, it is because of Him and not because of Nama.

Pride can be so subtle that without one's knowledge it creeps into an action good in itself. One feels elated when he is praised for his achievement, and distressed when praise is not given. Such people are controlled by external agents. We read in *Bhagavat-gita*, "The person who is not disturbed by happiness and distress and is steady in both is certainly eligible for liberation."⁶³ Again we read, "One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men, and he is in the transcendental position, although engaged in all sorts of activities."⁶⁴

When Nama looks back at his life he sees that after accomplishing anything worthwhile he would feel happy. Together with this happiness there used to be a desire to get some acknowledgement or praise from people. This was because there was almost always an

admixture of self in his work. God wanted to purify him. Hence quite often He would send him some painful experiences. Yes, truly in his life every ascent or achievement was followed by a descent or a pain of one kind or another. He is aware of many such instances in his life. After such experiences Nama has a fear as to whether some dark days are approaching him or not. In order to escape a painful experience, for he is afraid of any pain, be it physical or mental, nowadays he tries to speak less about himself and is more conscious of the fact that he is through and through sinful. Every morning after getting up he says like a *'japa'*: 'Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised.'⁶⁵ Together with the above verse, Nama prays with the psalmist: "Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from arrogance. I am not concerned with great matters or with subjects too difficult for me. Instead, I am content and at peace. As a child lies quietly in its mother's arms, so my heart is quiet within me. Israel, trust in the Lord now and forever."⁶⁶

One day the Lord spoke to Nama rather clearly that he has to learn to accept willingly sufferings instead of trying to escape from them, and that this alone will give him true peace.

Dare and Do

It seems that to a certain extent Nama is a man of contradictions. On one side he is afraid of pains and sufferings. On the other, he is daring and will stand by the side of Truth and act, even if problems and difficulties come on his way. In such situations he feels happy for having succeeded in doing the right thing.

There are times when a leader should act. By evading problems in order to please people one may go for greater problems. Nama's philosophy of life had been to do always what is right even if at times that doing something may displease a section of the people, provided one's self is kept behind and its objective is the good of people. The origin of a *gate*⁶⁷ in Doomdooma Parish and the initial difficulties which accompanied it was such an example. It proved to be for the good of all concerned, but courage was required in executing it.

Time to leave the great Parish

Three years for the second tenure in Doomdooma was getting over, and the time was approaching for Nama to leave the great Parish and start another journey. According to the first arrangement there was no plan of transferring him. However, at Dergaon, completely a new place among the Assamese people the late Fr.

Benjamin Toppo, the one appointed to be in charge seemed to be having some problems. Nama was asked whether he would be happy to go to Dergaon. Now with the experiences he gained among the Assamese people, without even caring whether there was at least a house in the land at Dergaon, he said, 'yes'. Thus Nama wished goodbye to Doomdoooma and started his journey to an '*unknown land*'. Yes, it was something like Abram leaving for an unknown land...Nama remembered that 2nd June, 1949 when he left his home and parents for places he had never known.

Notes

63. *Bhagavat-gita As it is*, ch.2,15

64. *Bhagavat-gita As it is*, ch.4,18

65. Matthew 5,5

66. Psalm 131

67. *Gate* - The gate seen in front of the church at Doomdoooma - erected to keep the church precincts sacred

"The mountains my depart and the hills be moved, but never will my love depart from you, nor my covenant of peace be removed, says Yahweh whose compassion is for you"
(Isaiah 54,10)

A CHALLENGING MISSION

**DON BOSCO IN DERGAON - PEOPLES'
EXPECTATIONS REALIZED**

It was 11th January, 1995. Doomdooma Parish jeep was already ready to take Nama to his new destination, Dergaon. Fr. Joseph Thettayil (T.T.) was at the steering. Before getting into the vehicle Nama asked Fr.V.M.Joseph, the Provincial Economist who happened to be that day at Doomdooma: "Is there at least a little house at Dergaon for me to lay my head?" Nama had only heard of Dergaon. He had never seen the Don Bosco land there. "I think there is a hut in our land there," said the Economist rather indistinctly.

When Nama arrived at Dergaon to his dismay he found that there was neither a hut nor a pot there. But there were jungles - luxuriant jungles, a den of hungry jackals, so much so that he could not even enter the land. Fr. T.T. Joseph who accompanied Nama from Doomdooma told him, "Let us go back". "But go where?" queried Nama. Not knowing where to go the two turned their vehicle toward Golaghat, and from there via Titabar they reached Rua Home, Jorhat. There Fr. Matthew Pulingathil, the Rector, told Nama, "You stay here," and with the old jeep they have left for you, you can daily go from here to Dergaon to see to the work." At that time it sounded for Nama like a voice from on high. And so driving himself an old jeep with no glasses on both the sides Nama began to shuttle daily to and fro Dergaon -

Jorhat, covering a distance of fifty kilometers. Late Fr. Benjamin Toppo had left with Nama Rs.30, 000.

At Dergaon Shri Narayan Chandra Hazarika and his son Amulya Hazarika placed at the disposal of Nama a room in their house, which he began to use as an office. The meal at noon consisted of a cup of tea and a few biscuits. After seeing to the work of clearing the jungles and starting a two-room bamboo house to start Nursery class, between 2.00-3.00 P.M. Nama would be seen returning to Jorhat. With a hungry wolf in him Nama would enter the '*daba*'⁶⁸ at Negreting cross road. The cheapest food was rice and '*chana dhal*'. After gulping it down Nama would be seen lying on one of the tables for a much-needed sleep, after which he would return to Rua home, Jorhat. Days passed by. But troubles set in - acute gastritis and a stomach pain which he never experienced in his life. With medicines and sheer determination Nama stuck on to his work.

In a Rented House

After shuttling between Jorhat and Dergaon for a month, on 7th Feb.1995 a small bamboo house was taken on rent for Rs.300 per month. It was blessed by Fr. Matthew Pulingathil. With low tin roofing and plastered bamboo partitions, the house was by no means safe to live. A

slight push would be sufficient for the bamboo wall to crumble down. With an unknown people almost alone Nama thought it safer to get strength from above. For this reason he kept a picture of Jesus Christ under his pillow. Later on Sri Ranjan Pathak one of his closest neighbours painted this picture, which is to be seen above the staircase of the school. Nama believes that it was Jesus Christ who took him through endless troubles and difficulties in Dergaon. Pathak himself gave testimony to Nama that after painting this picture of Jesus Christ he became famous as a painter.

Life in the rented house with no electricity, running water and latrine was a novel experience for Nama. The one latrine a little away from the house was being shared by other people as well. It was therefore quite a normal adventure for Nama to escape to the nearby jungles to answer to the call of nature.

Initially Nama could suffer somehow the heat radiating from the low tin roof, but not hunger. The money given by the Economer was hardly enough to pay the workers clearing the land. Nama thought of buying half a litre of milk, but half of that milk would be nothing but water. The little sugar on his table would often escape to the lady teacher's house ! Salesians and friends would visit Nama in his rented house.

Nobody seemed to be aware of the fact that he was finding it hard to survive. When things became more difficult Nama thought of buying a country cow for fresh milk. When asked for permission to buy a cow, the answer he received was, "Can't you manage without a cow? Is a cow really required?" Nama thought that he really required one! Hence together with his friend Narayan Ch. Hazarika Nama went in search of a cow. Instead of one he bought two cows *Bogi* and *Lali*, costing Rs.1500 each. With that pure milk began to appear on Nama's table.

Gradually the heat from the low tin roof began to be unbearable. Hence with due permission from ASEB office a temporary electricity connection was given from a nearby house. But during the first night after the electricity connection a noise like a thunder bolt was heard. Nama jumped out of his bed and went to the verandah to see what had happened. "Who asked you to take connection from my house in my absence?" yelled the owner of the house who came late at night from his office, and had pulled out the electricity connection. Nama replied saying that the connection was taken with due permission from the ASEB office, Dergaon, in the presence of his wife. "Don't you know that in an Assamese house it is the man who is in charge

of his house?" asked imperiously the unknown neighbour. Nama thought it wiser to keep his mouth shut. That was the end of electricity for Nama.

Nursery Class in a bamboo shed

The people at Dergaon were given the hope that Nursery class would start in March 1995. Accordingly sufficient land for a temporary bamboo house and a small playground had to be cleared. Simultaneously the work for a *pucca* two-storey school building also started. On 24th February 1995 Fr. V. M. Joseph the Provincial Economer blessed the first pillar of the new school building. Initially it was the intention of the Economer to build an Assam type of building. But Nama succeeded in persuading him to go for a concrete building. On 1st March 1995 Fr. Varghese Palathinkal the Provincial inaugurated the Nursery class in front of a gathering of guardians and well-wishers. Eighty four children selected from 120 applicants were put into two sections. The first two teachers were Maria Crerar and Theresa Ganlari. So far so good. But endless and nerve-racking problems or *hurdles* were waiting for Nama, which if he had known, he would not have ventured to take the blind leap into Dergaon.

Hurdle No.1 - Problems Related to Land Measurements

Most of the land was bought while Fr. Theophil Ganlari was stationed at Golaghat. He employed a certain Ramesh Barua, a broker from Dergaon to purchase the land for the Province. With the arrival of Nama at Dergaon Ramesh realized that he would not be able to milk the cow for long since the former started doing the work personally. This greatly displeased him. Nama found himself in a helpless situation. The land, although bought three years ago, was not yet demarcated. In three to four places encroachments had already been made. The Circle Officer of Dergaon Sri Muktiar tried his best to solve the disputes. But often Ramesh Barua who alone knew the boundary of the land was not seen. Quite a few times there took place heated arguments with some of the neighbours. One day Ramesh Barua even threatened Nama and his workers. Hence, he had to go alone one night to Golaghat to get the help of the Superintendent of Police. The police took Ramesh to Golaghat and he was asked to give in writing that he would no more enter Don Bosco land. But Nama did not want to keep a dangerous person near the institution. Hence he informed the Economer Fr. V.M. Joseph to come for a meeting. In the meeting in which a committee of the guardians' representatives played a very key role,

it was decided to pay Ramesh Barua all his arrears amounting to Rs.70, 000, as well as to buy from him his two *kattas*⁶⁹ of land very close to the teachers' quarters. Ramesh Barua even claimed that the *kadam* trees in Don Bosco land belonged to him and that he should be paid Rs.50, 000 for them. Further he added that he had with him a paper to that effect. To this Prasanjit Rajkhowa one of the guardians and a member of the committee, said, "I have never heard up to this day that the trees, on the land already sold, belong to the seller or to the broker. If you have any such paper to prove your claim," said Prasanjit, "you can better tear that paper into pieces, and throw them into a waste-paper basket." With that the problems with Ramesh Barua, the broker came to an end. Years have passed, and to this day Ramesh is very seldom seen outside his residence.

The problems with Ramesh ended, but not the land problems. Nama wonders even to this day, that is, after eleven years, how all the land disputes were solved without going to the court and at the same time not losing even a piece of the Don Bosco land. There were disputes on both the sides of the access road taking one to the main gate, which came to an end only with the construction of boundary walls. There were frequent disputes with an old bachelor regarding the land in front

of Don Bosco *bhavan* (hostel). That too was solved with the construction of a wall. But of all what gave Nama great headache and sleepless night was the land on which the school was being built as well as the plot on the north of the teachers' quarters. When already Rs. 60,000 was spent in digging the foundation of the school, the *mandal* or land surveyor told Nama that half of that land belonged to two families behind the school. Although generally Nama sleeps well, that night he sat up worried. There was no one with whom he could unburden his problems. "If no solution is found," said Nama to himself, "I will say goodbye and leave Dergaon, for it is not possible to construct the school in any other place." Early in the morning of the following day he went to the land settlement office, and told the chief surveyor: "Dergaon will not have a Don Bosco school, for you are not co-operating with me... I am leaving Dergaon." "Do not leave Dergaon," said the surveyor. "We will help you." "Then please sit down in my jeep and come with me to the spot," said Nama. "Call the people concerned and settle the problem, for I will not be able to shift the site of the school building." The *mandals* came with Nama and settled the problem in such a way that the construction of the school could proceed in the same place. Then there was still a greater problem waiting for Nama on the northern side of the teachers' quarters. A

certain Bordoloi, a government employee at Nagaon, claimed that the two *kattas* of land, which were measured and given to Don Bosco, actually belonged to him. After due consultation with the land settlement officer, the said land was given back to him, and he took possession of the same. After that Nama expressed his willingness to purchase it from him. But Bordoloi said that he was not interested in selling his land. After a week or so he sent information that his land would cost rupees three lakhs, whereas locally two *kattas* of land should not cost more than Rs.60,000. Nama replied that he was not interested in purchasing his land.

After three years Bordoloi's wife with the connivance of Dergaon land settlement officer, came demanding that the land should again be measured ! Instead of giving in to her ridiculous demands Nama approached the higher authority, the Deputy Commissioner at Golaghat. Within a month the Dergaon land settlement officer was transferred. With that Bordoloi's wife lost her patron, and her case ended. However when the matter reached the ears of Mr. Bordoloi at Nagaon, he phoned Nama at an unearthly hour in the night abusing him and threatening him by saying, "You are only the head master of a primary school under a bamboo shed; I am an officer, and I have the power to see that you will be

dragged naked along the roads of Dergaon.” From that day onwards Nama had some fear especially at night, for he was sleeping alone in a class room which was used both as his bed room as well as school office. There was no grill and the door could have been opened with very little effort. Nama told the Economer that it would be prudent to erect a grill on the verandah in front of his room. But the grill appeared only after two years. In order to put an end to the problem with Bordoloi, Nama built a boundary wall on the three sides of his land. Nama knew too well that the demand for re-measurement of the land was to cut across the Don Bosco land thus dividing it into two separate plots. Going from the school to the football ground would then be impossible. This was the last land problem solved and it took place in 2001, that is, after six years of Nama's arrival at Dergaon.

Hurdle No. 2 - Hostel cum residence and 'An expected change'

From 1995 to 2000 Nama's bedroom was the school office. In 1999 the Economer Fr. V.M. Joseph and the building commission visited Dergaon to study where to construct the building for Fathers' residence cum hostel. Except for Nama's lone voice the Economer and the majority of the building commission wanted the

residence cum hostel building to be not in the school campus, but in the present football ground. Nama told the commission in clear terms that such a plan would not be viable, because the residence cum hostel would be far from the only access road, and that the path in front of the school would cause problems for the children. Nama argued that in the actual set up the new building has to come up in the school land, that is, where the hostel is seen at present. He told the Economer that if the building is constructed in the football ground, he would have nothing to do with it. At this the Economer changed his mind and decided to construct the building where it is seen at present.

Fr. Theophil Ganlari, Nama's assistant had a plan to start a rural school in a Mising village some twenty four kilometers from Dergaon. But since this was not realized both Nama and Theophil together decided to start a hostel for the tribal students, mainly Misings. It was at this time, that is, in January, 1998 that the F.M.A. Sisters arrived at Dergaon. Sr. Ivy, their Provincial told Nama that her Sisters would be available for any work, which the Salesian Fathers wanted them to do. With the assurance of the Sisters' co-operation Nama started a hostel with ten children: five boys and five girls. Two of the rooms on the first floor of the new school building

which was completed in January 1998 were used for the hostel children as their dormitory. When the F.M.A Sisters arrived, Nama placed before them the teachers' quarters as their temporary house. Nama christened it *Maria Nivas*. The Sisters extended their co-operation to look after the hostel children. It was encouraging to see the Superior herself coming to help them in taking bath and to attend to other needs. Two of them also taught in the school. True to their promise of availability the Sisters who came in the beginning were very helpful. Mention must be made especially of Sr. Jessy Palliparampil who although frail in health was available both for the school and hostel. She was able to keep discipline among the students, and was a model for all the teachers. Besides she gave whole hearted co-operation in all the extra-curricular activities. After the arrival of Mary as superior and the inauguration of the new convent cum hostel Sr. Jessy was transferred. By the year 2000 A.D. there were in the hostel twenty boys and twenty girls.

The year 1999 was a very busy year for Nama, for besides all the school works, and land problems, he had to see to the construction works of the Fathers' residence cum hostel and the convent both two-storey buildings.

Nama told the newly arrived Superior that with effect from January 2000 the twenty girls who had been remaining with the Fathers could be shifted to her new hostel. After a month she came to tell Nama that her Sisters would no more be available to look after the hostel boys, and that the two Sisters teaching in the school would only be teaching, and that they would not do extra work after the classes were over. Nama had expected that such a change would come, but not so soon.

With the change of situation Nama had to find people for his work. After a lot of searching he got Sanjiv Rajbhangshi as the school clerk. Marcila Hazwary, who had been at Dergaon almost from the start of the work, began to do all the work done by the Sisters for the hostel children. After her marriage with Paul Basumatary the school driver, Bina Narzary took up the work from her. Both of them proved to be very sincere and efficient as wardens of the hostel while teaching also in Nursery and K.G. classes. They were also available for any work. Nama is very grateful to God for these two lay missionaries whom God sent, and without whom, he would not have been able to do the work. It was Nama's experience at Dergaon that when he found himself helpless God through the intercession of St.

Joseph came to his help, and the work went ahead. God never let him down.

Hurdle No. 3 - '*Mising apostolate*' and critical news papers

After the transfer of Fr. Theophil Ganlari to Rajnagar in Arunachal Pradesh, a confrere was sent from Rua Home, Jorhat to Dergaon as in charge of '*Mising apostolate*'. Nama was not aware of the *modus operandi* of this apostolate.

A few people from the Mising tribe were said to have been baptized more into the Baptist Church than into the Catholic Church. This was looked upon critically by the people at Dergaon who happen to be mostly Brahmins. Assamese papers began to publish that the Principal of Don Bosco School, Dergaon, was more interested in converting the tribals to Christianity, and that he was only in name Principal of the school. It was alleged that he bought land for the tribals and was building churches from Sadiya to Dergaon. Meetings were held by the public to enquire into this allegation. Nama made it known to his Provincial that it would be better for the one in charge of the *Mising apostolate* to have the centre for his activities among the Mising people themselves. A second option, Nama suggested, was that the centre for the *Mising apostolate* could be

either Sadiya or Jorhat, but not Dergaon because of the reasons mentioned above. He also added that the said centre should not be attached to any existing institution. Let it have its own identity and be free to bloom and blossom.

There were also other problems because of the two parallel types of work from the same centre. All these caused insurmountable difficulties for Nama who struggled all through for ten years. A few times he even risked his own very life. Fr. V.M. Joseph the Economer knew the hardships, which Nama endured and remarked once, "If it were not for Nama, Dergaon would have been the grazing ground of the cattles of the neighborhood." Besides Fr. V.M. Joseph, Fr. Varghese Palathinkal the ex-provincial who sent Nama to Dergaon understood the many problems he was going through, and had been always very sympathetic towards him. Fr. Matthew Pulingathil too knew the difficult time Nama was having at Dergaon and helped him especially with his invaluable prayers. Nama remains ever grateful to these friends.

Hurdle No. 4 - Construction works and related problems

The Economer of the province perhaps not having enough funds was not able to complete some of the

rooms in the residence for the Fathers, and so they had to be attended to. Nama took time to make a small church or chapel which the Assamese people found homely and in keeping with their culture. This chapel was dedicated to St. Joseph whom Nama addresses in his mother tongue '*Muthappan*' or old Daddy. What about the long boundary walls on all sides? The Economist would say, "Do it slowly". However in order to stop people from encroachment, Nama had to build walls on a priority basis. Thus he had to construct more than 4000 feet of boundary walls. Besides for the domestic workers a house had to be built which Nama christened St. Joseph's home. In the school the number of children began to increase. There were not enough toilets and latrines. Hence additional toilets and latrines had to be constructed both on the ground floor and the first floor. From where did the money come for all these works? Nama himself is not able to answer this question, for, he had neither Indian nor foreign propaganda. There was no project through which money could be generated. The tuition fee was not high, and his teachers were paid a good salary. Without incurring any debt after completing all the above works, he had in the bank a balance of rupees three lakhs.

However major expenses were ahead, because by 2003 a new building or school wing, with more class rooms and a new computer room would be required. Besides for the one who would be coming to take his place a bigger school office would be necessary. There was also the need for a clerk's office. A store room for school text books was another necessity. Finally something very dear to Nama's heart was a basketball ground. Where to tap for resource?

Nama was informed that the Province was not in a position to help him financially. When asked if he could start the new building by taking materials on credit, and that he himself would try to pay the bills gradually, a green signal was sent from the Provincial office. With the three lakhs in the bank the work started. The total expense would be rupees twelve lakhs and more. When Fr. Mazzali Giovanni, the Economer General paid a visit to Dergaon, he personally saw the work that was going on. The Provincial expressed his wish that Nama should not ask from him for any help, although he himself was not in a position to assist him. However Mazzali sent to Nama rupees four lakhs. At least another five lakhs would be needed to cover the expenses. He placed his problems before the guardians of the school who willingly made a contribution of more than rupees four lakhs. Prior to this from 1996 to 1998 it may be

mentioned here that the newly admitted children's parents willingly supplied mud to fill up the low lying places in front of the school. In all for three years they supplied mud costing approximately rupees sixty thousand. The school never demanded money as a condition for admission. Here the readers may like to know the secrets behind the guardians' generosity, bearing in mind that most of them were either middle class or lower middle class, and that at that time there might have been approximately only six hundred students in the school. Among other things the following could have been some of the reasons behind their generosity: There was a healthy relationship between the head master cum staff and the guardians. The parents knew that in the morning hours the head master's office was open to receive them with any complaint. The school had efficient teachers interested in their children. There was the regular meeting of the Managing Committee of the school. The yearly Guardians' meeting was conducted well. The annual Parents' Day was a day of gratitude manifested by a cultural extravaganza. The guardians knew that their head master had no foreign resource. Last but not least, the public knew that money was spent circumspectly and purposefully for the good of the children and of the institution.

Going against all odds Nama completed the new school wing and all other works except the basketball court. Some of the money was paid to the suppliers of materials after a year or so.

And, what about the construction of the basketball court? Even if there was no balance of money, Nama thought it better to finish also this work. Already in the beginning of 2004 Fr. Joseph Chittissery (C.M.) who would be the in charge and Head Master after Nama from 2005, was sent to Dergaon. Nama did not like to leave for the new person a burden that would consume both time and money. Hence he asked for permission from his Superior to construct the basketball court, adding that he would not trouble the Province for money. Although Nama expected a positive reply like: "Good idea, go ahead", came the question, "Can we not postpone it?" Nama thought he could not postpone the work since, besides the reason cited above, the dust rising from the ground would damage the computers in the room not far off, and so the sooner the work was done the better. Hence he started the work. It was completed at a cost of rupees one lakh eighty thousand. Nama himself finds it hard to explain how the money came. This is the reason why he attributed the success of the work at Dergaon to St. Joseph, his *Muthappan*.

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All the hurdles or problems cannot and need not be mentioned. Problems and sufferings are a part of life. In the midst of all these Nama learned a lesson which he can never forget. The lesson he learned is that during the darkest time in Dergaon when Nama felt that he was not understood, and suffered much, that was also the time he experienced from above special insight and interventions. Nama feels that the interventions were not mere dreams or chance coincidences or something emanating merely from one's subconsciousness when the mind is at rest. All the interventions were meant to help him to steer through. True to the meaning of Dergaon - '*Deorgaon*', that is '*God's Village*,' it was truly for Nama a place where '*God was with him*.' And, If God is with us, who can be against us?

Intervention from above - number 1

One evening Nama was sitting at his table in his sleeping room. He was trying to read something written by hand in Assamese, but due to the poor light he was finding it difficult to proceed. A middle-aged lady dressed in white saree appeared, and standing on his right side helped Nama to read. Nama read by himself without any difficulty in Assamese: "*Jimane tumi kora*".....that is, "*however much you do...*", and then he could not proceed. At this the lady placing her fore-finger

gently on the paper, read for Nama, "*himane kom hobo*", that is, "that much less will be." At once Nama understood clearly the meaning - something that he needed very much for his life. "Remember Nama, however much *you may do* (work), that much less *you will be* or will have." At the first reading the meaning may not be that clear for some readers, but for Nama it was and is very clear. It was something based on his life-experience. It was as if the Lord was telling Nama: "the more you are reduced to a *zero level*, to a state of emptiness - of helpless situation, the greater *you will be* and the greater will be my strength and vision for you. The *less of you* is equal to the *more of Me*."

Intervention from above - number 2

Nama was walking towards a bus stand to board a luxury bus for a long journey. The ground over which he was walking apparently seemed to be quite all right. But then unexpectedly down he went waist deep into a swampy ditch. Coming out from the mire, he thought, would be impossible. Besides, even if he did, his clothes would all be dirty and travelling that night would be out of question. "So better give up the idea of going," said Nama. He then made a little effort to come out, and to his surprise he came to the surface easily and his clothes also were intact. When he entered the bus he found

about twelve of his school children occupying seats in order to reserve just one seat for him. Here too the meaning sent from above was very clear for Nama. "Never say die in spite of obstacles do not give up, you will succeed...I am with you."

Intervention from above - *number 3*

Nama got the green signal from his Provincial to construct the new school wing. But he could not decide as to the place where the building should come. One night at about 03.00 A.M. while still in bed he heard an audible voice from within: "Have your new building along the boundary of the land parallel to the basketball ground. There you will get sufficient place." Nama's choice also was that spot. But since he was sure that the said place was not enough for the building, he not even thought of measuring the area. Early in the morning even before his usual meditation and prayers Nama went to measure the length of the land. To his surprise he found that there was just exactly enough land required for the new building he had in his mind. On the same day also arrived K.S.Singha who was in charge of the construction of all the buildings. Immediately the plan was drawn up and the work for the new school wing started. This seemed to be for Nama a direct intervention from above.

Intervention from above - number 4

Nama was travelling by a state bus to Sarupathar in the district of Golaghat. It was a hot day, and he was tired. But the bus stopped some thirteen kilometers before reaching its destination in an uninhabited area. The passengers were told that the bus would not be able to proceed. It was about 9.00 P.M. Some passengers started abusing the driver as if it were his fault. After about thirty minutes another state bus already packed, arrived and stopped approximately thirty feet in front of the first one. Immediately all the passengers from the first bus rushed out fighting their way into the second one. "I cannot fight," said Nama; "I will just sit down here." And he sat down alone in the bus. After a while an Assamese gentleman who was unknown to Nama and who was not sitting with him either, came and taking his hand said, "Come, I will help you." Nama went with him, and just as he was walking the thirty feet distance between the two buses, a jeep from Bishop's house, Dibrugarh going towards Sarupathar appeared. The driver recognizing Nama called him. And Nama reached his destination without any struggle, as an eagle carrying its young one on its wings. This has a message especially in our world of activism. Be still to know the power of God.

There were many other interventions from above which Nama experienced especially when he found himself helpless and weak in his life-struggles in Dergaon. But Nama limits himself to the above citations.

Nama's life for his children

Nama loved his children. With a sense of wonder from that first March 1995 he had been watching the tiny tots growing up. From the days they were rolling and crying on the cowdung plastered ground before their on-looking parents, to well-behaved, well-built, intelligent and happy children, Nama cannot sufficiently thank the great Artist for His skill in chiping and chiseling them into master-pieces. The first batch of children after twelve years, eighty in number in 2006, brought record-making matriculation results: three State ranks, ten distinctions, sixty first divisions and the rest second divisions.

Although almost single-handed Nama had to see to many works, his main aim was to put the school on a strong foundation. For this purpose he appointed good and qualified teachers, trained them, paid them well and demanded reasonable amount of work from them. They had to submit every Monday the *Weekly Lesson Plans*. Insistence was given on *daily home work* on one major subject, displaying on the notice board class wise the number of children who did not do their home work,

'home-class work' corrected in the class by the students themselves, *weekly tests on every Friday*, besides the first term, second term, half yearly and final examinations.

Extra curricular activities like debates, singing, dancing, mimicry, quiz, science, and art exhibitions were given great importance and the children benefitted much from them. In almost all the district and state level competitions the children of Don Bosco Dergaon got top awards. Some of the Dergaon girls were excellent dancers, and were acknowledged as such by top judges.

To give priority to sports, games and co-curricular activities the students were divided into four houses: red, blue, green and yellow with teachers in charge of each house. Chess, Carroms, table tennis, badminton, volley-ball, basketball, *kabadi*, football, athletics, etc., were placed under the charge of teachers. Every Friday two hours were reserved for matches and points were given.

In order that the children may keep themselves fit, daily before the assembly they would be asked to jog for a few minutes. On Fridays the fifteen minutes of aerobics was much appreciated by the students. It was

a thrill for the guardians to watch their children's aerobics on certain occasions.

The higher classes had Clubs: Clubs for Social service, Sports, Literature (Writers' club) and Co-Curricular Activities.

Children have a right for an all round growth. They should bloom and blossom. They should be given all opportunities to develop their talents. This was the aim which Don Bosco, Dergaon had from its very inception. The children in their turn responded whole heartedly, and the more they responded, the more facilities they were given. Nama never liked children to stand passive and idle, or merely loiter about. They had to be kept busy; they had to take part in some games. Victory or defeat did not matter.

An Eco friendly campus

Nama took great pains to have a good and eco friendly campus for the children. It was aesthetically planned and he took great pains to see to the growth of every single tree and plant. Some of the trees were planted at the time of the construction of the school building. Along the boundaries of the land teak saplings were planted. After a few years they should fetch some money. People who visit Dergaon are taken up with the lay out of the

campus the children's chess park called '*Maupia uddian*', Jesus' park from where the Lord Jesus carries on blessing the children, playgrounds, flower gardens, the variety of trees some of them filling the air with their scent, the '*deva darus*' trees helping one to lift mind and heart to heaven as well as to safeguard oneself from the scorching sun. "The whole campus," said a visitor "gives the picture of an *ashram* so conducive to prayer and study." Harmony with the magical atmosphere and environment has immensely helped Dergaon Don Bosco children to be a happy lot. It was a Bhutanese King who said that the Gross National Happiness is more important than the Gross National Product.

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In spite of the continuous assistance he received from above by way of interventions, and not once let down, weak as he was, Nama was not having that peace which his soul was thirsting for. Perhaps he might have focused a little too much on the two parallel types of works from the same centre as the root cause of the many difficulties he was undergoing. At the same time one cannot solve a problem simply by denying it. He tried to '*take up the cross....*'⁷⁰ But in spite of everything he seemed to have been overpowered... With the feeling that it may be better for him to move out than live

without peace, Nama finished some of the works he had in his mind in order to make it easier for any one to come and carry on the work.

Tearful Departure

Nama knew that his transfer was on the way. It was only natural for him to have an anxiety about the tree that was planted and is growing well. His only prayer was that it should reach its maturity and fruition. That alone would bring joy and satisfaction to all those who toiled. So he told his Provincial that besides Fr. C.M. Joseph, there should be one more priest as his assistant. Thus Fr. Rini James was sent as assistant Head Master to Dergaon. Nama then had to prepare himself for a great change over in his life from a very active life to a life he could not clearly visualize. He was now seventy two years old. After handing over the centre Nama went home primarily to make a spiritual retreat. He returned on 13th February 2005. On 15th February, 2005 would be the farewell, and on 16th February, 2005 Nama would leave Dergaon for his new place Don Bosco, Dibrugarh.

Fr. Jonas Kerketta the Vice Provincial had come to announce about Nama's departure. The teachers and children listened to him in silence and then most of them burst out crying. One of the children, Happy Gogoi came

to Nama crying and asked loud, "Father, what will you be without us?" And that exactly was what Nama thinking about. He could not think of his life without his children. Likewise almost all the teachers were in tears.

The guardians of Don Bosco, Dergaon themselves wanted to give the farewell for Nama. This they expressed to the new Principal, Fr. C.M. Joseph who gave his full co-operation. Nama cannot forget the farewell day. He could not imagine that the guardians of Dergaon could be so emotional, and that they had so many tears to shed. Identifying himself with the people, he worked whole heartedly in many places, but nowhere had he found so many grown up men crying during his departure. They came, put shawls of all kinds on him, and crying, embraced him. Nama also could not hide his tears. "Please do not go now," some said, "You may go after two years, that is, after seeing your first group writing their matriculation examinations."

On 16th February 2005 twenty guardians and teachers brought Nama to Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, Assam. After seeing for themselves Nama's new room and keeping in it all the gifts from Dergaon his friends with moistened eyes wished him goodbye, some touching his feet and craving for blessings. Nama could speak nothing. After his friends left him, Nama

finding himself with no one, escaped into the church where he sobbed and cried. He was alone... Was Jesus there with him? Nama believes He was there, but he felt very little of His presence that unforgettable night.

Notes

68. *Daba* - a wayside hotel

69. *Katta* - Five *kattas* make one *bigha*...Approximately three *bighas* make one acre.

70. Matthew, 16, 24

You have made the Lord your defender,
The Most High your protector,
And so no disaster will strike you,
No violence will come near your home.
(Psalm 91, 8-10)

**IN THE BOTTOM
OF THE WELL -
*ONLY TO GET OUT***

DON BOSCO - DIBRUGARH

Nama was back in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh. Twenty years have passed - at that time he was rector with well-defined work. Now he found himself with different feelings, feelings not easy to express in words. Perhaps it might be correct to say that he found himself as if on a suspension bridge.

In spite of everything deep in the well

During his retreat at Kolathuvayal, in Kerala as a preparation for his transfer Nama had resolved to be ready for any eventuality. From within he felt the Lord speaking to him. After years of work as in charge, He wanted Nama to do some little humble work and rest. Nama told himself that he should be even willing to work in the farm or to look after flower gardens. His superior the Provincial was understanding in the choice of the new place for him. But when the time came Nama failed miserably. Days passed by weeks and months. Nama was not his true self. Sadness and a feeling of rejection overtook him. All the religious life he lived for the past fifty years did very little to tide over this crisis. He found himself at the bottom of the well. Dark night engulfed him.

In his new place except for an Evening School for the poor children of the neighbourhood, who up to now were

left to themselves, Nama felt that he had very little involvement in the community. There were times when he thought that the people with whom he lived could have had little more concern for him. However in none there was any shadow of malice. All of them tried to be good to him. But for the first time he realized that some of our communities tended to fall back on the Provincial Directory for each one's assignment, and were not prepared to make some minor adjustment in order to make an individual feel at home. He picked up the house telephone and tried to talk to his beloved sister *Marykutty* far away in Kerala. As he began to speak, words got stuck in his throat. He could not proceed, but only sob. His sister wondered what had happened to her beloved brother whom she affectionately calls '*Kunjangala*' or little brother. Nama had to put down the phone. Yes, the man who had resolved to be even a gardener in the new community has been reduced to this state due to no one else's fault but his own.

Nama knew well that like the purification of metals man needed a purification of himself, and that sufferings alone can do this work. But when the time came Nama found he was not ready for the painful ordeal of letting go... He spent more time in his room reading the Bible. And he did get some inspirations and strength, but he was not able to see the sun shine as in his earlier days.

Used to years of hectic work, and the authority he wielded from his seat at the steering, with so many people around him, now his life seemed unrecognized.

New Revelations

One day he took the phone and rang to his friend Dr. Apurba Sarma in Dergaon and told him about his condition. The latter replied, "*Father, it only shows that you are human - you have a heart to love people...* I used to wonder how you managed to do so much work all alone here in Dergaon. Now you are in a different situation. It is only natural," his friend said. "*You are human...you have a heart...It is only natural...It is only natural...*" These words kept on ringing in Nama's ears and he felt better.

One evening while sitting in the Evening School office the bell rang for break. One little girl of class one, Lakshmi Karmakar by name, entered the office and looking at Nama, asked in Assamese, "*Apuni ki sinta kori asse? Apunar bhal nalage ne ki?*", that is, 'what are you thinking about? Are you not feeling well?' Nama saw in the face of that lass an angel with a message. Her words were truly a voice from above - they penetrated deep into him, and he felt a change in him. Another day while Nama was standing on the verandah of the

school, a small boy appeared. Looking into the office nearby he asked Nama, "Father, is there no bed in your room? At night where do you sleep?" Taken up with the little one's concern, Nama smiled and said, "I have no bed here...What shall I do?" At once the little kid catching hold of Nama's hand said, "You come with me to my house, and I shall tell my mummy to give you some rice to eat and a bed to sleep."

That evening with some extra dose of energy in him Nama began to go by a bicycle visiting the poor families in the vicinity. Who knows, it might have been the smiling welcome he received from the poor people happy with the very little they had, or the question of Lakshmi Karmakar together with the small kid's words of concern, or the soothing words of friend Doctor Apurba Sarma, or finally their combined effort, that were instrumental in putting a new heart in Nama. It convinced him of the truth that often in our lives it may not be those living under the same roof, the scholars or the so-called spiritual animators who seem to have ready-made answers for everything that make one whole. Yes, if only one has eyes to see and ears to hear.

All these were ways by which God reached out to Nama. He would not permit his precious child to be too long in the dark well. The Master Potter that he is, He

knew how to mould Nama. Through a painful process He made him realize the truth that in spite of the religious life he lived for the past fifty years, he was perhaps no better than a little lass studying in class one.

What has been said above can be an eye-opener to us. It is time that we try to go also beyond the established centres of prayer or pilgrimage to find God or hear His voice. We should try to encounter the divine in the ordinary poor neighbourhood where simple people are to be found. It is Nama's experience that quite often he has found Christ's face in the faces of those who did not claim to be Christians. Yes, according to St. Augustine half of those who claim they are Christians, are not Christians; half of those who do not claim they are Christians are in fact Christians in life. Bernard Shaw has a cryptic statement on the so-called '*Religious*' or '*Christian life*' - "There was only one Christian and the Christians killed him on the Cross."

The year 2005 was the golden jubilee of Nama's religious profession. His novitiate group under the leadership of Archbishop Thomas Menampampil gathered in March 2005 at Kharguli, Guwahati for a week of reflection, sharing and prayer. Out of the *thirty* novices who made their profession on 24th May, 1955, the number was reduced to *eleven* Salesians in 2005,

out of whom eight gathered at Kharguli - three were absent due to some sicknesses.

On 24th May 2005 the community of Don Bosco, Dibrugarh kept the golden jubilee of Nama's religious life. However he used to question the *purpose* of jubilee celebrations. Is there anything that smacks of self-glory? He could not get a convincing answer. Hence on this occasion he wrote the following poem:

Sponge Cake

Jubilee ! Fifty years ! Less may be or more,
They call it golden, reason not known what for;
Gold takes no rust - Is this Master the reason?
Or perhaps is it for shining like gold on and on?

The disciple puzzled asks still his Lord why;
Questions friends but all except one vague and shy;
Why golden he asks - why not my garden rose?
Roses though beautiful, hidden lie painful thorns.

Is life all roses? The guy slips, stumbles and falls;
Thorns and prickles hiding rolled as if like balls !
"Hai", said they, "Ahead we will go and lie in wait."
But saying yes to Him, into the lofty gate he stepped.

Rather late though came from the Master His voice,
And the pupil well knew that He truly was right:
"For years spent have no regret, yea not for a thing.
Joy sure to come though, after much groping in dark."

Clearer yet came Master's voice: "If Truth you spoke,
If by Truth you stood, Truth for you not a joke,
Suffer you are bound, suffer with your fellows;
Sorrows taught you to know deeper their sorrows."

The Master summed up final words all too fine:
"Jubilee, jubilee for you is a time,
Time to know how human your life you made,
Not hard like gold, but soft - soft like sponge cake,
Sponge cake for all !"

Prayer with the sixth sense

On 08-10-2005 Nama distributed among some of his friends his reflections on "*Prayer with the Sixth Sense*". This prayer often helped to free him from attachment or clinging to peoples and places. Besides when senility with its related problems began approaching, it acted like a tonic for him. It is in a dialogue form.

Active you had been Nama,
doing your duty best as possibly can.
Talents given you used,
spreading His Love thru' books and songs,
Among people colourful of golden Assam,
washed by yellow *Luhit*.
Undaunted you've been;
you ploughed through your way along.
Fearless you spoke, displeased even,
seeking nothing but good.

Daring you acted in spite of obstacles,
getting often your objective.

Peoples transformed, their hearts above all
And many a place - Dhekiajuli, Dibrugarh,
Doomdooma, Margherita, Jorhat-Majuli,
And later centers: Philobari,
Pengari, Jagun, Tongna, Mazbat;
Dergaon, all but jungles,
and prickly shrubs, den of jackals howling.
Yes, it's now a garden-like oasis,
for children bright and beautiful.
The trees - *hewali*, *devadarus*, *nahar*,
Krishna and *radha sarai*,
Your *bokul*, coconut, and what not -
you loved them - all you left.
Putlu smart little lad truly a gift from above,
you did take leave.
June and *Junali* so very human-like,
Faithful companions always -
Their beauty, their goodness now no more.
No one understands.

But do you really miss them?
Bring in your sixth sense Nama -
You see them all - the eyes of children,
sharp and sparkling.
With your teachers your life you shared,
and they with you.
They are part of your life
and you a part of theirs for all time.

You with them, they with you,
 are destined to live on together.
 So do you really miss them?
 Consider - seems much you've gained.
 In closer union you are with them all,
 a love heavenly never to go.
 Yes Nama dear it is true,
 if only your sixth sense you were to use.
 Agreed - I understand,
 but listen to me I pray - pets dear I miss.

The humans, animals,
 and flowers beautiful with their perfume -
 None you miss. Your sight and hearing,
 heart's love and smell -
 They travel - Up the hills and down the vales
 spread their wings -
 Miles and miles far away,
 and their sweet scent you still enjoy.

Remember Helen Keller's words:
*'Smell is a wizard truly potent.
 It transports you a thousand miles across,
 all the years we lived.'*
 Yes, Nama dear, with all the other senses too
 it is all the same.
 You miss nothing,
 if only your sixth sense you were to use.

You may now think as if you are nobody -
 little to reckon with.
 If so you feel, take a look around:

See the trees truly so patient.
They were with you,
they were for you but they have not left you.
They are with you,
they are for you - a degree may be higher.
Yes higher than humans perhaps.
See them with your sixth sense.
Look closely at them -
the trunk and the branches and the leaves.
What intimacy! Interior and exterior -
what wondrous harmony!
No tension you see, no division,
but wholeness without an equal.

People come and go,
but the trees and flowers - look at them all.
They stay with you. Look well at the leaves,
buds and flowers -
Ever fresh for you,
to keep your self pure and young every day.
Leaves and flowers turn oldie yellow and light
as they come down.
Flying they come down,
and gently rest below on ground fertile.
Fulfillment they find in finishing
a mission great given to them.
They proudly become food for all veg green.
They die - they live.
Yes, a lesson they teach you all -
to be fully alive, be fully dead.

Do you feel lonely Nama?
Watch the birds singing and chirping.
The little '*maupia*' brisk and agile,
the crow black and coarse,
Watch them all, take time and watch -
use well your sixth sense.
You will get lessons,
which all the encyclopedias will not give:
Jumping, hopping, singing,
eating but not fighting, making love
Yes, but not raping,
keeping clean and not polluting, truly divine.
Never jealous, proud of being
what they are - not somebody else.
Never distrustful, never anxious
for the morrow - no worry at all.

Around you people flocked day in and day out,
to you they came.
Yes, in you their problems they confided
and you solved them true.
You taught their children.
Helpers you had, all good and reliable.
They became your life story,
and you with their stories mingled.

Your service you rendered daily to them.
It was a family in love.
A communion of minds and hearts
with you truly in the centre.

May be feeling now, you're emarginated
accepting, but not fully.
Seeing no more at the steering
Are you Nama sad and depressed?
Look - you've seen many in power,
in position, men and women.
Quite a few, alien to themselves seem,
all distrustful, and in conflict.
In conflict with everything and every one -
'killing' to survive.

Trying to seek protection,
behind their false egos and barricades.
Groups pitted against groups you have seen,
seeking to destroy.
They were ready to pass comments unhealthy,
yes even painful.
'Religious' families, clergy-brotherhood
becoming slowly barren.

May even be a subtle war field -
each member driving on madly.
Yes even fighting against self and others -
all for power, position.
Daring to use means all the way fair or foul.
All these for what?
For money, for name, for self-glory,
but all the time saying for God.

After having said all these,
do remember Nama: sin will there be.
You can only say with Nelson Mandela:

*"No institution in the world -
No not one, which has no weakness -
all good and all perfect."*

So just play your game,
give the team your share and pass on.
Your sixth sense tells you:

*"When religion and society are on fire -
When everything all around is burning,
when no answer you see,
Wait patiently - on their ash-heap
the divine footprints to see."*

Hear too if you can the sound of the clap,
the clap of one hand;
Have also the eye to see the path
left by birds in the evening sky.'

Now that you are no more in the open field,
just watch the game -
No comments unhealthy, no rivalry you see,
no jealousy above all.
This is the time to be still, time to be,
to see the Divine in you.
This is the time to live for the moment -
just to feel your breath.
This is the time to feel your wholeness -
atma and *sariram* one.
This is not the time to preach -
enough with all your sermons.

Remember Rajkot V.G.'s words
about *Prasanna Devi*⁷¹ the hermit -
*'More good she does from that hill top
than all of us priests put together.'*

No acknowledgement given you may feel
for experience lived in.

You do see in civil life
the older and mature given credit title -
Consulted frequently, into confidence taken,
and respect to the end.

But your chin will you put down
seeing tricky puzzles of life?

No Nama, never.

With poet W.E. Henley emphatically you will say:

'I am the master of my own fate -
truly the captain of my soul.'

Never shall you say die,
for you are born to live, yes fully to live.

Trying to be silent, speaking as required
and trespassing never.

Endeavouring to cause pain to none -
no never asking for much.

While desiring fellow feeling and concern,
trying not to desire them.

Your strength failing and spirit fainting,
you are no more as before.

Better understanding you wish to see
in your home church dear.

In the big family of north - east dear
you served with all your heart.

For better days you may pray.
 Will your sixth sense help you here?
 Well, try and try. Do wait patiently,
 but answers quick expect not.
 Or if you like make fun of yourself
 by finding the comedian in you.

Of programmes high flying there is no dearth,
 of strategic planning.
 But what of prayer, of *sadhana*- meditation,
 of a journey inward?
 Rare commodities these truly seem
 to be among animators even.
 Shutting oneself from God,
 making of activism a religion for youth.
 With many a devotion dozens in number,
 devil gets what he wants.
 Seeing life made insipid, vitality evaporating,
 he jumps and dances.
 Is not this the state, you ask yourself,
 of my home church dear?
 'Is this going to be the new culture
 of my church so dear, so great?'
 In case your sixth sense doesn't help you,
 here too be patient.
 You may see or you may not see,
 but an answer is in the offing.

Or if you prefer say with the psalmist the prayer -
 *I am not concerned -
 No not with matters great

and with subjects I cannot understand.
Instead I am content and at peace
like a child quietly lying, lying,
In its mother's arms;
And even if the earth quakes and shakes,
It will fall not;
for it knows well it is in own Mother's strong arms.

- Psalm 131

In January 2006 Nama was on his way back from home to Dibrugarh. Three days in the train... 'Let me write something on Assam,' he said to himself. And so he started writing a *poem on the rich heritage of Assam*. The result was his *Xunar Axhom*.

'Xunar Axhom'

Sing oh ye peoples great, all black and white and brown,
Sadiya Dhuburi to and fro a mosaic of colours no equal,
In tongues variant sing 'xunar axhom, 'mur ai axhom'
To Saccidanandam, Satya Margaya, Sadapi Sat-Guru.'

You *Luhit, Dehing and Jiadhal*, rivers perennially yellow,
Dikhow, Disang and you *Bharali* with swanky malls,
And streams in dozens murmuring swift as crisscrossed
you flow,
High up to heavens throw your waters pure and
praises sing.

You *burah pahar* overlooking wild *Kaziranga* sprawling,
 You abode *Nilachal* of *Devi Kamakhya*

awesome goddess,

You mountains with river gods on *Axhom* looking down,
 Let air spotless from leaves million land rejuvenate.

You *Kamakhya* high up perching, *Umananda*, *Haigrib*,
 You *Sivadol*, *Dhekiakhua* and *Bapeta* of *Madhav*,
 All *namghars*, *manikuts*, *satras*, with *bhakats* in white,
 With rhythm clap hands, beat *tals* and glorify your God.

You great *Sivasagar*, *Joysagar*, *Rang-ghar*, *Karenghar*,
 And hillocks *Charaideu* with your tombs of ancient past,
 Tombs skeletons hiding of *Ahom* kings, warriors great,
 Oh *Sukapha's* men, *Shan* valour recall and praise God.

You *Axhom* pride *Muga* silk golden and *Mekhela*, *Riha*,
 You *Eri Chadar*, *Cheleng-Chadar* and many a *Gamosa*,
 You *Hasoti* on men with zest *tamuls* often cracking,
 Shine on to slim bodies' rhythm rear and upper
in harmony.

You *Bor pitha*, *Tekeli pitha*, *Til Pitha*, *Ghila pitha*;
 You *Chunga pitha*, *Bhapatdiya pitha*,
Kumalsaul, *Doichira*;
 You *Tenga anja*, *Kharisa*, *Kahundi*, *Kharali*, *Kolakhar*,
 With your people sing as they relish
aroma all-pervasive.

You *Gamkharu*, *Muthikharu* dozen, *Junbiri*, *Galpata*,
Kheromoni-Thuriya bright, all ornaments
jewel-studded,
Let your glamour luminous and the donas who don you,
Praise aloud the glories of the great King
all glory beyond.

You *Kapou Phool*, *Nahar Phool*, *Tagar*
and *Hewali Phool*,
Kharikajai and *Keteki*, *Madhoi-Maloti*, *Gulap* so sweet,
All species floral with scent air perfuming all around,
With rich and poor praise the great God in you hidden.

All you tea gardens green tea gardens,
bamboos towering,
All you many an oil well, sericulture-handloom,
You brass wares, sugar, paper, ply, jute, *juha* scented,
Sing the marvels great with full throat of Creator caring.

Bargit, *Ankiagit*, *Kirtana ghosha*, *Ojhapali*, *Bhatima*,
And *Nama ghosha* verses sonant of *gokhains*
and *bhakats*,
From *satras Auniati*, *Dakhinpat*, *Kamalabari*, *Bardowa*,
Let your praises the heavens pierce
and blessing shower.

You *Bodos* brave, *Misings*, *Deoris*, *Morans*,
all *Kacharis*,
Indo-Mongoloids, Austro-Asiatics, *Dravids* hardy,
And *Aryans* a lot varied, all blessed by *Sankara Mahan*,
And *Madhava*, with your drums and tals in chorus sing.

You *Magh Bihu* harvest fest under star-studded
Sky blue,
Girls and boys bright merrily dancing in fields all yellow,
Colourful Bohag Bihu, New Year beckoning, *Kati Bihu* -
All you *bihus* with love and colour bubbling praise God.

You hills *Karbi* and *Kachar* ever green, *Barak* valley,
And you Great Plains kilometers sixty by six hundred,
Washed by *Brahmaputra-Dehing*
dreaded and loved too,
Let your waters kissing and killing bring forth life anew.

You drums *Mridanga*, *Khol* and *Doba* to *thapana* calling,
All you tambourines, many a cymbal
Bar-tal and *Pati-tal*,
Khuti-tal music instruments varied
as tribes and peoples,
Play melodies no parallel in all *Bharat Mata Bharat*.

* * *

The above lyrics in praise of the rich heritage of Assam written in English were very much appreciated. Hence Nama translated it into Assamese. Set to music both the Assamese and English versions were recorded in Symphony Studio, Dibrugarh. The cassettes, which came out ***Xunar Axhom***, or Golden Assam, were released on 20th May 2006 in Don Bosco hall, Dibrugarh in the presence of eminent people from the town. Sri Prasanta Bordoloi, one of the well-known composers

and musicians of Dibrugarh before releasing the cassette spoke in glowing terms on the efforts made by Nama in composing the lyrics, which speak of the golden Assam and her great heritage. After the release of the cassette Dr. Dilip Ranjan Borthakur, Principal of the Music College, Dibrugarh was all praise for the new cassette. Up to now, said Dilip Ranjan Borthakur, so many cassettes had been prepared in Assam, but, he added, "there is not one cassette in Assam like *xunar axhom* - this is unique." "There is a saying in Assamese," said Dilip, 'which goes like this: *'bhurukath hati bharua,*' that is, "*putting an elephant into a bhuruka.*" *Bhuruka* in Assamese means a small container in which '*holy water*' is kept. Putting an elephant into a *bhuruka* is an impossible task. But Nama has succeeded in making the impossible possible. He put into one poem so much of cultural heritage, some of which even many Assamese people may not know." Dilip concluded by saying that there are no mistakes in pronunciation, or tunes in the song.' "This song," said the Principal, 'is really excellent and deserves to be circulated all over Assam as well as outside Assam.'" Sri Haren Gogoi Dibrugarh *Sahitya Sabha* President said, "Nama who made Assam his home for the last fifty years, has managed to do with painstaking efforts what many Assamese people have not done. He loves the people

of Assam and their cultures. This has enabled him to write the lyrics *xunar axhom*."

Many press reporters who came for the release of the cassette wanted to have a press club meeting with Nama. Accordingly nearly twenty press reporters gathered in Bishop's house, Dibrugarh on 23rd May 2006 to interview Nama.

The 21 May, 2006 edition of *Agradoot*, an Assamese daily, reported as follows: Nama has fallen in love with Assamese language and culture. He has enriched Assamese language and Assamese culture by writing books in Assamese. Noteworthy is his book '*The Valley in Blossom*' on Assam Vaishnavism and the peoples of the Brahmaputra valley, 1988. And now his cassette *Xunar Axhom* was released on 20th May 2006.

The 24th May, 2006 edition of *Dainik Janambhoomi*, another Assamese daily, spoke about the praiseworthy efforts Nama had made for the cause of Assamese culture. As we consider what importance the Assamese people have given for their culture, we are wonder struck at seeing how our culture has drawn the attention of a man hailing from God's own country, Kerala. The man who came to Assam in 1957 is caught up as a prisoner by the natural beauty and folk music of Assam. Through his book '*The Valley in Blossom*' he took pains

to make known Assamese culture and history to people.

Similar reviews appeared in *Amar Axhom*, an Assamese daily on 28th May, 2006, and in *Nij Samvadata*, a Hindi daily, on 23rd May, 2006.

Bosco Memorial Evening School

Nama's main work of apostolate in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, was to resuscitate the Bosco Memorial Evening School. Since no body was available from the staff to look after this school with classes from KG to IV, it was left to its five teachers. Nama tried to inject life into the school by his presence, assembly talks on some necessary human values like *discipline, spirit of hard work, cleanliness, honesty*, etc. Education was given totally free. However, he requested the guardians to give monthly Rs.5.00 which would be used for helping the poorest of the poor in buying clothes to come to school and to purchase some prizes for co-curricular activities like dancing, singing, mimicry, mental arithmetic, short speeches, drawing, etc. Children under the age of five who were selected by a team of Nurses and a Doctor for health, cleanliness, and dress were given awards, which actually went to their mothers. There were three clubs under the name of '*Literacy*', '*Clean Environment*', and '*Hygiene*'. Each club comprised a teacher with a group of boys and girls.

On Sundays they would visit the neighbourhood and the teacher in charge took lessons on the respective subject. Nama himself began visiting the families of the children trying to educate their parents. Thus his work at Don Bosco, Dibrugarh began to go beyond the boundary walls of the school and reached out to its neighbourhood.

While visiting the families of his Evening School children, Nama came across a big concentration of Muslim families in *Bairagimat*, a place close to Don Bosco, just beyond the Jalan stadium. There were 800 families all Muslims, most of the men being daily wage earners, poor, but having all what they needed: clean houses with all the necessary furniture, T.V., electricity, water, etc. There was no case of theft or alcoholism. All the children attended one or other school in the town, and a good number the Bosco memorial Evening School. They were not overburdened with long practices of devotion, but were faithful to their short *namaz* and attendance at the *masjid* on Fridays. They helped each other. They did not depend too much on their religious leaders. It was a revelation for Nama that people could be progressive, good and upright with very little help from civil and religious authorities. It was an example of a people among whom religion took its growth from the grass-roots, with the clergy's role remaining in the background.

In order to raise the children of his school from their lethargic way of life and to sensitise the neighbourhood as well, Nama hit upon a novel idea. He told his children that they were going to do something new - something that would make them great. At the dawn of the sun, even before their parents got up, they were to have a slow run along the narrow lanes and by-lanes of their villages or tea estate for about twenty minutes. And believe it or not, the children took the idea seriously. Almost all of them, both girls and boys were seen jogging in a criss-cross pattern along the foot paths meandering between the houses. The people in the neighbourhood began to wonder what was happening to their children. Had they lost their senses? Slowly they began to see more of life in their children, and were immensely pleased with the change that was taking place in them. In order not to limit this novel idea only to the neighbourhood, daily before the school assembly all the children were asked to run twice around the vast school playground.

Nama noticed that some of the children were coming to school hungry. To give them food he went begging in the town. However the result was not encouraging. But then something happened. A Charitable Agency appeared in Don Bosco and sanctioned financial help to provide each child a snack during the break - daily a

ration of two buns and some biscuits. Nama thanked his personal Friend who came to him whenever he was in need. Actually He does for Nama much more than what Nama ever dreams of... Jesus is that Friend.

An efficient Diver and a skilled Alchemist! Thank you

When Nama looks back at the beginning of the two years he spent in Don Bosco, Dibrugarh, he sees the tears he shed...the loneliness and dejection he felt...It was for him a sort of *death*. But from that death the Lord brought forth something very beautiful which otherwise today would not have seen the light of day. These carry on giving Nama joy and satisfaction. From the heart that sobbed there poured out certain reflections which otherwise would never have emerged. They are for Nama precious *jewels* which he treasures and over which he ruminates. Further, the tiny tots of his Evening School, poor and squalid looking as they were, perhaps even despised by the so-called rich, revealed for the first time to Nama the great wealth lying beneath their unkempt outward appearance. "*Are you not well...What happened to you?...I shall give you some rice to eat and a bed to sleep...*" These were not words of concern taught by some elitist parents to their children studying in top English medium Schools, but words gushing out

spontaneously from the hearts of the little ones possessing the '*kingdom of God*.'

Yes, for all these and many more things Nama can never sufficiently thank *his God*. While he was deep in the bottom of the well an efficient Diver that He is, He found that feeble soul and breathed His life-giving breath into it. Moreover this God of Nama is a skilled Alchemist. He has his own bevelled chisels for cutting and shaping poor quality metal. Slowly with a painful process the metal acquires a new image...Truly an efficient *Diver*!... A skilled *Alchemist*!... Thank you...

Conclusion

"*Okay, no need of my suit case, I am leaving,*" so saying the boy '*started to go.*' That happened on 2nd June, 1949. As already mentioned at the start of the story, the first steps the boy took were truly the beginning of a long journey to places unknown. Now 19th April, 2007 has dawned before Nama. He left Dibrugarh, the tea capital of Assam and *crossed to the other side* of the great Brahmaputra. To where?... To do what?... All these may not matter.

But '*crossing to the other side*' has a meaning for Nama. What Nama now requires may be to *cross to the other side in his life*. The great God, who once whispered to the boy to leave his home, may now be going to plan a special *sadhana* for him in order to be alone with Him... "*Be still and know that I am God...*"⁷² During this type of *sadhana* if some '*Heaven's Dews*' find their way to his heart, he may put them down for posterity.

Looking back at the years Nama spent in Assam - *among* the Tea and ex-Tea Garden people who extended their loving co-operation, and with whom he undertook numerous programmes for their advancement ... *with* the different cross sections of

Assamese people possessing a rich cultural heritage ... *visiting the satras* from where he breathed in an air of peace, simplicity and serenity ... *with the goxhains* and the *bhakats* living a life of austerity ... *with* friends in mutually helpful dialogues ... *with* the Ahoms the war lords of days gone by ... *with* the Bodos, a tribe verily marvellous ... *and* last but not least with the loving guardians, teachers and children of Don Bosco Dergaon - he can never sufficiently thank the Almighty for directing his steps to this wonderland of North-East India.

On 11th April, 2008 Nama was somewhere '*on the other side of the river*' alone with God. That day while completing his seventy fifth year Nama whispered a special prayer thanking the Almighty for His unfailing help, for it was His Spirit who continuously inspired him to get deeply involved with the people at large and the youth in particular, leaving no stone unturned for their all round progress. He sincerely feels that there was nothing left in him which he could yet have given them. It was because of these reasons that he had no time for mere socialization and chit-chat. The people in their turn with their life and cultural values have also greatly enriched Nama, making of him a better human being. Truly Nama believes that he made the right choice by

saying yes to God's call while sitting as a little kid close to his mother, and again later on when he was eight years old.

Finally Nama wishes all the best to his readers. This book is meant to help them to know more of the peoples of Assam and their cultures. This has been made possible through an individual and his long years of ministry - by his God-given charisms, which manifested themselves in diverse ways among peoples and cultures dissimilar. He appears in the picture with his qualities as well as his weaknesses, showing some of the typical ways he used in playing the game in this wonderland. And the wonder of wonders is how God made use of a sinner, an ordinary person with little or no specialisation for the manifold types of work entrusted to him. He believes that this book will inspire at least some of the readers to use their talents to enrich the world and be enriched by it.

Nama cannot bring this conclusion to a close without thanking *Jesus Christ his personal God* who kept on giving him strength and stamina all along his journey, to *Don Bosco* the great Educationist and Teacher who accepted him into his Society, and provided with all the necessary means to grow, and to *St. Joseph his 'Muthappan'* who through his intercessory power gave

him so many graces even when not asked for. Finally a million thanks to the colourful people of the Great Assam Plains with whom Nama lived and worked as if in a 'home' for more than fifty years, loaded with tons of pleasant memories.

Janette Cole, Spellman College writes: *"We cannot enrich our lives without enriching others."*

Jesus Christ both by his life and words expects total giving. He says: *"If you save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it."*¹⁷³

The above words are applicable to all those who would like to do something worthwhile or excellent with their lives. Yes, life lived for the betterment of the world is life gained. There is more - all those who venture on this project will be gifted with an inexplicable experience of joy, a joy which cannot be offered by any supermarket in this world. May we not then start looking for this invaluable treasure? We proceed with the sure hope of finding it, turning our vision into action now!

Notes

71. *Prasanna Devi*: a Catholic religious Sister - lives the life of a *hermit* on a hill-top in Gujarat...Daily hundreds of people, especially Hindus visit her... She is addressed as 'Ma'. The author spent a day with her.

72. Psalm 46, 10

73. Mark: 8,35

<p>You will never find a miserable Christian in the center of the will of God</p>

Photos



Nama's parents with
his brother
Thomaskutty, 1948.



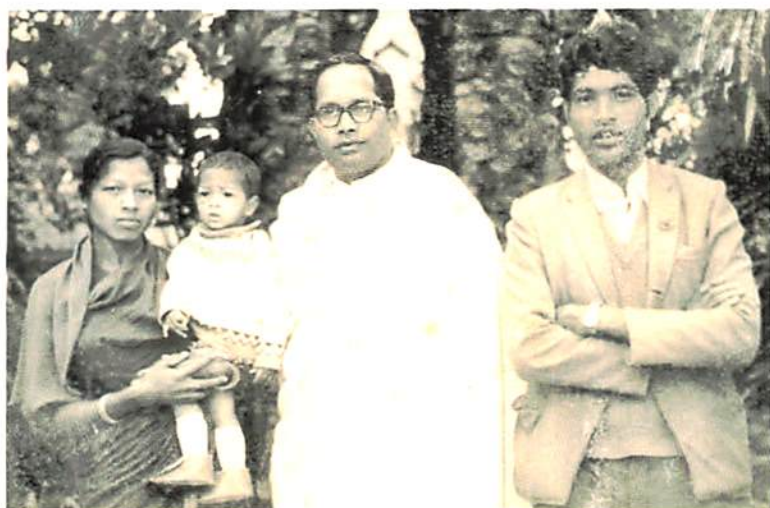
Nama's first
Mass in his
home parish,
1965.



Fr. Dal Zovo,
Nama's Rector
in Sonada and
Dibrugarh.



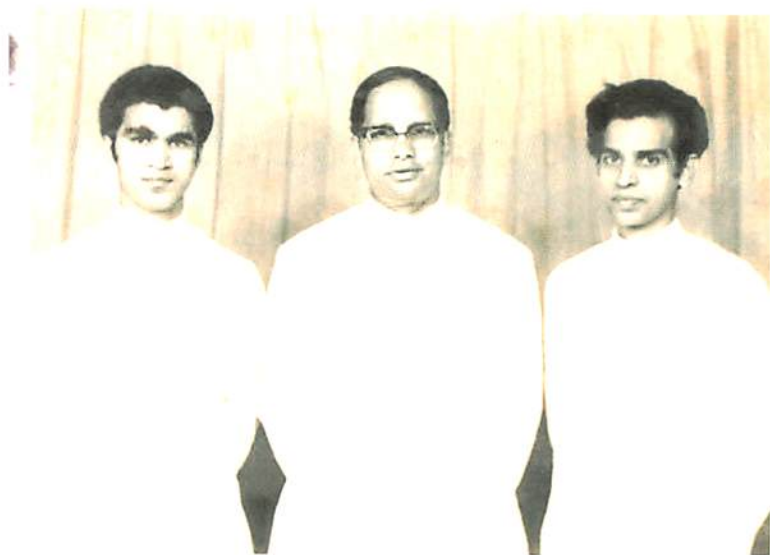
Ordination: Nama & companions - *From left:* T.V. Antony,
M.C. Thomas, Thomas Mathews, Thomas Mattam, and
Nama, 1965.



Dibrugarh: With his touring Catechist Peter Tete and family.



Doomdooma: With **Blessed Mother Theresa** and Bishop Robert Kerketta.



Doomdooma: With Frs.K.K Thomas and Anand.



Doomdooma: Nama with his touring catechists.



Dergaon: The miraculous painting of Jesus Christ seen beside the school staircase.



Nama with Bishop Joseph Aind of Dibrugarh Diocese. As a Brother Nama guided him to priestly life.



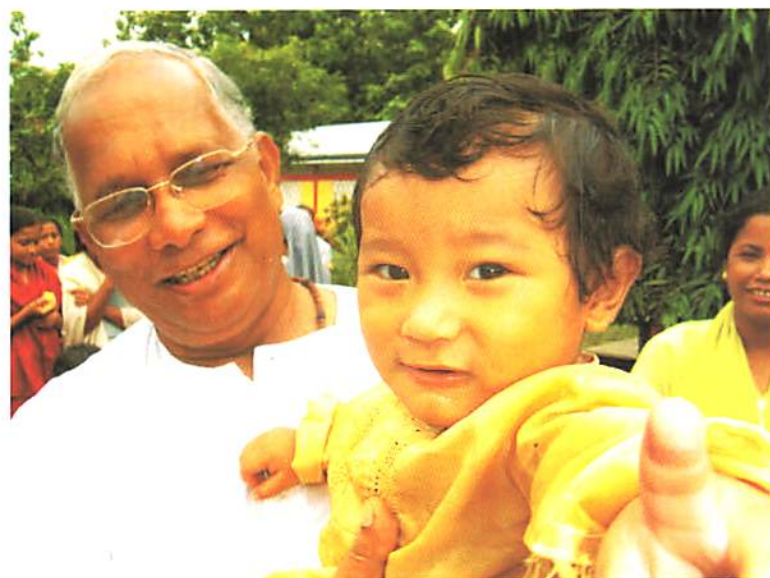
Dergaon: The Lord Jesus Christ blessing the children.



Dergaon: Nama in front of his rented house.



Dergaon: 1st batch of HSLC students - out of 80, 3 state ranks, 12 distinctions, 60 first divisions, all the rest in second division.



Dergaon: Nama with 'Putlu', Marcila and Paul's son.



Bihu Dance - the main folk dance of Assam, performed especially during *Bohag Bihu*. It manifests the cultural unity of Assam.



Dergaon: Nama with Marcila Hazwary on his right and Bina Narzary on his left – two Bodo ladies in their traditional cultural attire – both great lay helpers.



Doomdooma school: Nama with an Assamese girl.



Nama with his sister and brothers, 2008.



Nama with Bishop Akasius Toppo, the bishop of Tezpur - a worthy son of a worthy father.



With companion
late Abraham
Elangimattathil,
bishop of Nagaland.



A Bodo dance: The Bodos are the mother-tribe of many tribes in the North -East.



Dergaon: Hostel cum residence, 2001.



Dergaon: Nama with Fr. Theophil Ganlari, the first Bodo priest from Dhekiajuli parish.



Nama with his companion Fr. N.A. Joseph a great Salesian and a man of indomitable will power.



Dibrugarh: Hostel cum residence, 2006



Dibrugarh: With Evening school children, 2006.



Dergaon: Nama with lady teachers, and Sr. Jessy who contributed much for the hostel and school.



Nama with Rector Major, staff and students.



Dibrugarh: With Evening school teachers, 2006.



A group of Oraon girls in their dancing attire in Doom Dooma.



Dergaon: Inauguration of FMA Sisters' temporary residence - *Maria Nivas*. Seen second on the right is Ex-Provincial Fr. P.J. Varghese, who sent Nama to Dergaon.



Nama's mentor Bishop O. Marengo sdb, one of the greatest missionaries and a Man of God.



Nama with his novitiate companion Arch Bishop Thomas Menampampil of Guwahati.



Bishop Robert Kerketta, former Bishop of Tezpur - Nama's Hindi teacher in Sonada and his Bishop in Dibrugarh and Tezpur.



Floods in Doomdooma parish, 1993.



Dergaon: Nama with Prasanjit Rajkhowa and wife. Rajkhowa, a guardian, played a very active role in solving land problems. He was all for Don Bosco.



Dergaon teachers in front of 'rang-ghar' an *Ahom* heritage, in Sivasagar.



Dergaon: Nama with Fr. C.M. Joseph (extreme right) and teachers.



Doomdooma: With Fr. Bernard Topno - Nama sent him to the seminary during his 1st term in 1975 and he was ordained during Nama's 2nd term on 22 May, 1994 - the first priest to be ordained in Doomdooma.



Nama with Fr. A.J. Sebastian: His words, '*we want you to write your life story*' prompted Nama to write this book.



Nama with Sri Sri Gopal Dev Goswami, the '*satra - adhikar*' of Dakhinpat *satra* in Jorhat.



A '*bhakat*' in Narayanpur '*namghar*' holding the *Bhagavat* on his head.



Sri Madhav Dev's '*namghar*' in Narayanpur.



Don Bosco High School, Doomdooma, with a history of its own - inaugurated on 24 May 1980.



In Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh: Nama with **Fr. Pauly**, a close friend, and on his right side **Prem Bhai** - the apostle of Arunachal Pradesh, a man with a heart - a smiling saint. Prem Bhai died on 28th June, 2008.



Dergaon: Nama with Fr. Matthew Pulingathil after blessing his rented house.



Nama with his dear uncle *Kunjappan* - 99 years old, and his sister Sr. Paulette of Cluny congregation, 2008.



Fr. John Med age 92 - Nama's first rector at Tirupattur, Tamilnadu in 1949. He is celebrating his Platinum Jubilee of Religious Profession in 2008.



Matthew Narimattam SDB, is a Salesian priest belonging to the Province of Dimapur, Nagaland. He has lived among the people of Assam and has done in-depth study into their culture and living. His love for the people made him proficient in the Assamese language. His area of specialization includes: Assam *Vaishnavism*, *Satra life* in Assam; The Assamese people and their culture (Inculturation); The Tea and ex-Tea Garden communities in Assam – their life and culture and *Zen* and *Vipasana* Meditations.

He has authored several books and articles related to his area of specialization. Some of these include: ***The Valley in Blossom - Neo Vaishnavism and the peoples of the Brahmaputra Valley***, 1988, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati / Delhi (English); ***Meditation for Life in its Fullness***, Don Bosco Publications, Dimapur-Nagaland, 2006, and other publications in Assamese include ***Jivanar Sarathi*** - Catechism in Assamese - 3rd edition; ***Sathya Deep*** - on Christianity; ***Sneha Bandhu*** - on Jesus Christ; ***Baibelor Parisai*** - on the Bible; ***Christar saithe aru Christar abihane*** - Life of Sadhu Sundar Singh - a translation.

He has also produced a few audio cassettes such as ***Gananjali*** and ***Aradhana*** - two cassettes of devotional songs; ***Xunor Axhom*** - on the rich cultural heritage of Assam, 2006.

Matthew Narimattam sdb, known as *Nama* in his book "He Made Assam His Home", has presented vividly his life and work of the fifty years he lived among the people of Assam. He spent a good part of his life among the Tea and ex-Tea Garden Communities of Assam, engaged in various activities for their all round progress. Himself a priest, a man of prayer and a great lover of the Bible, he inculcated in the lives of the people a love for prayer and the Word of God which I believe is the key to the success of his work in Assam, his home.

Being in Assam he gave himself heart and soul to the study of the Assamese language and Assamese culture. As far as I know he is the first Catholic priest to visit almost all the satras in Majuli and elsewhere in Assam, studying in depth this unique institution. With his books and songs he tried to reach out to as many people as possible, endearing himself to all.

- Rt. Rev. Robert Kerketta, SDB, DD
Former Bishop of Tezpur Diocese, Assam

Like Abraham, our Father in Faith who left behind what was familiar and dear, at the invitation of Yahweh, Fr. Matthew Narimattam SDB left his native place of Kerala and came to Assam and "*He Made Assam His Home*", spending the best part of his life for the people as a Salesian Priest and Educator. This book is his story.

- Fr. James Poonthuruthil SDB
Salesian Provincial, Dimapur

I am happy to introduce this book "*He made Assam his Home*", a life story of Matthew Narimattam SDB, alias *Nama* who has made Assam his home for the past fifty years, serving as a dedicated educationist. He has managed to do with painstaking efforts what many Assamese people have not done – all bear his deep love for Assam and its people.

- Sri Haren Gogoi
Ex-President, Dibrugarh Sahitya Sabha; Ex-President, Assam College Teachers' Association (ACTA); Ex-Vice President, All India Federation of University & College Teachers' Organization (AIFUCTO)