



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASIAN CHRISTIANITY  
6 (2023) 122–143



brill.com/ijac

# Monitoring and Measuring the Ineffable

## *Religious Sisters and the Adivasi Peoples in Assam*

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### Abstract

We present an analysis of the work of Religious Sisters in Assam, India. They are involved in anti-slavery/anti-human trafficking work, as well as driving fundamentally feminist, economic equality, and human rights agendas within the wider communities in which they live. Their work resembles that of Non-Governmental Organisations, but unlike most NGOs, the Sisters tend *not* to: produce annual reports, carry out evaluation exercises, prepare grant proposals, or set 'key performance indicators'. This raises three questions: firstly, while the voluntary sector increasingly requires monitoring and evaluation, what are the methods the Sisters use to achieve social change? Secondly, the Sisters are not trained NGO employees, so what skill sets do they bring to the work? Thirdly, how effective is their work by their own assessment and outside evaluators? We identify six philosophical/spiritual orientations that shape their working practices and a methodology of accompaniment – living directly with those the Sisters work to support in change. While there are no educational/training certifications, there is a *rite de passage* that every woman must accomplish – the recognition of a divine calling to service and the encompassing commitment of a vocation.

### Keywords

women religious – accompaniment – *Adivasis*

We present an analysis of the work of Religious Sisters in the state of Assam, India who belong to a Roman Catholic Congregation known as the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (hereafter referred to as MSMHC Sisters). Our methodology is primarily ethnographic, based upon the embedded ethnographic participation of one of the co-authors<sup>1</sup> who lived with, worked with, and shared the lives of the MSMHC Sisters for over six months.<sup>2</sup> Our research questions were sparked by the realisation that globally Women Religious (Sisters) are involved in anti-slavery/anti-human trafficking work, as well as driving fundamentally feminist, economic equality, and human rights agendas within the wider populations/communities in which they live. Much of the work carried out by these Religious Sisters resembles that of non-sectarian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). But unlike most NGOs, the Religious Sisters tend *not* to: produce annual reports, release the results of monitoring and evaluation, prepare grant proposals setting 'key performance indicators' for their programmes,<sup>3</sup> and only rarely attend conferences of the NGO community operating within the same social change/human rights milieu.

This raises three questions: firstly, in a voluntary sector increasingly required to undergo monitoring and evaluation – from government oversight and the requirements of funding bodies – what are the *functional* methods the MSMHC Sisters bring to achieve social change? Secondly, the MSMHC Sisters are not voluntary sector employees in any normal sense, so what skill sets do they bring to the work and what skills do they learn within the work they do? Thirdly, how effective and successful is the work of the MSMHC Sisters by their own assessment and that of outside evaluators?

Exploratory conversations with MSMHC Sisters, and local people who use, or do not use, their services, helped to illuminate their work patterns and programme design, the success or failure of these programmes, and the ways in which tactical and strategic goals for their programmes are set. These conversations were illuminating, but they were not able to get at the internal processes that drive an apparently successful extensive programme of social change. A key concept, often raised by the Sisters, was that of "accompaniment", the practice of "being with" their constituency of need, "living alongside" the people

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1 Neither of the authors has any religious or theological connection with the Roman Catholic Church.

2 This research was supported by the Templeton Religion Trust, Grant TRT0273, 'Prosocial Benefits of Religion: The Case of Modern Slavery'.

3 There are some charitable bodies, such as the Arise Foundation, that are aligned with the Roman Catholic Church and accept funding proposals from Congregations. Such foundations are, in a sense, 'bilingual', fluent in both the language and thinking of the Religious Sisters, and in the language of charitable foundation management and strategy.

being supported. It became clear that this practice of “accompaniment” needed further analysis if the work of the MSMHC Sisters was to be understood. To that end we identify a specific “skill set” of the MSMHC Sisters. We also locate these Sisters and their work within the history of the Indian state of Assam, with particular attention to the *Adivasi* population there, and then explore the findings of our ethnographic research with the MSMHC Sisters. We note that the highly marginalised *Adivasi* peoples are regularly excluded from governmental support, and are also more vulnerable to such crimes as human trafficking and enslavement. We also note that a significant number of the MSMHC Sisters are, themselves, *Adivasi*.

### The Adivasis

“Adivasi” is the collective Hindi name used for the many indigenous peoples of India. The term *Adivasi* derives from the Hindi word “*adi*”, meaning “of earliest times” or “from the beginning” and ‘*vasi*’ meaning “inhabitant” or “resident”. This nomenclature was coined in the 1930s, the consequence of a political movement seeking to forge a sense of identity amongst the indigenous peoples of India. Within the Indian Government Census, the *Adivasis* are termed “scheduled tribes” within the population as opposed to “scheduled castes”. Both terms are enshrined in the Constitution of India. The “scheduled castes” represent the sub-sets of the 2,000-year-old *Varna* system within Hindu theology which separates the population into hierarchical occupation-based sub-groups. The “scheduled tribes” roughly hold all those groups not found within the *Varna*-based castes.<sup>4</sup>

“Scheduled tribes” is a legal term, but it is interpreted differently from state to state within India. Under both the *Varna* system, and the long imposition of the British colonial state, it was the dominant groups within India that named the “tribal” groups. Tribal groups were not identified by their own traditional nomenclature or histories. Some indigenous peoples were excluded, and others lumped together with unrelated groups, into the “Scheduled Tribes”. The *Adivasis* are not a homogeneous group; they represent over 200 distinct peoples, speaking more than 100 languages and varying greatly in history and culture.

4 As one of the two authors of this paper is from India, and the other is from North America, we note the parallel lessening of the humanity of the indigenous peoples of our two continents of origin. We look forward to unfolding scholarships that will bring to the foreground the unique personalities, beliefs, histories, cultures, and truths of these, and all other, suppressed Indigenous Peoples who have suffered under a colonial yoke.

There are, however, similarities in the lives of *Adivasis* today. This is not based on a shared socio-cultural background, but on more than 200 years of systematic discrimination and oppression under both the *Varna* system and the British Imperial State. According to the Indian Census of 2011, *Adivasis* constitute 8.6 per cent of the population, some 104.3 million people; there is, however, evidence of an undercount of *Adivasis*. *The World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples* notes that:

Unofficial figures vary significantly but represent a much higher proportion of India's population. *Adivasis* live throughout India but are primarily based in the mountain and hill areas, ... the greatest concentrations are in the states of Chattisgrah (38%), Jharkahand (26%) Madhya Pradesh (20%), Orisssa (22%), Andhra Pradesh (6%) Gujarat (15%) Rajastahan (12%), Maharashtra (9%) and Bihar (0.9%).<sup>5</sup>

As Banerjee explains:

*Adivasis* and tribes also do not figure as subjects of archaeology and textual exegesis. While this is true for most subaltern subjects – the fact that it is difficult to write their stories because of their archival, archaeological and textual invisibility – *adivasis* and tribes are doubly disadvantaged, because they have not been able to claim alternative archives and alternative histories of their own.<sup>6</sup>

There is a common assumption that the *Adivasis*, as their name reflects, were early inhabitants of the subcontinent and were likely to have inhabited much larger areas than they do at present. There is a further assumption that 3,000–4,000 years ago many indigenous groups were pushed from more fertile areas to hill and forest habitats after the arrival of Indo-Aryan tribes from the North and West. This migration was, in the past, termed the 'Aryan Invasion'. This term, however, represents a 19th century narrative designed to support the British colonial conquest. As Witzel explained,

5 World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – India: *Adivasis*, at [bin/texis/vtx/rwm/ain?page=search&docid=49749d14c&skip=0&query=adivasis&coi=IND](https://bin/texis/vtx/rwm/ain?page=search&docid=49749d14c&skip=0&query=adivasis&coi=IND); see also <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/adivasis-2/> [accessed 4 Nov 2021].

6 Prathama Banerjee, 'Writing the Adivasi: Some historiographical notes', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53:1 (2016), 1–23 SAGE Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC DOI: 10.1177/0019464615619549.

The theory of an immigration of IA [Indo-Aryan] speaking Arya (“Aryan invasion”) is simply seen as a means of British policy to justify their own intrusion into India and their subsequent colonial rule: in both cases, a ‘white race’ was seen as subduing the local darker colored population.<sup>7</sup>

In the long conquest of India by the British from the mid-18th Century, the *Adivasi* were suppressed along with other parts of the population, leading to some 170 years of *Adivasi* resistance. British dispossession generated at least forty-one unique *Adivasi* revolts, though many were expunged from ‘official’ colonial records. For example, on 7 March, 1922, in north Gujarat, 1,200 *Adivasis* taking part in a peaceful demonstration were gunned down by a paramilitary force led by a British Officer. As noted by L.P. Mathur, an historian from Udaipur University, who interviewed survivors of the massacre, “It appears that the Palchitaria massacre was completely suppressed”<sup>8</sup> in the British Colonial archives. Little remains of *Adivasi* history, and what has survived are primarily the self-justifying accounts of the Europeans.

After the initiation of the Indian State, laws were passed to protect *Adivasis* lands from outsiders. These laws barred the sale of indigenous lands to non-*Adivasis* and made provisions to restore alienated lands. In practice most of these laws were disregarded, and unscrupulous merchants and moneylenders found ways to circumvent them. These problems are still encountered by *Adivasis* today, though the actors abusing power are equally likely to be large companies and state corporations as well as small traders and moneylenders.

### The Adivasis of Assam and the Tea Plantations

The history of tea plantations in Assam is the story of modern Assam itself. The Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826 marked the annexation of Assam by the British East India Company.<sup>9</sup> The discovery of the tea plant in Assam in 1828 set in

7 Michael Witzel, ‘Indocentrism’, in Edwin Bryant, Laurie L. Patton, eds, *The Indo-Aryan Controversy. Evidence and inference in Indian history* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

8 Interviewed by Uday Mahurkar for ‘Palchitaria: The carnage that took place in Gujarat three years after Jallianwala massacre’, *India Today* (May 13, 2013), <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/investigation/story/19970901-palchitaria-the-carnage-that-took-place-in-gujarat-three-years-after-jallianwala-massacre-830500-1997-09-01> [Accessed on 4 Nov. 2021].

9 D. K. Mishra, A. Sarma and V. Upadhyay, ‘Invisible Chains? Crisis in the Tea Industry and the “Unfreedom” of Labour in Assam’s Tea Plantations’, *Contemporary South Asia* 19:1 (2011), 75–90.

motion rapid expropriation and exploitation by the British through the Assam Company from 1839,<sup>10</sup> with continuous expansion and consolidation during the colonial period.<sup>11</sup> China's closed-door policy, and the ambition of the East India Company to break China's tea monopoly, led the British to set up tea industries in several Indian States.

The rapid expansion of tea production, and its highly labour-intensive nature, required a large and malleable labour force. Initially, the tea industry faced a serious labour shortage in Assam. Local Bodo-Kachari tribespeople were recruited to the plantations, but their numbers were insufficient. The British then turned to procuring labourers from the *Adivasi* populations in Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.<sup>12</sup> Driven by a series of 19th century famines and epidemics in their home areas, many *Adivasis* were convinced by the British to relocate to work in Assam.<sup>13</sup> The tea plantations grew into large agro-industrial installations, yet the original organising structures have remained relatively unchanged since their establishment.<sup>14</sup>

A 2014 report compiled by the Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute described the evolution of the plantations in this way;

The tea workers of Assam and the adjacent area of West Bengal come from two marginalized communities – Adivasis (indigenous people) and Dalits (the so-called “untouchable” caste) – whose ancestors were brought from central India by British planters. They remain trapped in the lowest employment positions on the plantation, where they are routinely treated as social inferiors.

The compensation scheme originally developed for the colonial plantations and their migrant workers – low cash wages, supplemented with housing and social benefits – has remained unchanged. As in the colonial period, the plantations function as a parallel governance structure, with little active

10 S. Chatterjee, and R. D. Gupta, ‘Tea-labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840–80’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 16: 44/46 (1981), 1861–68.

11 D. K. Mishra, A. Sarma and V. Upadhyay, ‘Invisible Chains? Crisis in the Tea Industry and the “Unfreedom” of Labour in Assam’s Tea Plantations’, *Contemporary South Asia* 19:1 (2011), 75–90.

12 M Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

13 N. Vandekerckhove, and B. Suykens, “‘The Liberation of Bodoland’: Tea, Forestry, and Tribal Entrapment in Western Assam’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31:3 (2008), 450–471.

14 A. Sharma and S. Khan, ‘The paradox of ingenuity: Adivasi struggle for ST status in Assam.’; S. Roy, ‘Historical Review of Growth of Tea Industries in India: A Study of Assam Tea’, *International Conference on Social Science and Humanity* 5:1 (2011), VI-166–70.; *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, June 5, 2018/<https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966718761746>.

involvement by the state, whether in setting wages or in monitoring working and living conditions. This places workers and their families in a relationship of total dependence on the plantation.<sup>15</sup>

The system of worker control and exploitation has been remarkably stable in Assam. There has been nearly 200 years of control of *Adivasis* by an evolving group of landowners, foreign agents, Indian agents, government bureaucrats, and, today, agents of vast multi-national corporations. While the “owners” and controllers of the plantations changed over time, the fundamental arrangements of debt, suppression of educational attainment, and lack of basic health care and job safety has meant generations of *Adivasi* tea-workers have worked a significant part of their lives in a limbo of control, ignorance, and deprivation

### Religious Sisters and the Tea Plantations

In the early 20th century Christian missionaries began to proselytize in some indigenous areas, where, in contrast to Hindu and Muslim areas, they found a greater degree of success. Response to Christian outreach was especially favourable in the Northeast, including Assam, as it was often linked to encouraging education and political awareness. One example of growth amongst marginalised groups was the emergence of a religiously organised group of indigenous women in Assam.

One aim of this research is to examine the relationship between two marginalised groups. Our methods centre on an ethnographic study of a group of Roman Catholic Sisters of the Congregation known as the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians (MSMHC). This Congregation was founded in 1942 in Northeast India as an order to be made up of indigenous women, including *Adivasi* women. The Congregation’s founding was partly driven by the impact of World War II when Assam was drawn into war when Japanese forces invaded British India, and Burma. In October 1942, eight women candidates entered the Congregation at St Mary’s Convent in Guwahati, the largest city in Assam. In 1968, this Congregation, now known as the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, became independent and self-governing. At present, the Congregation has some 1,244 sisters in 205 Houses. The ratio of Sisters to Houses shows that most Sisters live in small groups serving a relatively small

15 Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute, “The More Things Change...” The World Bank, Tata, and Enduring Abuses on India’s Tea Plantations’, 2014, <https://web.law.columbia.edu/human-rights-institute/initiatives/global-economy/extractive-industries/business-human-rights-global-economy/past-projects/tea-plantations/more-things-change-report> [accessed 9 July, 2021].



area or neighbourhood. Altogether MSMHC Sisters cover six administrative provinces in India, also maintaining a delegation in Italy, and a sub-delegation in Africa.

To place the work of this Congregation in a national and international context, in India Christians make up 2.3 percent of the population. Though a small percentage of the total population, Christianity is the third-largest religion after Hinduism and Islam, just ahead of Sikhism. Roman Catholics, like these Religious Sisters, make up a third of the Christians in India. Christians are not uniformly distributed in the population or geographically. In the State of Assam, Christians make up approximately 3.74 percent of the total population, but in some small rural communities they are up to 30 percent. .

Yet there is a paradox in these demographic numbers when we come to the work of the MSMHC Sisters in Assam. While only a very small sub-set of the population of Assam, the MSMHC Sisters represent one of the largest anti-slavery/anti-trafficking/social change organisations in the world. The Arise Foundation<sup>16</sup> estimates that at least 900 Religious Sisters, many of them being MSMHC Sisters, are working against exploitation just in the state of Assam. By comparison, this is the same total number employed by one of the largest global anti-human trafficking groups, the International Justice Mission, a US based anti-trafficking and human rights NGO.

One aim of this research is to illuminate the demographic facts of the participation of Religious Sisters in anti-slavery/anti-human trafficking work. Because they tend not to publicise their work or publish annual reports, it is difficult to define the role of Religious Sisters in the global anti-slavery movement despite anecdotal evidence of extensive engagement. Globally, there are between 600,000 and 750,000 “women religious” in the Roman Catholic church, in some 833 Congregations. There are also “women religious” in the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist Christian denominations, as well as in Buddhism, Hinduism, and some other faith traditions. No global estimate of the “women religious” involved in anti-slavery work is currently possible. We hope that this study of “women religious” within Assam may foster more precise estimates. In this article we focus solely on the MSMHC Sisters given that our methodology is an embedded ethnographic participation in their lives.

Within the MSMHC Sisters is a social change unit called the Centre for Development Initiatives (CDI). This “social wing” of the MSMHC Sisters works

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.arisefdn.org>.



to “empower the marginalised communities of the society, especially women and children.” It has a staff of 110, sixteen MSMHC Sisters and 94 other workers, with a special focus on “the exploited and voiceless”. CDI is a tightly organised “social development wing” and service provider. Within the Congregation it is known as the Social Apostolate and has six key sub-units: Dispensaries (for medical care), a Vocational Training Centre, a Rehabilitation Centre for the physically challenged, a drug Rehabilitation Centre, the Women Development Centre, and the Domestic Workers Movement. In addition to these service units, there is significant person-power devoted to what could be termed “development outreach”. Many of the Sisters doing this outreach work are working with populations of tea workers. Yet our participatory ethnography provided a critical insight:

[The Sister in Charge of this Centre] says she is one of the first few tribal Sisters who has held such a position of power and that is something not very common in their work. This fact struck me when I realised that in my entire life of studying in convent education, I actually have never seen a tribal Sister holding positions of authority or responsibility in schools/ colleges or even in the offices.

On the plantations, families are employed, and live in housing owned, by the company. Some of these families are the descendants of families recruited and installed there up to one hundred years ago in what might be termed hereditary peonage. The situation is similar to debt bondage, common in rural areas of India, but with a corporate gloss. In the past, tea worker families were recruited to the plantations. These families, often *adivasi*, live in housing provided by the plantation, receive other minimal support, and a small cash wage. The housing is deplorable and often without regular access to water. There is normally no effective sewage disposal, resulting in the proliferation of disease. There is insufficient healthcare, poor services in the school, and an absence of safety equipment. Workers across estates explained they receive safety equipment (apron, gloves, boots, mask, etc.) *only* on the day the plantation is audited by labour inspectors.<sup>17</sup> Though they are “employees”, at least half of tea plantations workers receive no pay slip or other record of their wages.

The level of control exercised over tea plantations workers is significant, but not normally reaching the definition of enslavement – that a person is controlled and treated *as if* they are property, found in other forms of forced

<sup>17</sup> Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute, “The More Things Change....” The World Bank, Tata, and Enduring Abuses on India’s Tea Plantations’, (2014), p. 31.

labour. The control that does exist is still strong enough to prevent workers from leaving. The small cash wage is just enough to supplement the foodstuffs provided, and to purchase absolute essentials – often from the tea plantation’s ‘company’ store. Tea plantation work requires intense physical labour, and are often sites of child labour. These poor living conditions make villagers vulnerable to the deceit of human traffickers who promise better lives in the city.

Given this context, what are the specific interventions mounted by MSMHC Sisters? How do they decide and prioritise actions and programmes? Are they able to ‘change course’ when confronted with new challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic? And, ultimately, what is the ‘recruitment/employment’ process that generates significant numbers of ‘employees’ (Sisters) that are, literally, willing to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, if needed, and do so for virtually no remuneration beyond subsistence and housing? Our ethnographic research found high levels of ‘job satisfaction’ and ‘commitment’ to both the Congregation and the work at large. This leads us to a key research question: How do the Sisters understand their ‘jobs’ in comparison to other social service and human rights workers?

### Deciphering the Skill-Set of the Women Religious

A goal of this inquiry is to elucidate the work-lives and skills that typify the day-to-day existence of the MSMHC Sisters, and through them, gain a better understanding of the relatively undocumented and unanalysed orientations and work practices of Women Religious. It is telling that an internet search on “skills needed for charity or NGO work” yields over six million results. A typical list of skills needed to work in the NGO sector highlights adaptability and specific skill sets:

1. Enthusiasm and dedication for your chosen charitable cause.
2. Team-working and people skills.
3. Communication skills: oral and written.
4. Administrative and organisational skills.
5. Commercial/business awareness.
6. Pro-activity and flexibility.
7. Willingness to undertake routine jobs.
8. Languages.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/career-path-guides/charity-NGO-social-enterprise/how-to-excel/> [accessed 12 Jan. 2022].

No such list exists for Women Religious. Nor do the “recruitment procedures” for Women Religious include any type of formal skills assessment or required training, except for one key expectation – that a Sister will “have a vocation”. For Women Religious *vocation* means “to be called by God to service”, and no other characteristic or skill is sufficient to enable a person who does not have a vocation to be a Woman Religious. A key organising concept is that whatever skillsets, training, or personal characteristics a woman might have, they can only be mobilised through a vocation, being personally called by God to service.

Vocation is a deep commitment, arrived at through prayer and discernment. One’s vocation is recognised through a process guided by knowledgeable people who also have a vocation. This may be a priest, a Religious Sister, sometimes a vocations director. The expectation is that if a woman is called to religious life, she will have an ineluctable impulse toward the commitment to vocation. If her religious guides agree, they will confirm she is, indeed, called. Women Religious don’t refer to this process as “recruitment”, and significant differences between the work of Women Religious and other voluntary sector workers begin at this point.

Women Religious are not hired according to a set job description. Their vocation is more a surrender of self, the extinguishing of ego in service to others. While conventional workers exchange their hours and energy for remuneration and, hopefully, fulfilment, Women Religious begin their “employment” by actively giving away their lives, offering it to be used in whatever way decided by their Congregation. This is a profound and alternative economic, social, psychological, and fundamentally political, philosophical orientation to human existence. For the Sister, it is both a diminution of self and an aggrandizement of the soul as part of a larger, eternal, effort.

The unique “skill-set” of Women Religious flows from renouncing self and the acceptance of a life of service to others. It is altruism writ large, requiring the sacrifice of a “worldly existence”. It is expected that there should be no self-serving component to work, though this is paradoxical in that self-sacrifice is also seen as a positive attribute. A vocation also leads to, in most instances, a lifetime of subsistence support. Food, clothing, and shelter are provided to Women Religious, though with an expectation that subsistence may be minimal, and that they will be expected to work in preparation – cooking, sewing, cleaning, building, gardening, any work that may be necessary to support the material life of the Sisters in a House or the larger Congregation.

Upon this foundation of altruistic sacrifice and service is built the specific “skill-set” of Women Religious. Our ethnographic study identified key intellectual/philosophical themes acted out through service, key “skills” of the Sisters.

Some of these skills are *orientational*, agreed and shared values or intellectual approaches as to how the work is to be done. Other skills are *functional*, a specific set of actions to be applied, making up the actual art and science of the vocation. Using, in part, their own nomenclature, we find these specific skills to be:

**Vocation** – as discussed above, there is an orientational decision and commitment to the vocation, a calling to give your whole life away, to dedicate your life to service. This is the foundational step leading to the separated life of a Woman Religious. It is the transformational moment in which a woman's life is paradoxically lived intensely, wholly, and completely, but in service to others.

**Being Pure at Heart** – is understood as the active orientation of altruism, it is a discipline that rejects any self-serving component in the actions of service, amongst the Sisters this is often referred to as being “pure at heart”.<sup>19</sup>

**Adherence to a Shared Moral Structure** – is both an orientational and functional skill. This is the foundational code, a program that explains the goals and means to achieve those goals, setting out behavioural and intellectual expectations. Knowledge of, and adherence to, this code creates the boundaries of what is, and what is not, appropriate action and thought. There is also a Code of Canon law setting out how religious orders should be managed, processes for admission, and so forth. Parallel to this are rules and expectations specific to the MSMHC Congregation. In their day-to-day life there are shared expectations and moral boundaries taught, practiced, and agreed by the members of the Congregation. Altogether these make up a shared moral structure that guides most behaviours and answers most dilemmas.

**Focus on Justice and Mercy** – is an orientational, interpretive, and functional skill – a specific commitment to the paired concepts of justice and mercy. As an *orientation*, it is used to *interpret* when justice and mercy are being violated or need to be exercised. This is not always easy, life can be complex, and drivers and actions may seem contradictory. This requires analysing social situations that can be addressed through the conscious practice or promotion of justice and mercy. The *functional* use of this skill is to act in ways that support justice, expressed with mercy. The range of actions to be taken within that aim are potentially infinite, hence the skill needed in their interpretation and functional mobilisation.

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19 The key Biblical source for ‘pure at heart’ is Matthew 5:8. It is one of the ‘beatitudes’, attributed to Jesus during the ‘sermon on the mount’. The full text is: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” It is interpreted as being deeply focussed, without earthly distraction, and loving in thought and action.

**Empathy** – for the Woman Religious empathy is a functional tool as well as an orientation. It is the dynamic act of compassion and sympathy, and equally important is the functional and active *responsiveness* to individuals and groups that empathy has identified as needing support and care. While an NGO may select a specific constituency of shared need such as hunger or healthcare, within the community of Women Religious there is no boundary delineating individuals or groups as “eligible” for care – *except* the criterion of empathetic engagement. Empathy is the way that the Community of Women Religious identify their “target audience(s)” and from there, determine appropriate responses.

**Grace** or Gentleness – these are also orientations as well as functional behaviours. If a business or NGO has specific ways they want the staff to engage the public, these will normally centre on a positive attitude, communications skills, being adaptable, and time management. For the Woman Religious, grace is an orientation to the public. Their response to a constituency of need, and to the wider community, is the active expression of *grace*: a gentleness of spirit and action. This is a theological and philosophical orientation that describes an inner peace, a reverence, and a pervasive hospitality, to others. All of these orientations and pathways to action – grace, empathy, focussing on justice and mercy, adhering to the wider moral structure, and being pure at heart – come into play within the key and deliberate act of accompaniment.

**Accompaniment** – if there is a methodology of response and action that encapsulates the work of Women Religious, it is *accompaniment*. When offering an explanation of how they orient their work or how achieve their goals, Women Religious return again and again to the concept of accompaniment. Accompaniment rolls together the practices of empathy and grace, and the strategic direction of justice and mercy. It is also a method of intelligence gathering, learning, communication, and the entering into trust with their chosen constituency of need. It means, literally, moving into the immediate physical space, work, and lives of that constituency – sharing virtually all daily acts of domestic and economic life. It is an entry into the lives of others that is whole and persistent. Children, the elderly, and the unwell are cared for, food is cooked and shared, when night brings an end to the struggle for subsistence, the Sisters sleep nearby and wake early to begin again their accompaniment. If young people are working in factories or fields, Sisters accompany them there, to understand the benefits and dangers of their work, helping those they accompany to see alternatives, or reminding employers of their responsibilities for worker safety. As they get to know those they accompany, Sisters may help them toward a training program, medical care, basic education, or the forming of a village credit union. These examples describe accompaniment in

Assam, around the world Sisters accompany others in their work and lives in many other ways. If there is a common theme, it is that they are accompanying people whose lives are lived in poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion, whose work is poorly paid, and often dirty and dangerous. Accompaniment also takes Sisters into the shadowy world of criminal businesses, from children enslaved in public begging, to women and children enslaved in commercial sexual exploitation. Given the mental, spiritual, and physical demands experienced when practicing accompaniment, it is not surprising that Women Religious often relate that one specific attribute is crucial – *stamina*.

Clearly accompaniment can be directed toward and achieve many different outcomes – but a common, and intentional, result is trust.<sup>20</sup> Living closely with a community, and doing so continuously and committedly, means that Sisters, however they are first received, come to be seen as human, trustworthy, and supportive. For culturally or politically suppressed communities, such as the *Adivasi*, that have suffered generations of discrimination, who have come to distrust all institutions of government, including landowners and businessmen, these outsiders who actively take on their burdens and ask little of them are a revelation. Over time, suspicion and disbelief are replaced by trust and interest. And from that breakthrough comes community organising, education, and change.

### The Skill-Set in Their Own Words

We have described the Skill-Set of the MSMHC Sisters in the voice of an objective analyst aiming for clarity. But for the MSMHC Sisters themselves this skill-set is simply part of their spiritual practice, of faith made manifest. Theirs is not a bureaucratic language, so we quote their own words as illustration and confirmation.

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20 Co-Author Saikia spent six months embedded with the MSMHC Sisters, from her notes: “While I accompanied Sister Molly, I noted the level of trust that she would achieve by just interacting with the people of the community. She created a safe space for people to come and share their innermost feelings, their miseries and sorrow, things that have been disturbing them for years. We met with two Mothers Clubs set up by CDI coordinators. In each meeting Sister Molly explained the importance of creating a livelihood for themselves by using the locally available resources. The aim was to empower the women to visualize a better life and to enable them to think beyond the boundaries of a patriarchal system. Women in the group started sharing their miseries with Sister Molly leading to instant connection and trust.”

For example, we asked one Sister “what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you see a person in distress or helpless?” She replied, “I see Jesus in people and that is why I am compassionate to them. We cannot help someone if we have ego in us. I remember I was looking after one girl who was HIV+ and she was in a bad state. When she was admitted to the hospital, I stayed with her and cleaned her used bed sheets since the nurses there were fed up with washing them as her vaginal liquid was continuously flowing from her body.” Another Sister answered, “I feel a lot of compassion for the person and that I should help this person. I immediately pray to the Lord to bless the person in distress and relieve him/her of the pain. My grandmother and mother were very generous people. Anyone who used to come to our house never left empty handed. They would sometimes go beyond their capacity to help others. I have grown up seeing them, hence I am heavily inspired by them. The only challenge I feel as a nun is that I am not able to help people with money as that is what their basic needs are. Especially those in deep poverty who are not even able to afford one meal a day.”

We also inquired how Sisters motivate others. One Sister stated, “I believe we can only motivate others if we ourselves are motivated. I am motivated through prayer and inspiration. This phrase from the Bible, ‘Life in Abundance’ is what guides me through. The Spirit of God drives me, it enlightens and energises me. Unless and until we have light inside ourselves, we cannot spread light to others.” The MSMHC Sisters were unanimous when asked about what “keeps them going” – answering always that their foundation is “the Lord Almighty and the compassion that they hold within themselves for all.”

The organising concept of ‘accompaniment’ was always defined functionally, but within a spiritual framework: “Our work”, stated one Sister, “will not make any impact in the community unless and until the Sisters consider themselves as ‘one of them’ ... until they have gained trust and respect and work together with the community, being an example.”

### *Documenting and Analysing Skills and Work Practices*

How do the fundamental philosophical orientations of the Sisters translate into skills and work practices? Answering this question brought us to the ethnographic method – embedding one of the authors into the lives and work of the MSMHC Sisters. Her months living and working with the Sisters provided evidence of what are relatively undocumented and unanalysed work practices. A full ethnography will be presented in time, but being embedded within the work and life of the Sisters made it possible to document the interlocking lives, commitments, and work practices.



One example is the schedule of work and life lived by the Sisters. A common daily time expenditure was:

Praying:	3–4 hours
Working:	10–11 hours
Cleaning/washing:	2 hours
Eating:	2 hours

“Sleep” is not seen as the highest priority, occupying 5–7 hours per day. There is also an opportunity to misunderstand these categories if they are assumed to be discrete and exclusive. All these activities are commonly thought of as ‘worship’ – that ‘praying’ is also ‘working’ and *vice versa*. Cleaning, washing, cooking, eating, mending, running errands, can be and are performed with an assumption of prayerful work. The ethnographer explained, “They all work like professionals since the only attachment they have is to God – but somehow they beautifully manage to strike a balance between professional and informal work.”<sup>21</sup>

A specific skill noted was empathy. In contrast to NGOs or officials working with needful groups, was the deep rapport achieved firmly and quickly by the Sisters. A social worker will often need to fit a person needing support into a bureaucratic category, one that may not reflect the reality of that person’s life and needs. In the field Sisters provided relief in the pandemic, we recorded: “The unique nature of Sisters is that they hold so much compassion and empathy within themselves that the other person feels instantly connected; that their secrets will be kept and the Sister’s only aim is to bring relief and blessing.”<sup>22</sup> This gentle and caring skillset can also become firm and decisive when faced with injustice or wrongdoing – from ethnographic notes: “There was a local work agent who used to recruit young girls and send them to work in other states without any formal proceedings – the Sisters busted this man, ending this potential human trafficking.”<sup>23</sup>

A key example of the multi-faceted practice of accompaniment is how it is used to address gender inequalities and the exclusion of women from education and work. Work addressing gender inequality ranges from one-on-one support with young mothers, to an MSMHC Sisters project that supports 23,000 domestic workers that are registered, monitored, and protected. This

21 Ethnographic Report, February 2021, Bidisha Saikia.

22 Op. cit.

23 Op. cit.

is a significant sub-project aimed at reducing the endemic income inequality faced by women, as well as protecting the domestic workers from physical and sexual abuse. One pathway for these domestic workers is a training package that fosters entrepreneurship and business skills. Once trained and into jobs, the Sisters follow up with each student ensuring that they are paid and treated according to standards.

### The Skill Set in Action in Assam

It is challenging to quantify the impact of the work of the MSMHC Sisters since their fundamental strategic orientation is gradual and organic. Though they might act quickly in an emergency, normally their work is done carefully and deliberately. Effective work is seen as slow, careful, and gradual – timed by how people experience and accept it. In our investigation it became clear that persistence is needed to achieve change among the communities in Assam. These communities have been stuck in a cycle of exploitation and deprivation for generations, and can be suspicious of change and intervention. In spite of that, the work of Sisters has resulted in creating awareness among the tea garden communities, especially those mostly inhabited by *Adivasi* people. Sister Rose Paite is director of the MSMHA Centre for Development Initiatives in Assam. She explained that her work with the *adivasi* tea garden communities is driven by the fact that she cannot “unsee” the injustice that these communities suffer. In response, she has made it her mission to empower them and uplift the whole community. The strategic and functional approach to addressing injustice in these communities is to take a long-range view and begin the process of accompaniment. The ground staff team of Sisters start by forming Childrens’ clubs, Mothers’ clubs, and Village Vigilance Committees. While the first two are self-explanatory, Vigilance Committees are less well known outside of India. In 1964 the Indian government established a Central Vigilance Commission to identify injustices and codify and regularise legal action at the local level. In 2021 the Central Vigilance Commission published its Eighth Edition of guidance<sup>24</sup> on addressing local issues and injustices. Human rights groups organising in rural areas, or working against debt bondage slavery and trafficking, often begin by bringing local people together into a (Community) Vigilance Committee (CVC). Within the CVC, local people are encouraged to describe

24 Central Vigilance Commission, *Vigilance Manual* (updated 2021), New Delhi, 15.10.2021; at <http://cvc.gov.in> [accessed 15.1.2022].

what they see as key problems in their community, and then work out what should be done to address these problems. This method has proven successful over time in the freeing of villages locked in hereditary forms of collateral debt bondage.<sup>25</sup>

The setting up of clubs and Village Vigilance Committees creates a channel for awareness raising. Each club plays a role in bringing the community together. The children's clubs are taught a range of subjects by a teacher paid by the Centre for Development Initiatives. Children are welcomed from any background with no age bar. They learn about child rights and take part in recreational activities.

The Mothers' club is composed of mothers of the children who are (usually) part of the children's club. This is a women's group that discusses challenges and problems they are facing in their community, and with advice, work toward solutions. The women come together and first learn about their rights. For many women the fact of rights is a revelation, and once achieved enhances their ability to think and plan a better future for their children. The Vigilance Committees bring together men and women from the community. In Assam, their main responsibility is to monitor unsafe migration, and explore and address any human rights violations. The Sisters help to monitor and report problems using their wider network. At the same time, through accompaniment, they are present to address situations that happen regularly in the tea estates. In the past, the majority of both large and small violations of worker's rights went unreported because of fear of retribution.

For the Sisters, the long-term challenge is how to break the cycle of debt and exploitation that holds these families. The functional interventions for young people on the tea plantations focus on skills development to bring about economic independence. Many *adivasi* girls drop out of school at an early age, due to cost, as well as discrimination against *adivasis*. Since 2018, the Center for Development Initiatives has supported a total of 176 girls from Assam who have left education, training them in housekeeping, tailoring, cooking, and English-language skills. The aim is to prepare them for regular employment in urban areas as domestic staff or factory work. To find and recruit the young women, the Sisters visit rural villages and tea garden communities across the Northeast. If young women and their families agree, they come to the CDI campus in Guwahati, Assam for a three-month residential training program taught by licensed teachers and staff members. On completion they receive a certificate from the Tailoring Training Center, and another certificate from

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25 K. Bales, *Ending Slavery: How We Free Today's Slaves* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 62–68.

CDI spelling out their acquired skill sets. The graduation or ‘felicitation’ day is always celebrated with ceremony, feasting, and fun.

In their outreach and human rights work, the CDI team acts in partnership with the non-sectarian All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA), an association of youth, mainly older students, who campaign and support the *adivasi* community. AASAA is fundamentally a civil rights organisation, working to ensure that tea garden communities have a voice and are empowered to resist injustice. Given that students of the AASAA share the ‘ethnicity’ of the tea garden communities, they are trusted and listened to. Shortly after the AASAA was formed they allied with the MHMSC Sisters. One AASAA leader, Stephen Lakra, is responsible for on-the-ground operations. He related that, “I attended one seminar three years back where I heard Sr Rose Paite and was inspired to know about her work in the tea garden areas for our communities, and that is when I approached her. I believe it is always better to work together to create a meaningful impact in society and I have since then supported CDI in whatever capacity that I can and will always do.”

### Accompaniment in Quarantine and Conflict – Skill-set Adaptation

As with other public-facing organisations, COVID brought much of the work of the MHMSC Sisters to an abrupt halt. Assam is a poor rural state and government action against COVID was slow to arrive. The pandemic gave the Sisters an opportunity to explore how they might practice accompaniment digitally, and they initiated online outreach and data collection. Training and classes were shifted online. Faced with the need for emergency expenditure for medical equipment, the small stipends paid to Sisters for personal expenses were suspended. But for Assam, COVID arrived at the same time as another crisis driven by political upheaval in Myanmar.

A military coup d’état in Myanmar occurred on 1 February 2021, when democratically elected members of the country’s ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), were deposed by the *Tatmadaw* – Myanmar’s military – replacing the elected officials with a military junta. The coup d’état occurred the day before the Myanmar Parliament was to install MPs elected in the 2020 election. President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with other ministers, their deputies, and Members of Parliament. By February 2022, at least 1,400 civilians, including children, have been killed, some 11,000 people detained, and 400,000 internally or externally displaced.

In the wake of the conflict, many people from Northern Myanmar fled to the nearest states of India, Mizoram and Manipur, and then into Assam. At the time of writing there are some 15,000 refugees in the region. Sister Rose mobilised the MHMSC team to monitor the situation and raise funds to help the refugees – all the more challenging because of restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Activating international contacts, MHMSC received rapid support from national and international organisations, in part because they were one of very few groups working directly with the refugees. Sisters curtailed many of the regular activities and pivoted to on-the-ground monitoring and support in the refugee camps. A key need was COVID supplies and Sr Rose and her team were able to distribute relief items along with oxygen cylinders, PPE kits, face masks and sanitisers.

### Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to analyse closely the working practices of Women Religious, and specifically the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians. Two facts drew us toward this inquiry. The first was the realisation that Women Religious are involved in very large numbers in direct social action, medical care, and aid to communities and individuals. We were also interested in the work of Women Religious in addressing contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking. Qualitative, ethnographic, and journalistic reports point to significant numbers of Women Religious engaged in human rights work. The precise accounting of the financial value of rights and development work undertaken by Women Religious was not part of this study – but we look forward to parallel cost analyses comparing different modes of delivery to similar constituencies of need.

In addition to offering background and illustrative information about one specific group of Women Religious, we sought to analyse *how* this community of Women Religious understood, planned, and accomplished their work. In short, what are their key skill sets and organisational frameworks? Our method was primarily ethnographic. One of the authors lived with the MSMHC Sisters for over six months, taking part in their daily lives. Her full ethnographic study is forthcoming. This article calls on those parts of the ethnographic record that explore the skill-sets of these Women Religious, not as specific task-based skills (such as book-keeping), but philosophical and religious beliefs and orientations to their work, and more broadly and philosophically, to how life is to be understood and lived. Specific practical skills may flow through the work of the Women Religious, but only as an expression of their spiritual and philosophical

beliefs. This is a crucial difference. The most important driving force is neither financial nor prestige, but rests on a foundation of selflessness and a life dedicated to and lived in service. This orientation generates powerful, complex, intensive, and long-lasting outcomes. These outcomes are both journeys and conclusions, achieved through work that is also prayer, and through worship that is also work.

For the MSMHC Sisters we have identified six philosophical and spiritual orientations that shape their work – an active and directed altruism; an adherence to a shared moral structure; an active and expressive commitment to justice and mercy; the act of acting through and with grace; and, significantly, a methodology of accompaniment – living directly with those whom the MSMHC Sisters support in growth and change. And while there are no educational or training requirements for Sisters, there is the major *rite de passage* that every woman must accomplish – the recognition of a divine calling to service and the complete and encompassing commitment of a vocation.

These findings are both significant and mundane. There are hundreds of thousands of Women Religious in the world, and while not all are engaged in direct social action and change, all adhere to a vocation and express their lives in service. On the basis of our relatively small and geographically focussed study we believe there is much to learn from these Women Religious, about the nature of community organising, about the best practices of consciousness raising and education, especially amongst women; and for those of us who operate within a different orientation to work and life, about how a life of giving and service in relative material poverty can be very rich indeed.

### Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust (0273).

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