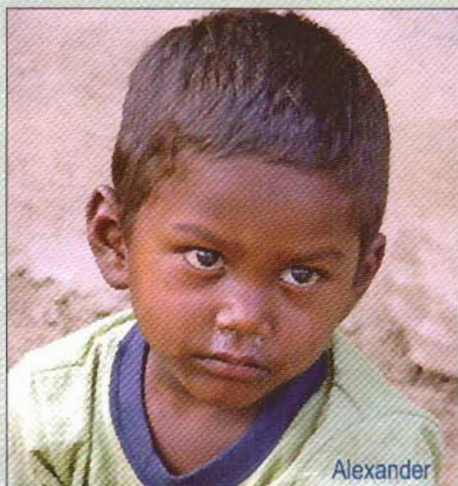


NEPAL: education is the answer

Fr Bill Robins SJ



Fr Roy Sebastian SJ

Meet Alexander. He's a nursery school student at Moran Memorial School, Maheshpur, Nepal. Each school day his grandfather, Zecharias, brings Alexander and his older brother, Alister, to school by bicycle.

Zecharias grew up in India, in West Bengal, on the east side of the Mechi River, which marks the Nepal-India border, just a score of kilometres from the school. As a young man, he moved here to work on an expanding tea estate. He has four children. The two youngest are completing high school at Moran Memorial. His eldest son, Prakash, married Jacintha. They live in company housing on the estate, where they raise their two sons. Each earns 580 rupees (about CAD

8,30) per week. Housing is free but without running water, other than a shared hand pump, or power supply. Their salaries allow for simple food and clothing and little else. Children can look forward only to work on the estate, eventually replacing their parents, and ensuring a constant supply of workers for this labour-intensive industry.

Many workers on the estate brought their Catholic faith with them. A decade ago the Jesuits were able to come and meet their pastoral needs. The parish priest, Fr David Ekka SJ, is responsible for about a thousand families scattered over the eastern half of Jhapa District. We provide the sacraments and good religious instruction but we cannot ignore other needs. How can we help people free themselves from this cycle of labour and poverty?

Education is the answer. A decade ago, Alexander's older cousins had nothing but tea estate work to look forward to. Their language and culture are different from those of the people who control the district. Although these tribal people have lived in Nepal for generations, none had Nepalese citizenship. Therefore none had the tools to break away from the tea estate. The status quo was fine for the estate management. Political changes have come, however. All the tribal people born in Nepal now have citizenship and are

looking for a more active role in Nepalese society. Good education can give them the skills they need to move ahead.

Alexander and his friends are able to study as well as anyone else, but where? The Nepal government provides basic education, but the standards are low, and there is discrimination against these tribal people. Children generally will not study for long in such conditions. Moran School, named after Fr Marshall D. Moran SJ who opened the first Jesuit school in Nepal in 1951, is trying to meet this need. The school provides education from pre-primary level through grade ten, the end of high school here. Each year, this private school needs about 5,000 rupees per student to operate. None of our students' parents can afford that. We ask for 100 rupees per month tuition and the parents also provide books, stationery and a simple uniform. The Jesuits raise the rest of the funds. All the students in the school are poor, from either the tea estate or surrounding villages.

I've been helping in the school and parish over the past two years and have enjoyed sharing faith and knowledge with these people. It's consoling to watch Alexander and his friends grow, on their way to becoming free and responsible adults.



The weekly Sunday evening rosary. Prakash is in the foreground, wearing a blue t-shirt; Fr Bill is sitting at the back.

Fr Roy Sebastian SJ