

“Jesus took the children in his arms...”

Mark 10:16

The Santhals, Indigenous people living in Kasiadih, Jharkhand, India, are understandably fearful of outsiders, after a long history of oppression and suppression. This is why Medical Mission Sisters have made a decades-long commitment to living among them as neighbors, as family. Sisters Gemma Mendes and Bina Stanis describe their religious life as a tapestry interwoven into the lives of the Santhals. This enables the Sisters to respond to the suffering, troubles, mental health problems, health issues and conflicts the villagers face in their daily lives. Sister Bina adds that MMS presence is significant in this caste/class ridden district particularly for the children and youth who bear the generational scarring of exploitation.

In Kasiadih, the Indigenous traditional governance structures are still active. The mores and customs support the values of community life – sharing, working together, and reducing inequalities in the villages. One of the most important functions the traditions provide is maintaining peace and resolving conflicts among the people. It is very important for Indigenous communities to relate to one another with respect and abide by the villages’ unwritten norms. Everyone is expected to promote peace and share in the common works of the community. Sister Bina shares, “You may be standing first in your career, but if you are not well-behaved in the community, there are serious repercussions.”



Santhal children are grateful for support in their schooling during Covid-19 lockdown.

Protecting and nurturing the rich traditions of Indigenous culture and values is one of the reasons Sisters Gemma and Bina are living among the Santhal. Covid-19 has highlighted the resilience of the Indigenous people and has revealed their invaluable wisdom of living a simple and holistic life attuned with nature. At the same time, the pandemic has amplified the inequalities of rights to potable water, health facilities and adequate food. Political apathy and little room for dissent make it difficult for the people to voice their grievances about the systemic oppression. Children are experiencing malnutrition, lack of schooling, lack of access to decent health facilities and poor-quality training modules for youth who are forced to do on-line professional studies.

The community structures in the village have been weakened because the leaders are not equipped

to meet the demands of modern society. Globalization has increased consumerism and individualism; the youth are particularly vulnerable to this way of viewing the world. The influence of the outside world erodes the priorities of community and shared wealth and power.

To help support the community, Sisters Bina and Gemma are offering health education and sharing traditional knowledge with around 30 children a week. Their goals include strengthening learning capacities and improving literacy rates in the children in addition to promoting skill training in youth. On November 14, 2021 they celebrated International Children’s Day. In honor of the Campaign in the Child’s Right to Play, the Sisters assessed children’s learning levels and offered space for them to explore and play.

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Because the schools where most of the children go are still closed due to Covid-19, Sisters Gemma and Bina have started holding classes in their home. Four Indigenous youth are helping to teach mathematics, English, Hindi and Computer to the children. Sister Bina shares the pupils are responding very well to the teenagers, one of whom they call Sir Comedy. She adds that their home vibrates with the laughter of the children who giggle a lot while learning Hindi as it is not their first language.

The two Medical Mission Sisters share that the learning taking place goes both ways. Sister Bina says, “We are learning what it is to be born to illiterate parents, what it is to be undernourished, how hard it is to study in a language foreign to you. We are learning how to be kind, that there are no losers or winners, to communicate gently and firmly. I see that given the opportunity...the children here can slowly grow to reach their full potential.”

“We are learning the effects of the loss of common forests and grazing lands. We see the children missing the juicy mangoes that used to provide them with a wonderful snack in the hot summer months. From the children we are learning contentment, to be happy and satisfied with little.”

—Sr. Bina Stanis



Sisters Bina and Gemma’s whole house has become child friendly with the children using every corner to play during the breaks.

As Medical Mission Sisters we take a stand with those most in need of healing, especially women and children. We stand with those in our world who have no power, no prestige, no position, with those who are on the journey of becoming and we walk with them. As in all mission we give of what we have and those we accompany shape us and form us and love us and teach us. Together we become the space where God’s reign becomes a greater reality. So it is with the children to whom we are called.

Would you please consider supporting Medical Mission Sisters’ work with children, women and men who have little power, those most vulnerable and marginalized?

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Venezuela



The Latidos (Heartbeat) band, started by Sr. Mai, brings joy to the musicians and neighbors.

Medical Mission Sister Maigualida Riera from Venezuela tells of alarming circumstances in her country. An inflation rate that has exceeded 1,550% and the collapse of public services such as water, electricity, internet and gas, as well as the health system has led to increased despair and hopelessness in the Venezuelan people. Children are more at risk than ever of malnutrition, prostitution, human trafficking, mental health problems and violence.

It is into this environment that Medical Mission Sisters and Associates have been able to offer food, activities and programs with the support of our donors. Sister Mai shares that their neighbors have regained hope and rekindled their desire to live. She adds that the children are given the chance to eat, laugh, be together and heal wounds.



MMS have held 12 Health Days, serving over 650 children.



Georgina Ventura, a teenage volunteer, gives arepas (Venezuelan bread) to people who live on the streets. A total of 150 arepas were distributed.



MMS and volunteers hand out 1200 hotdogs to local children



A young volunteer disinfects the children's hands. More than 400 children receive snacks every day.



Sister Luz Marina teaches a youth to play the drum.



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Indigenous villagers in Kasiadih, North India.



Sister Celine Paramundayil tells of a beautiful custom in Assam, India where at a child's request for a blessing, the adult offers her hands with palms upward.

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