

Notre Dame School, Bandipur, Nepal – the Light on the Top of the Hill

At a liturgy marking the School Sisters of Notre Dame presence in Nepal for 25 years, Bishop Anthony Sharma, S.J., referred to Notre Dame School in Bandipur as, “the light on the top of the hill.” This image characterizes Notre Dame influence in the village of Bandipur on a remote hilltop where the school provides education for impoverished children.

How did the sisters find this place? They were invited to the isolated “ghost town” of Bandipur by residents who hoped that a quality, English-medium school would restore the once prosperous village. *Why did they stay?* The sisters wanted to respond to the needs of the very poor in one of the least-developed countries of the world. These answers lie at the heart of this mission’s remarkable success.

In 1983 Japanese Sisters Evangela Imamura, Miriam Therese Kanaya, Janet Tanaka, and Mary Ambrose Kawase were sent to Nepal. After studying the language and culture for two years, Sisters Evangela and Miriam journeyed to Bandipur, starting a school on the ground floor of a village house donated for the sisters’ residence. As they began the ministry, the sisters had little more than support from the villagers and Mother Theresa’s spirit of dedication to educating the poor. The 50 children who arrived for the first day of classes were unprepared for anything as structured as a lesson. Patience and persistence in the face of many hardships (e.g. no electricity or telephone; no teaching materials, clean water, or fresh food) rapidly bore fruit.

Soon after the school opened, other Japanese sisters joined the community in Bandipur. As the reputation and success of ND school increased, so too did the number of students and classrooms. Makeshift structures became four permanent buildings with science laboratories, offices, computer and staff rooms. In time, the school grew to its present size of almost 800 students with double classes in nursery through class six and single classes in grades seven through twelve. Many classrooms are overcrowded with more than 40 in a class.

Today the school is staffed by four ND sisters, Sisters Evangela (Principal) and Miriam Therese and two American sisters, Andre Maureen and Barbara Soete, and 37 Nepali and Indian men and women teachers. Classes are taught in English using the prescribed national textbooks and curricula. Students must be competent in Nepali and pass national examinations at the end of grades eight and ten through twelve in order to continue their education.

Hostels are provided to insure safety and supervision for class eleven and twelve students who travel great distances to study at ND. At present 58 young adults, aged fifteen to eighteen reside in three Notre Dame Hostels.

In response to poor, working mothers’ needs, a child-care program was started in 1992. A short distance from school, the sisters maintain Seto Gurans, an early learning center for approximately 100 children aged eighteen months to four years. Under Sister Miriam’s direction, nine Nepali teachers and two workers staff the center with assistance from parents. This program promotes effective child-rearing skills and health awareness for parents. It has produced countless happy, healthy, eager learners who are more than ready to join ND’s nursery class.

After the decade-long Maoist insurrection (1996-2006) that closed the school for fourteen months, the community began a Peace Project to help restore communities disturbed by the war. Donor funds were secured for community-based Child Development Centers located in various poor areas near Bandipur. Sister Miriam oversees and mentors staff in these 17 centers.

Occasionally the sisters are asked to describe the most significant aspects of their work in Nepal. Always, the first point mentioned is providing excellent education for both girls and boys. In this patriarchal society, girls and young women do not receive educational opportunities comparable to those of their male counterparts. With their ND education, students have received remarkable opportunities for further study and thriving careers. Hundreds of graduates have returned to Bandipur to share their success stories: scholarships; advanced degrees; careers in medicine, engineering, teaching, and computer technology; study or service abroad; and successful businesses.

Sisters also note the school's impact in breaking down caste barriers. Although caste discrimination has been outlawed, it still exists in many places in Nepal. At ND caste bias has been effectively eliminated, chiefly through example and the opportunity for students to interact in classrooms and note the gifts and abilities of their classmates.

As guests in this Hindu/Buddhist land, the SSND community does not evangelize the students or parents. Rather, we are blessed to "see that part of the Kingdom of God that was already there, rooted and active in the hearts and relationships of people."¹ The sisters' efforts focus on *transformation through education*, letting God do the rest.

Today the village of Bandipur is a showplace among Nepal villages. Tourists come to see a beautiful hill town, enjoy traditional foods and observe ancient cultures. Many of these visitors are drawn in amazement to Notre Dame School, expressing delight and astonishment at the "light on the top of the hill."

¹ From remarks made to the Bishops' Synod by Jesuit General Adolfo Nicolas, S.J.