

THE IMPLANTATION OF THE FMA IN NORTH-EAST INDIA VIS-À-VIS THE SERVICE OF EDUCATION: IDEALS, ANSWERS, RESULTS

*Bernadette Sangma**

Introduction

This article looks at the first thirty years of the presence and implantation of the Salesian charism on the soil of North-East India. The first group of six FMA missionaries disembarked in this region on 8 December 1923. During the span of time under consideration, there were eight foundations of which seven were in the North-East and one in West Bengal.

The study focuses on the foundation, consolidation and growth of the FMA in the region with special reference to educational services, in order to appraise the extent of human promotion afforded to poor children and orphans, and particularly to girls and rural women of the region through education, and to study the impact of such services on the Church and the society at large.

1. The FMA in North-East India

The role of the FMA in the mission of North-East India can be gathered from the many reports on the life and growth of the local Churches in the different parts of the region. Of particular significance is a letter written by Msgr. Stefano Ferrando on the Salesian Sister in the Mission.¹ With reference to one of the communities in the region,

* FMA, is consultant to the General Council in the area of the empowerment of women.

¹ Cf. Archivio Salesiano Centrale (ASC) B709 (fascicolo 2) *Letter* [hereafter Lett.] *Ferrando - Ricaldone*, Shillong, 20 gennaio 1939. The same is published in Stefano Ferrando, *La suora salesiana in missione* in BS LXIII (maggio 1939) 145-147.

the letter describes the works of the Salesian missionary sisters which ranged from tours to the villages both as trailblazers and as consolidators of the evangelising-catechising work of the priests to educational activities in favour especially of girls and women.

In fact education always constituted a mark of the charismatic identity of the Institute even in the mission lands, where educational interventions were a priority in the different contexts into which it launched out. This was actually the principal focus of Don Bosco too, who recommended to the missionaries, "Take special care of the sick, of the children, of the old and of the poor [...]"²

Education was the hallmark also of the FMA mission in North-East India even as they embraced diverse missionary activities in response to the needs of the place and the time. In living the multi-faceted mission that was required of them, the strong educational perspective gave a specific charismatic slant to their work.

At the time the FMA arrived in the region in 1923 education, even at a primary level, was still a privilege of a few townfolk who could afford it. The situation was worse still with regard to the education of girls and women, especially in rural areas. The FMA joined hands with the Loreto Sisters and the Queen of the Missions as they furthered the project of education of the girls in the region. This study on the FMA in North-East India from 1923 to 1953 will focus specifically on the educational works of the FMA at various levels and in various settings.

2. The Sources

The sources of this study are principally the official documents of the Institute, communications with the General Councils both of the Salesians and FMA, letters, chronicles and other documents.

² [Giovanni Bosco], *Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros*, Introduzione e testo critico a cura di Jesús Borrego. (= Piccola Biblioteca dell' Istituto Storico Salesiano, 2). Roma, LAS 1984, p. 43.

The lack of publications on the educational presence of the FMA in North-East India required a vast research in the archives not only of those strictly pertaining to the Institute but also of other Religious Congregations and of the Salesian Congregation in particular. The central archives that were consulted are: Central Archive of the Salesians - Rome, Archive of the Salvatorian Sisters - Rome, Archive of the Queen of the Missions - Rome, Archive of the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate - Paris and Archive of the FMA - Rome.

A special mention needs to be made of the Central Archive of the Salesians where the research met with stunning surprise in terms of the availability of many precious manuscripts of some of the pioneers and other sisters who worked in the missions of North-East India. Apart from the said materials, there were accounts, articles and reports written by the Salesian missionary priests and Bishops regarding the mission of the FMA in the region.

The Salvatorian Family has published a series of studies and documentation on the Salvatorian history in the *Studia de Historia Salvatoriana*. There already exists a volume documenting the life and activity of the Salvatorian Sisters in the Apostolic Prefecture of Assam 1891-1915. This research, therefore, drew on the published sources which provided valuable and rich information.

The archive of the Sisters of the Queen of the Missions yielded some unpublished typewritten materials regarding the first years of the presence of the Congregation in the region and some of the interesting accounts at the time of replacement of the Salvatorian Sisters in the houses of Shillong and Raliang after their expulsion during the First World War.

Some pertinent information was obtained by post from the Central Archive of the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate in Paris regarding their short-lived but intense mission in Gauhati.³ They

³ The city today is known as Guwahati, but throughout the course of this presentation it will be referred to by its old name, Gauhati, excepting cases of direct quotations.

too suffered the fate of the Salvatorian Sisters at the outbreak of the First World War. It is to be noted that the name of the Congregation then was Catechist Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception.

The General Archive of the FMA has well maintained material on the work of the Institute in the different parts of the world. Moreover, the General Archives of the Salesians possess in comparison a greater amount of material on the activity of the sisters in North East India. The various types of documents in the Archive of the FMA are chronicles, letters, proceedings of the Provincial Council meetings; requests for new foundations, more sisters and financial help.⁴

Apart from the above mentioned documents, there is the *Notiziario* of the congregation with a significant number of articles written by the FMA missionaries in North-East India.

The research in the Provincial archives of the Province of St. Thomas the Apostle, Madras proved very advantageous. It led to the discovery of significant documents such as the proceedings of the Provincial Councils, letters and requests which constituted valuable sources of information. The minutes of the Provincial Council for the years 1940-1949 could not however be traced. The period includes the years of the Second World War during which the majority of the sisters who were of Italian nationality were restricted from outdoor movements resulting in the impossibility of having council meetings.⁵

For the period under consideration, the only materials that could be consulted in the Provincial Archive of Shillong were the chronicles of the different houses including those that are closed. Evidently much of the materials concerning the Province remained in the Province of St. Thomas the Apostle to which the houses of the North-East belonged upto 1953.

⁴ Cf. PIERA CAVAGLIA, *Archivio Generale dell'Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* (Comunicazione di Suor Piera Cavaglià al Seminario "Scripta Volant. La conservazione della nostra memoria", Madrid, 1-4 novembre 2001. Unpublished).

⁵ Cf. MARY BOUT, *A Pearl of Great Price. The Story of Mother Maria Avio, FMA, Provincial of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, Shillong: Don Bosco Press 1974, p. 110.

The archives of the individual houses that were consulted were: St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati, St. Mary Mazzarello Convent - Jowai, Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai, St. Joseph's Convent - Tezpur. However, the only valid documents found in most of them were the copies of the chronicles. Two important notebooks were found almost accidentally in the house of St. Mary's Convent, Gauhati which shed much light on the beginnings of the schools in this first community of the region.

Other pertinent documents such as the Reports of the annual visits of the Provincials along with those of the Extraordinary Visits of other Superiors are not retraceable from any of the houses in the region. One of the probable reasons leading to the poverty of the archives of the individual houses could perhaps be attributed to the Chinese invasion of North-East India in 1962. Sr Josephine Gaod, a missionary in the region from 1939, testifies that as the Chinese advanced into the Indian territory reaching up to Tezpur in Assam, the then Provincial, Sr Cesira Gallina asked the remaining sisters in the houses to burn all the documents and to flatten the tombs of the orphans fearing that they may become the cause for unjust accusations.⁶ But it is difficult to ascertain the validity of this argument.

The documents found in the archives are mainly manuscripts and typewritten copies of the annual reports provided first by the Prefect Apostolic and later by the Bishops to the Propaganda Fide as well as to the Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation. There are also personal and official letters from the fathers and sisters to the Provincials or to the Major Superiors, both Salesians and the FMA. Interestingly, a good number of these letters were published in the *Bollettino Salesiano*. In fact, all the articles of this bulletin cited in the present research are either entire letters or extracts of the letters of Bishops, Provincials, fathers and sisters who were in the different missions of North-East India. Some of the articles contain all the

⁶ Oral testimony of Sr Josephine Gaod, Shillong, 24 November 1998, in Personal Archive, Audio cassette: Interview of Sr Josephine Gaod by Sr Bernadette Sangma.

details regarding the address and date of the letter and nearly all the articles preserve the format of a letter. Unfortunately the original copy of many of those letters cannot be traced. A considerable number of letters and extracts of reports were retraced also from *Gioventù Missionaria* as will be observed from the pages that follow.

In some cases, the original copies of the letters published in the *Bollettino Salesiano* and *Gioventù Missionaria* can be found in the Archives either of the Salesians or of the FMA and this offered the possibility of making a comparative study to probe the authenticity of the articles in the just mentioned publications. The resulting discovery of the genuineness of the documents with minor changes or additions led to the choice of using the articles in the said reviews recognizing their historical value and worth.

As regards the chronicles of the houses, some of the houses have well-written chronicles with a good coverage of the various activities of the house, whereas others provide very scanty information with lacunae on important activities. In general, the chronicles present the beginnings of the house, day to day life of the community, specific events, evolution of its mission and development of the presence of the FMA in various geographical locations. The chronicles also reflected the ideals of the community, their theological, anthropological views and their vision of the world in general. As regards the educational mission of the community, the chronicles of some of the houses offered interesting notes on the methodology of teaching used in the schools. The description of the visits of the civil scholastic authorities showed that there was much appreciation of the method of teaching adopted by the sisters. However, the lack of any type of documentation and the non-existence of the lesson plans, preparation books of teachers and the notebooks of the pupils of those years constituted an obstacle to the understanding of the same.

The reports of the civil authorities – Ministers of Education, Ministers of Industry, School Inspectors, Deputy Inspectors, Vice-Inspectors – constitute another set of documents, both manuscript and type written. They give a good account of the running of the schools and trade schools, their organisation, educational methodology,

quality of service etc. They also speak about financial constraints and the consequent handicap, and at times also about the contribution given and the support afforded by the government. Unfortunately, such reports exist only concerning the first house founded in the region, St. Mary's Convent, Gauhati.

Another category of documents is the letters from and to the Superiors. A significant number were from the members of the General Council, Provincials, Bishops and Salesian superiors to the local superiors, communities or individual sisters. At times they contain guidelines on how to go about in facing some delicate problems, on relationships with civil authorities, Salesians, pupils, teachers and doctors. Sometimes they contain recommendations on community life, timetable, observance of rules and regulations, prayer life, health and discipline. They shed greater light on some situations which are either obscure or unclear. Some of the individual letters of the sisters to the Superiors provided sources of rich information in that they provide detailed accounts of the living out of the mission, the methods used, challenges faced and the fatigues encountered.

Besides the above listed documents, there are other sources such as newspaper cuttings, articles from the journals, contract papers, testimonies.

3. The Role of the FMA in the Field of Education

The educational mission of eight communities in the different parts of North-East India and West Bengal founded between 1923 and 1953 took the shape of various educational institutions. They were designed to respond to the urgent needs of the context in which the communities were situated. The house of Bandel was the only community outside the region. The others were scattered in the different parts of the region – in the plains such as Gauhati; Tezpur, Dibrugarh and in the hills such as Jowai and Shillong – and were implanted within the different ethnic communities, both tribal and non tribal. The context, in which the sisters worked, therefore, bore their own peculiarities as regards culture, tradition, language and customs. However, it can be said that there were some commonalities as regards

the general conditions and need of education, particularly for girls. For example, in the entire region there existed a general lack of schools, mass illiteracy particularly of women and girls in rural areas, diseases and high mortality rate especially of women and consequently the existence of numerous orphans.

In response to such a situation, the sisters opened formal schools for girls giving priority to those of remote villages who would otherwise have no access to education. Consequently there arose a felt need for boarding homes for school-going girls and young women of the vocational training centres. Other important educational institutions run by the sisters were the various orphanages in almost all the areas in which they worked. In true Salesian style, the oratories constituted one of the informal means of educating the young people through a range of animation programmes, recreation and amusements.

It is remarkable to observe that from the first years of the presence of the FMA in the region much importance was attributed to the education and promotion of rural women. The initiatives and activities in this field constituted another face of the regular formal education and vocational training that was given to the girls and young women of the villages. While the younger generations were given priority in the formal settings, the enhancement of the older generations was realised through those limited and affordable means that could in some way better their personal lives, their families and the communities on the whole. The mission accomplished by the sisters, year after year, with much dedication and commitment did make a difference in the lives of numerous women whom they encountered during the village tours, house visits, marriage preparation courses and ecclesial gatherings. It would suffice to quote one of the remarks of Msgr. Stefano Ferrando, "Great improvement has taken place among the women through their contact with the sisters. During this year [1936-37], they visited 135 communities remaining at least a day in each one".⁷

⁷ ASC A8870332 Ferrando, *Relazione missionaria illustrante la statistica 1936-1937*. Other such remarks can also be found in ASC A8870322 Ferrando, *Attività missionaria nel distretto di Tezpur*; ASC A8870320 *Lett. Ferrando -*

4. Salient Features of the Style of Education

The outstanding elements of the style of education adopted by the FMA in North-East India can be drawn from the many affirmations disseminated in their writings. From them it is possible to discover the features that indicate the basic methodological aspects of the Salesian education. They clearly evince the underlying anthropological, theological and teleological concepts of an educational system that has its source in the pedagogy of Don Bosco. Accordingly they defined their priorities, means and strategies, seeking to impart a truly integral education in the different contexts of North-East India.

4.1. *The Role of Religion*

The principles of education of the FMA in North-East India reflect the great heritage received from Don Bosco. Fidelity to his system of education in the different settings of the whole Institute constituted the entire section of the Manuals and Regulations of the FMA.⁸ Accordingly, there were constant recommendations by the Superiors in their circular letters to read and assimilate the system in order to put it into practice in their educational relationships with the young people.⁹ Faithful to such teachings, the FMA of North-East India lived the educational heritage of Don Bosco to a truly striking degree. His principles of education were so deeply embedded in them

Ricaldone, Shillong, 24 agosto 1936; ASC B709 (fascicolo 2), *Lett. Ferrando - Ricaldone, Shillong*, 20 gennaio 1939. This last letter can be read in S. Ferrando, *La suora salesiana in missione...*, p. 146.

⁸ Cf. ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Manuale - Regolamenti delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice fondate l'anno 1872 da San Giovanni Bosco*, Nizza Monferrato, Istituto FMA, 1929, pp. 128-157.

⁹ Cf. Luisa VASCHETTI, *Lettera circolare 120b*, 24 dicembre 1928, Nizza Monferrato, Scuola tip. Privata 1928; *Lettera circolare 121*, 24 gennaio 1929, Nizza Monferrato, Scuola tip. Privata 1929; cf. Linda Lucotti, *Lettere circolari 120, 122, 129, 131, 141, 146, 219, 220, 229, 265, 266*, Nizza Monferrato-Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1928-1943, and Angela Vespa, *Lettere circolari 265, 268, 270, 273, 276, 282, 291, 282, 291, 297, 305, 313, 316, 319, 325, 328, 334, 340, 346, 349, 362, 365*, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1943-1952.

that it will not be an exaggeration to say that one can attain a perfect understanding of the system of Don Bosco drawing on how they lived it in their day to day contact with the girls, young women and adults. The central focus accorded to the salvation of souls and the resulting primacy of religious education, the pedagogy of the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, Marian pedagogy are all important pillars of the education advocated and practised by Don Bosco, which found a high degree of correspondence in the educational praxis of the FMA missionaries in North-East India. Like Mary Mazzarello and the first FMA communities, they lived it in a typically feminine style as is evident from the following proposition:

“To make ourselves all things to all; to be all eyes in order to watch over with motherly attention, to be all heart in order to search for the spiritual and temporal well-being of the girls whom Divine Providence entrusts to us; to nurture with our understanding, shown through kindness and tolerance, the confidence of the girls which makes them serene and open in the manifestation of their virtues and defects, cheerful through the enjoyment of the great good deriving from peace with God and with men.”¹⁰

Spurred on by such orientations, the sisters in North-East India sought to incarnate the system in the different contexts of the region, focussing most on the religious and moral aspects of formation. The multi-religious context required them to make differentiated proposals, that were duly taken care of as they aspired to inculcate a life of values irrespective of religious affiliations.

The motto of Don Bosco *da mihi animas coetera tolle* and his zeal and enthusiasm found analogous rejoinders in the sisters of North-East India, whose ardour for souls rendered them greatly enterprising and full of initiatives in their educational mission. In the initial years, there were insurmountable difficulties of lodging, food and educational facilities for the orphans and poor girls from remote

¹⁰A. VESPA, *Lettera circolare 316*, 24 gennaio 1948, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1948.

villages. Yet, they forged ahead accepting many needy children not just as members of the family but, more so, as souls for the Kingdom of God. The interest for the salvation of souls is evident in one of the first writings about the mission in North-East India:

“How it breaks our hearts to see so many poor people struck by all sorts of illnesses caused by ‘humidity and misery’, to see that life is neglected because they do not know how to appreciate its benefits and to see them die along the roads, in the forests and in the public hospitals without a ray of divine light to enlighten their souls and speak to them of life beyond there where human sufferings will cease to exist. Born in tears, they also die in tears.

“Divine Providence entrusted to us also a portion of such unfortunate creatures. We extended our hearts and hands to give them a festal welcome in the name of Jesus Christ and with the hope of forming them into fervent Christians.”¹¹

In the early years of crèche and orphanage, many little ones in fact could not survive the consequences of the sufferings endured during their tender age. Thus, as they arrived the first thing the sisters would ensure the babies and children, especially if they were in critical conditions of survival, was Baptism so as to guarantee their participation in the bliss of God. A great number of babies died in spite of constant care and attention afforded them day and night. This caused untold sufferings to the sisters, but they were always consoled by the thought that the little ones expired with their untarnished Baptismal innocence and that they would number among God’s angels in heaven. Such considerations gave them not only consolation, but also a holy joy and satisfaction. Even on their visits to the families the sick babies in critical condition and with no hope of survival would be baptised whether they were of Catholic, Protestant or non-Christian parents. The sisters were wont to refer to it as a help afforded to such babies

¹¹ Innocenza VALLINO, *Una pietosa proposta* in BS LVIII (novembre 1924) 291.

“to fly to heaven among the angels”.¹² Such practices of the sisters derived their origin and inspiration from the *Pontifical Works of the Holy Childhood* which was widespread and had as its scope the salvation of non-Christian children, who were sick or abandoned or at the point of death through Baptism. This practice was propagated and recommended especially to those who worked on the frontlines in mission lands.

The sisters toured the villages far and wide and from many such rounds they returned to the house with children and girls to be educated and formed in accordance with Christian principles. Every single child brought under their care was for them a soul added to the number of God’s children and a victory over the devil as can be noticed from what they affirmed: “Our orphans are all from far off villages. Our sisters make long journeys on land and along the rivers to go in search of them and are truly happy when they can bring home some of them because they are souls who have been snatched away from the devil.”¹³

The tours entailed a lot of sacrifices of various kinds requiring them to cover long distances on foot, suffering hunger and thirst. Besides, they had to face lodging inconveniences resulting from the continuous shifting from village to village. Yet such difficulties were considered as mere trifles or nothing in comparison with the holy joy they experienced in making Christ known to a vast number of persons or in confirming them in their faith. Such dedication and ardour are thus documented:

“Tiredness... discomfort... who minds them? ... They are part and parcel of everyday life and are those aspects that

¹² Archive Immaculate Heart of Mary, Shillong (AIHM-SH), *Chronicle [Chro.] Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai 1941, November 3; AIHM-SH Chron. Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai 1941, November 19; AIHM-SH Chron. Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai 1941, June 3; AIHM-SH Chron. Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai 1942, June 24.*

¹³ Tullia DE BERARDINIS, *Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nell'India* in BS LIV (aprile 1930) 115.

assure fecundity to our poor undertakings. Therefore, nothing can deprive us of our joy even when, for hours and hours we walk barefoot through the paddy fields under the scorching sun with our legs swollen and numb that they almost refuse to hold us up, or when we take shelter in some huts from where goats and hens have temporarily been shifted, when in the night we are awakened by the unwanted surprise visit of pestering leeches mercilessly making us shed our blood without the glory of a luminous martyrdom.”¹⁴

The sacrifices were seen as a guarantee of fruitfulness to their demanding mission. Therefore, they were ready to pay a heavy price even physically. Furthermore, the willing correspondence and the openness of the people to their mission of proclaiming Christ and his Kingdom was indeed a great stimulus in intensifying their zeal and readiness to suffer. Such hardships contributed only to savour the special predilection of God who deigned to bless them with a promising field of work. These considerations abound in their annotations:

“Even during our other visits to the villages which lasted longer, the promises and the consolations we received in our first contacts with the different tribes of the region made us forget the fatigue and the discomforts of the tiresome days of walking. It awakened in us lively sentiments of gratitude to God for being called to work in such a rich and fertile field.”¹⁵

The ultimate aim of the sisters was always the salvation of souls. Whatever they did carried such an objective as a final seal. Therefore, whether they spoke explicitly about God in the catechetical and religious instructions, or assisted the sick, visited families and villages, taught in schools and training centres, looked after the orphans and boarding girls, everything ultimately spun around the axis of *da*

¹⁴ FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE (FMA), *Dalla nuova fondazione di Tezpur in Il Notiziario VII*, (ottobre-dicembre 1936) 3.

¹⁵ Cecilia DA ROIT, *Un promettente centro missionario nell'Assam in Il Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice XI* (ottobre-novembre 1940) 4.

mihi animas. The description recorded in the chronicle of St. Mary's Gauhati about one of their visits to a village for the distribution of medicine to the sick stands out as proof of this constant and conspicuous focus.

“An extraordinarily great number which put together will perhaps reach five hundred, came to us to be cured of their various skin diseases, which are much widespread in hot places specially here where the water and the sun are the major causes for such diseases.

“We cure their body, but we aim at their souls so as to take them to God, our beginning and our end.”¹⁶

The primacy of the salvation of souls in Don Bosco is clearly reflected in similar considerations of the sisters. Everything else was subjected or oriented to it. However, the priority of the spiritual aspect did not deflect their attention from the many human needs of the people.

The priority given to the salvation of souls can be traced also from the language of the sisters. Often they were accustomed in their writings to refer to persons as souls. It can well be concluded that for them the people they encountered, the children they cared for, the grown ups they served, were above all souls to be led to God. In this sense, it is interesting to note the description given of the foundation of the house at Tezpur, referring to it as “a centre of activities for a district with 500,000 souls, which still lives under the shadow of paganism”.¹⁷

In their mission the “*Da mihi animas*” was the *leit motiv* of all their thoughts, actions, movements and desires. Their oft repeated prayer to God was to be able to approach and touch the hearts of the people and to convert them to Him. Sometimes their supplications

¹⁶ Archive Mother of God, Guwahati (AMG-GH), *Chron. St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati 1925*, January 31; see also AIHM-SH, *Chron. Mazzarello Convent - Jowai 1926*, March 25.

¹⁷ FMA, *Dalla nuova fondazione di Tezpur*, p. 2.

sounded like a true bargain with God. They declared themselves unmindful of hardships, deprivations and difficulties for a return of efficacy in words and deeds which could result in drawing a multitude of souls closer to Him.

With their great zeal for the salvation of souls, it follows naturally that the sisters concentrated their utmost attention on religious education. The primacy of religious education or the teaching of Catechism was in fact a prescription in the Manuals and the Regulations of the Institute.¹⁸ Their concern to teach Catechism to all categories of persons beginning from the children of the nursery reaching up to the mothers of families saw the sisters enthusiastically committed in all the communities of the region.

It must be said that the girls, and in some cases also boys, who came to the sisters were not all Catholics. There were some who belonged to other religions, particularly, Hinduism, Islam and other Christian denominations. As much as they desired to gain souls and enlarge the fold of the Catholic Church, the sisters were also careful not to force their religious beliefs on the children or the adults they came into contact with. On their part the sisters would transmit the essentials by imparting an education to values and a life of prayer, conducive and acceptable to their religions. Their hope in such cases was to be able to do good through example and good words.¹⁹ Apart from such a distinction, the recurring element was the eagerness with which the sisters sought to inculcate a life of values and deep prayer in all the children, girls and women under their care. This was not difficult in the Indian context of those days, given the great religiosity and sense of the sacred that reigned within the families, be they Hindu, Muslim or others.

When it concerned the Catholic girls of the boarding and the orphans, instead, the Catechism lessons were accorded highest priority. The orientation for a strong focus on the teaching of Catechism was

¹⁸ FMA, *Manuale - Regolamenti delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, p. 149.

¹⁹ Cf. AMG-GH, *Chron. St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati 1941*, September 1.

determined from the initial days of the educational mission in North-East India and to confer such a direction was Sr Innocenza Vallino, the leader of the first group of the FMA who arrived in the region. Of her it is said, "Sr Vallino had very clear ideas about the upbringing of the orphans. They were to acquire a solid religious knowledge and piety [...] keep them on the right path all their lives and ensure their salvation".²⁰ The great zeal she had for the teaching of Catechism is testified to by Sr Luigina Saletta:

"We [...] transferred our work to a different locality of Gauhati where there was a better chance of expansion. I remember well Sr Vallino's desire of having a good boarding for the girls of the villages. She was keen on having them taught Christian doctrine. She spoke often of Mother Morano with whom she had been acquainted in Sicily. She was emulating her zeal in the teaching of Catechism."²¹

The methodology that was employed concentrated very much on making the girls memorise the contents of the Catechism. This approach was a privileged mode of impressing the truths of the faith and was a common method in the whole Institute. This option was re-confirmed by the members of the General Chapter XI in 1947. The motivating force underlying such a choice can be understood from the explanation that said:

"We would not want, however, [that] *reviving the energies from within* be understood in such a way as to exclude, for example, learning by heart in the teaching of Catechism.

"No, the study of the formula is essential because a precise and scientific wording is required in order to be able to express theological truths without falling into imprecision and inadequacy. This precise formula is given in the Catechism; it will be difficult, superior at times to the intelligence of the

²⁰ DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1922-1947*, p. 44. The term 'orphans' was inclusive of boarders.

²¹ Giuseppe DAL BROI, *From the Alps to the Himalayas. Life Sketch of Sr Innocenza Vallino*, Shillong, Don Bosco Press 1974, p. 23.

children, but it does not matter. The formula will remain impressed in the memory if it is learnt with the slightest explanation corresponding to their age. With the passing of the years and through experience, they will become and will remain a guiding light and a practical norm of life."²²

Accordingly, this method of memorising the contents was a predominant learning technique offered to the children by the FMA in North-East India, while the gradual assimilation of the content and the subsequent change in the lifestyle was induced by diverse other factors.²³

The sisters sought every possible means to make the Catechism lessons and exams special and memorable events in the lives of the children. The extraordinary preparations in dress and ambient provided glamour, whilst the manner of conducting lent solemnity to the event. Such a style of imparting the truths of religion can be observed from the following citation. It speaks specifically of the role played by Sr Vallino, but it certainly had an impact on the style of teaching of other FMA in the region, who imbibed the same spirit.

“Her [Sr Innocenza Vallino] zeal in teaching the Christian doctrine seemed exaggerated to some. She insisted that the children learn the answers by heart. At times the little ones were quicker in learning than the grown-ups. The examination on the Catechism was given the greatest importance. All the contestants had to be nicely dressed, the table had to be decked with the best cover and adorned with flowers. All the sisters had to be present for the occasion. The questions were asked in all seriousness.”²⁴

²² ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Atti del Capitolo Generale XI*, Torino, Casa Generalizia 1947, pp. 147-148.

²³ Cf. Innocenza VALLINO, *Un po' di resoconto in Gioventù missionaria* (GM) III (gennaio 1925) pp. 8-9; Luigina SALETTA, *La candidata apostola dei Boro in* (GM) XXVIII (maggio 1950) pp. 10-11.

²⁴ G. DAL BROI, *From the Alps to the Himalayas...*, p. 24.

The chronicles of St. Joseph's Convent, Tezpur, report that at times the closure of the scholastic year and the visit of the Provincial to the community constituted propitious occasions for the organisation of Catechism competition for the girls.²⁵ These initiatives were prompted by the faithful observance of the Manuals and Regulations of the Institute, which required to "possibly organise every year competitions or preferably Catechism tests; the exam on religious instruction be done with seriousness, distributing prizes to those who obtain best results".²⁶ The presiding over of such events by important personalities was to bestow greater solemnity to the occasion and thereby stimulate the eagerness of the children to know and assimilate the truths of faith. It would further contribute to making such events memorable for the whole of their lives.

Besides solemnizing the function at the local level, there were other incentives offered for the study of Catechism. Competitions were organised also at regional levels with all the young people of the different houses and villages participating. The grandeur of such occasions would have motivated the girls to prepare themselves well. The objective of such initiatives was to make them know more about their faith so that they would be steadfast and strong. One such contest was organised in 1939 which evidently was in response to the invitation of intensifying the teaching of Catechism as a preparation for the centenary of Don Bosco's first Catechism class on 8 December 1841, which marked the beginning of his works. The report regarding the competition stated:

"Of the many competitions which are being held during this period of Catechism crusade, the one that was conducted

²⁵ Cf. AMG-GH *Chron. St. Joseph's Convent - Tezpur* 1949, June 28; AMG-GH *Chron. St. Joseph's Convent - Tezpur* 1951, June 20.

²⁶ FMA, *Manuale - Regolamenti delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, pp. 151-152; see also Eulalia Bosco, *Lettera circolare 115*, 24 febbraio 1928, Nizza Monferrato, Scuola tip. Privata 1928; A. VESPA, *Lettere circolari 319*, 24 aprile 1948, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1948]; Carolina NOVASCONI, *Lettera circolare 266*, 24 April 1943, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1943.

for the girls gathered in the mission of Gauhati deserves special mention. The girls who come from different parts of the remote areas [...], under the lively spell of the charity of Christ open themselves to faith and love to study Catechism with a preferential love.

“The idea, therefore, to hold the Catechism competition during the solemn occasion of the *jingiaseng* or the general gathering of the Christians of the entire mission this year was welcomed with great enthusiasm. All of them, great and small, wanted to participate in it; more so because the prizes were very attractive. The first prize for the winner consisted of Rs. 5 (equivalent to 40 Italian Lire), which is a considerable sum for our poor girls who are not used to seeing much money!

“The outcome of the competition was very consoling because everyone had studied very well and each one was animated by the much coveted prize. The Christians who were present for the occasion were very much interested but the happiest one was the Bishop, who was glad to be the Chief Guest of this little feast in which he could see sure promises for the future.”²⁷

The sisters too were happy to see the interest and the enthusiasm of the girls in studying Catechism. What gave them greater joy was the assimilation of the contents which could be assessed by the change in attitudes and behaviour of the girls. The sisters attested to the transformation in the lives of the girls, their increased obedience, greater love for prayer and kindly relationships with the companions as the consequence of the translation of the contents of the Catechism lessons into life. Besides such behavioural changes, the sisters had the joy of seeing the girls grow in the spirit of charity and altruism, as is narrated of the winner of the above mentioned regional Catechism competition:

²⁷ FMA, *Catechismo vissuto tra le piccole Assamesi in Il Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice X* (agosto-settembre 1939) 3-4. The same article is also published in BS LXIII (novembre 1939) 332-333.

“The much contended prize was won by a twelve year old girl who is one of the best girls of the house. What would she have done with that sum? ... Her companions were curious to know and they besieged her with their questions, but the winner had her plans already and she would reveal it only to the sisters. She was among the few fortunate ones who still had a family to go to during the holidays. She thought of taking with her a little orphan who was entrusted to her care and who was always sad because she had come to the convent just lately and was missing her village. The money received would have served for the journey and other expenses ... Thus, the prize of the Catechism was used for works of charity. The poor orphan returned to the convent after some weeks and very happily showed us the beautiful new dress that her companion bought for her with much generosity.

“This was the prize also for the missionaries, for they saw that the young winner of the competition did not only know the Catechism mentally, but had it also in her heart and lived it.”²⁸

Other occasions of intense teaching of the truths of faith were the periods of preparation for the reception of the various Sacraments. The candidates were made to feel the solemnity of the event and were also closely accompanied in living the Sacraments in their everyday life.

4.2. *Human Formation in Preparation for Adult Life*

The paramount attention given to the growth in religious and spiritual life with the corresponding insistence on faith formation and value education is more than evident. It would fall into arid spiritualism and, therefore, education that could lead to inactivity in the face of the concrete realities of life, were it not to be complemented by an equally insistent emphasis given to formation which prepared them for a decent living.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

This integrated vision constitutes the heritage of Don Bosco. The primacy given to the eternal destiny and religious purposes did not detract him from active involvement to bring about a change in the physical and material conditions of life. Following such teachings, the preparation of the orphans and the boarders to face an adult life constituted one of the priority areas of the Institute. To that end, it was recommended that the sisters refer themselves to the existing Regulation which provided useful guidelines for the organisation of the orphanages in the spirit of Don Bosco and in the feminine style.²⁹ It was affirmed:

“The orphanages that best respond to the directives of the saintly Founder and the desires of Mother General are those that have the Elementary school, Vocational or Professional training centres and Specialisation Courses; those in which the Elementary schools guarantee a diploma, the Vocational centres which are organised with a set time-table for study and for practical exercises, following a criteria that should enable the orphans to learn a trade and become tailors or experts in knitwear etc. etc. after a period of five years.

“We would desire that all our orphanages and, to the extent possible, even the boarding homes opened in the missions, be organised in this manner. Today more than ever it is essential that our girls be in a position to earn their living honestly when they get out of our houses. Not the least essential, especially when they lack God fearing relatives who will assume responsibility over them, is the attention given to render them capable of earning a living as a Christian.”³⁰

²⁹ Cf. FMA, *Regolamento delle case di educazione dirette dalle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana 1895. The booklet is actually a transcription of Giovanni Bosco, *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana 1877, applying it to the community of women. See also A. VESPA, *Lettera circolare* 365, 24 October 1952, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1952.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; see also A. VESPA, *Lettere circolari* 297, 343, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1946, 1950.

The resonance of such orientations can be perceived looking at the organisation of the various orphanage-cum-boarding homes in North-East India, although the directives could not be observed to the letter given the differences of situations and possibilities. Among the aims of education, the element that figured much was what they called “preparation for life”. Under this term were included various aspects covering intellectual, social, domestic, sanitary and professional formation so as to guarantee the acquisition of essential tools to make a dignified living. This vision, therefore, complemented religious education and the two were much like the two sides of the same coin in the educational plan of the sisters. It can be observed from the following annotations:

“Thanks to Mary Help of Christians, the sisters overcame the diffidence of the people towards the Catholic faith. Besides, with the help of Divine Providence they managed to buy a better house where they could accept and care for poor and abandoned young girls. These were the foundation stones of a flourishing orphanage. There are around fifteen orphans, who are given faith formation along with a preparation to face the future that awaits them through an elementary education and practical training in domestic work, tailoring, knitting, weaving and agriculture.”³¹

As the little orphans grew up they were made to frequent regular classes. In all the houses that ran orphanages, viz., St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati, Mazzarello Convent - Jowai, Sacred Heart Convent - Mawlai, St. Joseph’s Convent - Tezpur, there were convent-run elementary schools. Therefore, as soon the children reached school going age they were immediately put to regular schooling. After the elementary school, the orphan boys were always shifted to the care of the Salesian fathers for their further education and formation. The girls instead continued their formation with the sisters. Besides the orphan girls, there were poor village girls who were recruited to the

³¹ FMA, *Piccole Propagandiste tra le colline Khassi* [sic!] in (GM) XVIII (ottobre 1940) 148-149.

boarding to give them Christian education and training in trades. Both the categories of girls received equal attention and care as well as the same formation. There was a strong recommendation to make the girls complete their elementary education and to facilitate further education for those who were capable. One such orientation of the Provincial during the annual visitation of the community, though it concerned the house of Mawlai, enunciates a policy common to all the houses. The report said:

“Mother Provincial asked the sisters not to accept the girls without a written promise [from the parents] that their daughters would be allowed to complete their elementary studies. After consulting the Salesian Superior of the Missions, those who succeeded in their studies could be kept as boarders in Mawlai, where they could attend the school of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions.”³²

It is clear that the above recommendation concerned the girls of the boarding. The fact that the sisters were recommended to get a written promise from the parents implies that continuity in education did not present an easy task for them. The value of education was not understood by the parents, and in many cases the girls were stopped prematurely.³³ In most instances such a decision was made in order to give the girls in marriage at an early age or to introduce them to the world of work as can be figured out from the following passage:

“How difficult it is to get the girls here! The families do not want to part with them because they can be employed in the tea gardens even if they earn very little per day. They are not

³² Mary BOUT, *The Diamond Years of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco*. Vol. I. *The Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco (FMA) in the Province of St. Thomas the Apostle of South India*. 1922-1953, Madras, [Province of St. Thomas the Apostle] 1986, p. 321.

³³ Cf. Hughes John MORRIS, *The History of the Welsh Calvinist Foreign Mission. To the End of the Year 1904*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing Company 1996, pp. 96-97; see also Christopher BECKER, *History of the Catholic Missions in North-East India*, Shillong, Vendrame Missiological Institute 1980, p. 87.

at all bothered about their education. It is enough for them that they know to cook rice. All the rest is completely insignificant.”³⁴

Besides the difficulties deriving from the lack of understanding of the value of education on the part of the parents, there were others that were determined by the condition of the children themselves. Sr Severina Schiapparelli testifies, “The children came from far away places, they were poor, delicate in health and quite unused to discipline. All this made it difficult to get anything out of them”.³⁵ Poverty, poor health, malnutrition and all the sufferings endured at an early age certainly had great impact on the growth and development of some children, particularly orphans, and there were cases that were irreversible as the one that is presented in the following report:

“Diar [...] was pale, quiet, without strength and without life. She loved to be all by herself, away from her companions and almost insensitive to the attentions given her by the others. Also from the intellectual point of view she was deficient. At school, it was not possible to make her learn even the first alphabet. At work, the only thing she could do was to knit stockings slowly which she liked very much.”³⁶

Apart from schooling, there were other aspects of formation which received minute and detailed attention from the sisters. They were particularly eager to endow the girls with all the requirements for becoming women capable of maintaining order and cleanliness in the house, knowing the basics in health, child-care, food, clothing and kitchen garden.³⁷ It is clear that the human formation of the girls was aimed at preparing them for family life. Here, the sisters were guided

³⁴ Maria AVIO, *Ostacoli dell'apostolato missionario* in GM V (febbraio 1927) 24.

³⁵ M. BOUT, *The Ambassadors Return*. Vol. II. *Mini-biographies of Deceased FMA (in India). They Blazed the Way*, Shillong, FMA-India [undated], p. 41.

³⁶ I. VALLINO, *Caterina* in GM VII (ottobre 1929) 188.

³⁷ Cf. DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1922–1947*, pp. 44–45.

by a deep conviction that women play an irreplaceable role in effecting a change in the family and consequently in the society. This objective was next only to religious education which, as seen previously, insisted on the formation of women with the conviction that the family is a domestic church and within it women play a predominant role in the faith formation of the family members, especially children. Such considerations and the multifaceted formation derived from them can be observed from the following testimony about Sr Innocenza Vallino, who was the leader of the mission in the North-East. It affirmed:

“Next to Religion it was a sound domestic training which [Sr Innocenza Vallino] aimed at giving them. They were to know to keep even the poorest room spotlessly clean, how to cook their simple meals and wash their clothes, how to grow a few vegetables and rear poultry, how to sew their clothes and weave their *sarees* and finally how to look after the little ones. Thus, prepared for Christian and domestic life in a warm, cheerful atmosphere, she felt confident they would do well and enhance the cause of God far more than one could tell.”³⁸

The objective was further enlarged to cover other important facets of life. This emerges from the recommendations of the Provincial as she made her annual visit to the house of St. Mary’s Convent. The report said, “She insisted that the girls learn to stitch, darn and patch their clothes before learning embroidery. They were also to be taught hygiene, first aid and the symptoms of infectious diseases”.³⁹

The education afforded to the girls, therefore, embraced every aspect of family life. Thus, the girls were prepared to become women adept in the art of housekeeping, no matter how poor their habitations. They learnt to blend poverty with dignity and decency in the maintenance of their homes and surroundings, as well as in dress and

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ M. BOUR, *The Diamond Years of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco*, I, p. 322.

clothing. Cleanliness and hygiene helped to keep off some sicknesses, and the possibility of applying their knowledge in first aid and diseases helped to enhance better health conditions.

In addition to the training received in domestic matters, the girls were taught some trades which could offer them job opportunities or the possibility of earning a living. It can be said that the sisters were very much up to the mark in situating themselves in the context of those times. They identified those areas which opened up to employment opportunities and trained the girls accordingly. This can be deduced from a statement made in the first years of their mission. It said, "We have started weaving classes, the art which will guarantee our girls a sure means of livelihood for their future".⁴⁰ Unfortunately, there are no records that could serve to evaluate this statement and know the extent of the effectiveness of such a training for women who passed through their centres. Besides weaving, other principal occupations taught were tailoring, embroidery and knitting. After the opening of the community attached to Ganesh Das hospital, some orphans were afforded nurses' training which opened up immediate possibility of employment.⁴¹

The sisters were particularly interested in training the girls to earn something because, in their rounds to the villages, they realised that the betterment of the situation of women alone could really make a difference in the living conditions of the families. Targeting women's self sustenance, therefore, was a strategic choice to effect a lasting change in the family and in the society.

4.3. *Education to Cheerfulness*

The imperative of cheerfulness in the Salesian educational system derives its origin from the almost instinctive understanding of Don Bosco on the need of the young people for joy, games,

⁴⁰ I. VALLINO, *Un po' di resoconto* in GM III (gennaio 1925) 9.

⁴¹ Cf. DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS, *Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1922–1947*, p. 57.

amusements and enjoyment. He was convinced, however, that the source of true joy is the Good News of the Gospel, a religion of love and a life of grace.⁴² This balanced combination of the state of grace and nature found its expression in the daily demands for a serious application to study, work and other commitments along with recreation, games and amusements which were attractive and appealing to the young people.

In keeping with such indications, the sisters in North-East India assigned a predominant place to entertainment and amusements in all their settings. Great importance was given to the moments of recreation in the daily schedule of the orphanages, boarding homes and schools. The feasts, visits of important persons and special occasions were ascribed a joyous atmosphere through songs, dramas, stage performances and dances.⁴³

What is most surprising is that in spite of the utter poverty of the beginnings, the sisters were wont to offer special sources of enjoyment and relaxation to the children. Poverty never seemed to have stood in the way of the sisters when it concerned providing particular occasions of joy like outings.⁴⁴ At times, these moments were offered to the girls as a reward for their good performance and as an incentive to better behaviour and a more serious application and assimilation of the values and lessons imparted. The joy and satisfaction afforded to the girls can be traced from annotations as the one in the chronicle of St. Mary's Convent, Gauhati, which says,

⁴² Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni*, Torino, G.B. Paravia 1861 pp. 16-28 in *Opere Edite XIII* (= Centro Studi Don Bosco, Università Pontificia Salesiana), Roma, Editrice LAS 1976-1977, pp. [170-187].

⁴³ FMA, *Feste celebrative nel nostro mondo* in *Il Notiziario XXII* (agosto-settembre 1951) 2-3.

⁴⁴ Cf. AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati* 1925, May 24; AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati* 1930, June 23-25; AMG-GH *Chron. St. Joseph's Convent - Tezpur* 1947, August 16.

“Today, as a reward for the study of Catechism, the superior thought of taking all the girls for a long outing. They left the house at 10.30 am taking with them all the utensils of the kitchen for cooking rice in the open. After a day of relaxation they all returned home fully satisfied”.⁴⁵

The children were offered varied and new experiences on other occasions too, as revealed by the following report: “The girls that remained in the house during the holidays went for a very exciting outing to the airport by bus. They enjoyed it immensely because they had never seen aeroplanes. Thanks to the kindness of an official, they boarded a plane and observed it to the great satisfaction of everyone”.⁴⁶ Certainly, it must have been a memorable day for the girls.

The way the holidays for the orphans and boarders was organised was also striking. Though the financial state of the houses was deplorable, the sisters did their utmost to make their holidays impressive. A number of times they took them to visit different places. The chronicle of St. Mary’s Convent, Gauhati, noted one of them:

“During the school holidays a number of girls returned to their families for summer vacation which will last for the whole month of July. Around thirty girls who remained in the house were taken by us for fifteen days to Sonapur where they were lodged in the house of Mr. Middleton, who in his generosity gratuitously provided us food and lodging for all the days we spent in Sonapur”.⁴⁷

Another year, fifty two boarders along with their assistants Sr Alma Ghidoni and Sr Angela Daglio were taken to the community of Tezpur to spend a month’s holidays in that community.⁴⁸ It comes out strikingly that they were unmindful of all the hardships involved in providing the girls with such opportunities.

⁴⁵ AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati* 1938, May 26.

⁴⁶ AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati* 1949, July 15.

⁴⁷ AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati* 1934, June 25-30.

⁴⁸ AMG-GH *Cf Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati* 1937, February 6.

4.4. *Educational Continuity Offered to the Past Pupils*

The service of education to the young girls that started in 1923 had witnessed many young women crossing the threshold of the FMA houses after having equipped themselves morally, intellectually and professionally to take their place in society. In the chronicle of St. Mary's Gauhati, the departure of Rebecca, one of the first girls of the boarding school, is recorded together with a note that she was going to be married and that she promised to be faithful to the teachings she received during her years of education.⁴⁹ The event was certainly a significant one and worthy of record as the efforts of the sisters began to result in women who would form the nucleus of families in their villages.

In the spirit of our Father and Founder Don Bosco, these past pupils were never left entirely to themselves. Much effort was made to accompany them in their journey of life. The manner in which they continued their educational relationship with the past pupils may be said to be mirrored in the exhortations in this regard:

“It is essential that our past pupils feel that they are truly loved by the sisters. In order to make them cultivate good sentiments it is not enough to give them a good smile or say some cordial words perhaps by way of some compliments. No! It is essential to be guided by ‘true’ kindness and ‘true’ cordiality. It is essential that we ‘sincerely’ take part in their pains, in their hopes, in their preoccupations, and that we be ‘sincerely’ interested in their lives. In a word, we must consider them as souls dear to us, close to us and entrusted to us by the Lord, in such a way that they in their turn feel that we follow them up with vigilant thoughts just as when they were girls in our oratories, workrooms, colleges and hostels.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cf. AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary's Convent* - Gauhati 1927, March 19.

⁵⁰ E. Bosco, *Circular letter 131*, October 24, 1930, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1930. See also E. Bosco, *Circular letters 158, 163*, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1933. Similar writings focussing on the care and attention to be afforded to the past

The resonance of these exhortations among the sisters of North-East India may be perceived from the efforts they made to give the past pupils a constant follow-up in contexts that presented no little difficulties, both considering the distances and the financial status of the communities. The sisters, in fact, made long journeys to the villages for the sole purpose of meeting the past pupils, gathering them and instructing them on their “responsibilities of living as good Christians and good mothers of families”⁵¹. At times they traversed great distances to call them for the annual meetings.⁵²

The first annual congress of the past pupils was organised by St. Mary’s Convent in 1934 jointly with the Salesians. It is recorded that most of the religious instructions were given by the Salesian fathers while the sisters complemented them with lessons on health and domestic economy.⁵³ The continued attention on forming good mothers of families may be deduced from such initiatives. The report of a meeting in Mazzarello Convent in 1935 highlights a further dimension of the vitality of the past pupils. It says, “Several of the girls who returned to the villages after spending some years with the sisters have become little apostles eager to convert their brethren. Lately the past pupils union was organised. Some came walking from villages that were twenty-four miles distant”⁵⁴.

It must have been difficult for the sisters to be faithful to the recommendations of organising annual meetings in the first years, and in fact it was not realised on a yearly basis. Nevertheless, it is certain that they reached out to them to the best of the possibilities they had at hand. Another congress of the past pupils was organised by the community of St. Mary’s Convent, Gauhati, 20-24 May 1937.

pupils can be found also in C. NOVASCONI, *Circular letters 274, 306, 315, 375*, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1944-1953.

⁵¹ AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati 1937*, May 21.

⁵² Cf. AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati 1934*, May 19.

⁵³ Cf. AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary’s Convent - Gauhati 1934*, May 23.

⁵⁴ M. BOUT, *The Diamond Years of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco*, I, p. 270.

The past pupils were dispersed all over the Brahmaputra valley. It can therefore be imagined how difficult it would have been for them to come together. Moreover, the first showers of the year in the month of May and the subsequent bad weather rendered it more difficult for them to bridge the long distances that separated them. This notwithstanding, the meeting was attended by around thirty of them.

The initiative consisted of three full days' programme jointly for the FMA and SDB past pupils. Msgr. Scuderi, the Provincial of the Salesians, spoke on the first day regarding Catholic Action.⁵⁵ The topic of the second day dealt with the responsibility of the past pupils in giving good example, on being pious and the need of their helping the Salesians and the FMA in their mission. In the afternoon the instructions were given by the sisters in their premises. Their talks centred around the role of women in family and on the responsibility of being good Christians. Their hope was that the four days would produce much fruit in the lives of the past pupils, as expressed in the account of the concluding ceremony:

“In the afternoon, after the conference in our house, we accompanied them to the mission to receive the souvenirs of the meeting at the conclusion of the Congress. May they be able to carry home the fruit of the four days of happiness spent in the company of their superiors, assistants and above all of the time spent on looking into their souls. May the Lord keep them good as models of Christian life in their poor villages where morality and good habits are not yet known.”⁵⁶

The close follow up of the past pupils is seen in the way the sisters tried to trace them at different places and offer them the help necessary, especially in cases of estrangement. In fact, the sisters

⁵⁵ The necessity of encouraging and introducing the past pupils to join the Association of the Catholic Action is an oft repeated topic of the Circular letters of the General Council (cf. E. BOSCO, *Lettere circolari* 131, 133, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1930. See also C. NOVASCONI, *Lettere circolari* 248, 24 January 1951, Torino, Scuola tip. Privata 1951.)

⁵⁶ AMG-GH *Chron. St. Mary's Convent - Gauhati* 1937, May 23.

who worked in hospitals narrate how they offered assistance, consolation and reconciliation with God to their past pupils, who arrived in their dying moments. One such instance is reported by the sisters of Ganesh Das hospital:

“Margherita, an orphan from Jowai, was settled in life but had no moral strength to cope with her difficulties. She succumbed easily and became seriously ill. The mercy of God brought her to the sisters who, while trying to give physical relief, tried also to reconcile her to God. A priest visited her often, and the sisters attended to her lovingly reminding her of the beautiful and innocent years of her childhood. The grace of God triumphed. With visible signs of repentance she received the last Sacraments and prayed to Our Lady to come and take her. She died on a Saturday and we hope she enjoys the bliss of heaven.”⁵⁷

Such care and concern of the sisters show that besides caring for their all-round education, they offered a continued formation and follow-up, aiming particularly at the spiritual and moral coherence in their lives and the salvation of their souls.

4.5. *Motherly Tenderness as a Distinctive Trait in Care and Relationships*

In most educational settings of the FMA in North-East India, the sisters took care predominantly of the orphans and the poor girls of the remote areas of the region. The lives of the majority of them were, even at a very tender age, already marked by profound and visible traces of suffering. The sisters were overwhelmed by the condition in which some of the children arrived – their painful stories, their destitution – and were induced to action with a typical feminine sensitivity and dexterity. Of their relationships with the orphans it is written: “Born in suffering and abandonment, they find in the sisters

⁵⁷ M. BOUT, *The Diamond Year of the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco (F.M.A.) in the Province of St. Thomas the Apostle of South India 1940-1953*, Vol. II, Madras, Pauline Printers 1986, p. 127.

many good mothers who, besides caring for their spiritual needs, pay attention to their formation and education and make of them good girls who will one day form the nucleus of Christian families”.⁵⁸

The educational relationship that should characterise the care afforded especially to the orphans is feminine tenderness – a specific way in which the FMA translated the dimension of loving kindness in the educational system of Don Bosco. The situation of the orphans as they entered the houses of the FMA in North-East India revealed tragic situations suffered in the very early years of their lives. The wants and the vacuum of maternal or parental love left lasting marks in their lives, requiring much effort on the part of the sisters to fill the void and make them grow as integrated persons.

Many of the children at the time of their arrival, especially the small ones, were fearful and would wail desperately at the sight of the sisters. Their tender touch was necessary to instil calm and serenity to the troubled little ones and gradually win them over. At times they would conquer them with the help of gifts, as is narrated:

“The following morning we quickly returned to the hospital to take the little orphan under our care [...]”

“The father had died the night before and his remains were placed in the waters of the sacred river which according to the belief of the Hindus would give eternal life to the children of Brahma.

“We found the little innocent one playing along the corridors of the hospital. Just a few candies were sufficient to attract him. We brought him to the mission where together with many other brothers he felt at home just like a swallow in its warm nest.”⁵⁹

There were times, instead, when bigger children arrived all by themselves. In many cases they were runaways and children with

⁵⁸ ASC B709 (fascicolo 2) *Lett. Ferrando - Ricaldone*, Shillong, 20th January 1939. The same can be referred to in S. FERRANDO, *La suora salesiana in missione*, p. 146.

⁵⁹ FMA, *Sotto le ali della Provvidenza* in GM XII (agosto 1934) 155.

heart-rending stories. The greater majority of them were orphans who, after the loss of their parents, were sold or bartered to pay off the debts of their deceased parents. It did not matter how much was due. The small orphans were taken as servants even for insignificant amounts and they would remain so until someone paid off the debt or they did so by themselves as grown-ups. This latter possibility, however, could be contemplated only if they succeeded to outlive the ill-treatment and abuse at their tender age.⁶⁰

The destitution and inhuman treatment rendered the children extremely vulnerable. Thus the condition in which they arrived presented a truly pitiful sight. It was in such moments that the care and attention of the sisters appeared in an eminently feminine style. The way they approached such children, the tenderness with which they surrounded them and helped dispel their initial fear and diffidence, the assistance and relief given to their physical needs testify to the loving care bestowed on such unfortunate children, as eloquently reported in some writings:

“She arrived at our mission in the evening just before nightfall. Timid and fearful, she stopped at the main gate and looked at the small cottage which was a peaceful and cheerful nest of our dear orphans; but she did not dare to enter. At the end, overcome perhaps by her need for food and attracted by the cheerful cries of our orphans she came forward. Horror, wonder and compassion filled our hearts as we saw her. The girls instead appeared ecstatic as she stood in one corner of the compound.

“I went close to her and tried to caress her, but the girl being too used to lashes, felt frightened. I observed her. The ears were bleeding and were without the interior lobes. The face was so full of scars and the two fingers of the right hand were broken!

“Poor little martyr! Whoever reduced you to such a state? What is the mystery that surrounds your tender life?

⁶⁰ Cf. I. VALLINO, *Cipriano, il piccolo schiavo* in GM IX (maggio 1931) 86.

“Seeing herself surrounded by care and attention, but with a timid and faint voice she said, ‘I’m hungry’.

“The pot of hot and abundant rice had just been removed from the fire. She was given a good portion in a plate with a curry made of potatoes. Seeing it, her eyes beamed with joy. With much ease, she made small balls of rice and ate them with the utmost satisfaction.

“Once her hunger was satisfied, she became friendly and began to narrate her painful story. Orphaned and alone, she remained in her remote native land until she was sold to a heartless woman. She was then subjected to all sorts of fatigue. She was not always able to resist the weight of the hard labour, was poorly nourished and at times she refused to obey. These constituted the reasons for the girl to be brutally thrashed. One day her wicked and furious mistress wounded her ears, her face and her fingers and mercilessly reduced her to such a pitiable state.

“A warm bath gave relief to the wounds of the unfortunate child. She was then dressed in new clothes and her hair combed after which her appearance was less appalling.”⁶¹

The initial fear of the girl when a sister approached and tried to caress her is easily understandable, because such a reaction on the part of destitute and abused children is quite normal. Used to the violent hands of adults frequently lashing and heaping blows on them, they hardly have known hands that care.

The maternal aptitude of the sisters can be gauged from the way they approached the children in their visits to the villages. They would never bypass the children without enquiring about them and in the case of orphans they would not spare anything to get them to the house. Many times this implied paying off the debts; but they did so in order to guarantee them a home and a family. In fact many of the orphans saw in the sisters other mothers and in the other children their brothers and sisters.

⁶¹ FMA, *Piccola martire* in GM XIII (febbraio 1935) 33.

The motherly role played by the sisters induced them to assume complete responsibility over the orphans. This implied not only paying off the debt of the deceased parents, taking care of them and seeing to their upbringing in every aspect, but in some cases, also administration of the family property even if it might have been small or insignificant. When such custody was required, the sisters were seen going about it with great precision. The case of two orphan children goes a long way to prove how they played the parent figure for the children. One of them was in their orphanage and the other was still in servitude due to the debts incurred by the deceased mother. The sisters paid off the debt and thereby obtained the guardianship over the children and then proceeded to claim the property of the family. Such a gesture was significant not so much with regard to the property which was worth almost nothing but for the act which demonstrated the assumption of the guardianship completely and seriously. A record regarding this goes:

“Now that we have the two children, it was our duty to protect the goods of the family. With much interest we proceeded to find out and compile the list...

“As is the custom of the place, there were two witnesses in front of whom we noted down all the objects. [They consisted of] ‘a pot to cook rice, another one for the curry [...]; two brass glasses, two sickles, a basket, some fishing hooks, a ring made of tin, a handful of rice, some garlic and some salt’.

“All these were put in a basket and brought to our house much to the admiration of the Catholics as well as the pagans who were present. On being informed of the reason they gave their approval to the act accomplished.”⁶²

The cases like the one quoted above showed how earnestly the sisters took upon themselves the parental role, particularly that of a mother. Such a part played by the FMA amidst the children was

⁶² I. VALLINO, *Cipriano, il piccolo schiavo*, p. 87.

underscored even by the Salesian Fathers and Bishops. In fact, especially in the first years, many girls were brought to the sisters by them as they returned from their missionary tours. To entrust such children to them was a sure guarantee that their integral formation would be cared for. In one of his reports about the Diocese of Shillong, Msgr. Stefano Ferrando wrote:

“Thirty poor children cheer up the atmosphere of the house and the work of the Holy Childhood which is a real blessing to the locality around. How many poor creatures are brought, baptised and taken care of in this blessed house! Born in suffering and abandonment the children find in the sisters many good mothers who, besides their spiritual well being, take care of their education and formation, making them grow as good girls who will one day become the nucleus of good Christian families.”⁶³

The feminine dimension of the presence of the FMA amidst the children, therefore, was very evident. It is in this way that they contributed to the formation of good mothers and strong and committed women of families.

4.6. *Some Aspects Regarding Culture and Beliefs*

Some references have already been made to the culture of the various categories of people in North-East India and the implications for the mission of the FMA. It has been pointed out that the women in the plains of Assam could be approached only by the sisters because of the cultural restrictions that did not permit them to have any acquaintances with men other than their own family members. Women were valued only in function of household chores, on account of which parents were hesitant or unwilling to educate the girls, and early marriage was prevalent even among the hill tribes. The sisters make numberless references to another common practice, especially in Jowai and its surroundings as well as in the Bhoi area of Khasi Hills –

⁶³ ASC B709 (fascicolo 2) *Lett. Ferrando - Ricaldone*, Shillong, 20th January 1939. See also S. FERRANDO, *La Suora salesiana in missione*, p. 146.

taking orphan children in servitude until the debt incurred by the parents is paid.

Other allusions especially to the beliefs and superstitions of the people appear from the accounts of the sisters regarding healthcare services. This was predominant in Jaintia and Khasi Hills where the cause of particular sicknesses was attributed to God. In some cases the patients struck by such diseases could not be approached by anyone because of the total isolation. In other cases, they would offer sacrifices invoking their cure, as can be observed:

“One of the existing superstitions is to believe that their sicknesses are the work of spirits and gods. For example, people who suffer due to big boils would complain to us how the spirits had not yet left their boils even after offering many propitiatory sacrifices and paid one or more witch doctors to perform ritual ceremonies.”⁶⁴

In the same article, the sisters narrate how they treated two women and how this approach helped to bring about a change of mentality with regard to sicknesses and presumably also regarding God. The account reads:

“One day, a young woman who had two big boils on the neck could not bear the pain any longer and therefore wanted us to see her. We found her lying under the scorching sun as she struggled and moaned in pain. Her poor face had not seen water (not to speak of soap because they do not use them; they usually rub the different parts of the body with a smooth stone) and therefore her hygienic condition was extremely conducive to getting boils. We began washing and cleaning the sick one and then some days later we did a simple operation by cutting the boils. The people of the place who were around to watch us were greatly surprised to see the stinking pus coming out of the two boils instead of the spirits! “The happy outcome of the operation which relieved the sick woman of her pain gave rise to hectic movements in the

⁶⁴ I. VALLINO, *Tra la gente di Joway* [sic!] in GM VI (luglio 1928) 131.

entire village. They immediately invited us to bring relief to other persons with the same problem especially to a woman who had a big boil on her shoulder. Everyone had concluded that the poor woman was *hajan ka jingiap* (close to death) and that all the sacrificial offerings to the spirits and the prolonged dirge of the witch doctors, which was very expensive, had been in vain. As soon as she saw us she gave a loud cry, which almost frightened us, and fell motionless. The curious people crowded around while the husband [...] continued to patch his pants in one corner of the hut.

“After having treated her for some days we managed to let out the ‘spirits’ from the boil in which they had nested. Had we succeeded to introduce Jesus into her heart from then onwards how happy we would have been!

“However, we are not discouraged. The operations on the boils, which to the eyes of the simple people are miraculous facts, served to increase the fondness of the poor people towards us. On market days especially, there is a rush of people to our poor house to ask us *dawai wieh, dawai rih, dawai kie shoh, dawang pang kpoh*, etc., that is, an unending series of medicines according to their illnesses that everyone learnt to take as if they were candies.”⁶⁵

Consequently, the healthcare services of the sisters served also to help the people overcome some of their superstitious beliefs and learn to adopt both hygienic and medical measures in the cure and prevention of diseases. The interventions of the sisters led to the betterment of the living conditions, especially of the poor people in the villages deprived of access to healthcare facilities.

It appears that the sisters were critical about some cultural practices and beliefs especially those which in some way or other were harmful or superstitious. However, there can also be found some powerful insights in the direction of what we commonly call inculturation today. This can be noted in their writings as passing

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

remarks while describing some of the traditional religious ceremonies, interpreting them in accordance with Christian concepts.

“In the first years of my missionary life in Assam [North-East India], I travelled through the Khasi Hills during my tours to the villages in the months of January and February. On such rounds, I was always struck by the thick strings of cotton hung on every bridge, small or big, and across every stream even if it was simply a rivulet. No one dared to remove or even touch them because they told me that *they would serve for the souls who during these months are on their way home...*

“And they explained to me that when a pagan dies far from home, according to the local custom, his body is cremated where he dies. But during the months of January and February which are considered sacred months for this purpose, the ashes collected into an earthen urn are taken to the village of origin to be placed in the mausoleum of the family, sometimes within the house itself. This transfer takes place following a specific ceremony, with a procession of relatives and friends, with moans... lamentations... sacrifices and oblations for the departed. It finishes with a solemn banquet for the living [...].

“As the ashes return to the house, so should the soul too return home; not to the earthly one however, but to the house of happiness. During the journey (and here’s the thought of expiation which vaguely refers to the Christian concept of purgatory) the soul could find obstacles along the streams of water... It could remain trapped there because of the impossibility of crossing it without the providential help of those strings which are placed there by merciful hands in order to facilitate the journey towards happiness.”⁶⁶

The sisters were certainly struck by such ideas similar to the Christian teaching on the purification of the soul before entering the bliss of paradise. In the same article is narrated another incident of

⁶⁶ C. DA ROIT, *Anime in cammino per tornare a casa* in GM XXIX (novembre 1951) 10.

the Khasi Bhoi area alluding to the same concept of the journey of the soul towards happiness:

“I had another proof of the belief of this people on the expiation of the soul beyond the grave in my missionary tour to the so-called tribes of the Khasi Bhoi area. After much walking through a vast forest, in a place far removed from the habitations I saw a small hut whose height perhaps was not even 80 cm. It was built on the model of the ordinary house in the Khasi village, that is, with much care and precision.

“‘Whoever had the pleasure of coming till here and making this beautiful hut which can serve only for the pastime of the children?’ I asked.

“‘No, it is not made for amusement,’ replied seriously the two good Catholics who accompanied me. ‘Can you not see down there that clearing? It is a cremation place of the pagans. They certainly would have cremated someone in these days and here they prepared a hut for the soul because they believe that the soul could rest and remain here for all the time it requires to wait until it is permitted to proceed to the place of happiness’.”⁶⁷

From the attempts made to interpret the beliefs and practices of the people in terms of Christian truths, it can be said that the sisters had an insight into the process of inculturation of the faith in the region. The time was not yet ripe for them to make headway in such a direction, but their intuitions were ahead of their context and time.

Concluding Observations

The first thirty years of the history of the FMA in North-East India shows that, as in any other venture animated by great passion and love, it enjoyed the freshness of the energy, enthusiasm, missionary and charismatic thrust of the pioneers in the field. It could be observed that they set off with an incomparable zeal, unmindful of the sacrifices

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

and demands and facing the challenges with indomitable courage. The beginnings, above all, were marked by many and varied impediments deriving from the lack of financial resources and insufficient personnel. Besides, the region with its paradoxical combination of diversified characteristic traits did not present an easy ground for the sisters. Thus, while the region could be hailed for its richly endowed natural resources, its fertile valleys and dense forests, its thriving flora and fauna, it could also be censured for the poor living conditions of the people and widespread mortal and infectious diseases that loomed in all corners. Again, while the region presented itself unique for the living together of numberless ethnic groups with the originality of their cultures, traditions, costumes and folklore, it presented an insurmountable difficulty in knowing the multiple and diverse languages to facilitate communication with the people. Even at an educational level, it presented difficulties not only for the sisters but also for the children, slowing down the process of their learning and progress in studies.

The FMA were pioneering women religious in most of the mission centres opened by them in the first years. Generally their work consisted in running orphanages, the education of girls, vocational training of young women and village visits for the education and faith formation of adult women. These were areas untouched by the political administration and not contemplated for many parts of the region especially those rural. In fact when the FMA arrived into the region there were hardly any schools away from the few towns. Thus, the educational mission of the FMA was an urgent need of the times to which they responded with great audacity especially through the opening of vernacular medium schools when they themselves hardly knew to speak the language. Besides, it was striking to note that in some communities like Jowai, they made tentative efforts to open more schools in the villages.

Given the fact that the majority of the girls of the boarding schools were recruited from the rural areas, it can be said that the FMA together with the Sisters of the Queen of the Missions, were

pioneers in efforts to uplift the rural people through the education of girls and women.

Vocational training was another field in which the FMA invested a lot of energy and resources. Its primary aim of rendering young women capable of sustaining themselves economically bespeaks a far-sighted vision in line with the promotion of women in an era when movements for self determination by women around the world were unheard of. Thus, even at the level of intent alone, such enterprises of the sisters can be termed highly significant for the women of the region.

The FMA can be rightly called the pioneers in the systematic village visiting mission in North-East India which later on came to be known as the mission of the touring sisters. In this field and in the marriage preparation courses which was specific of the community of Tezpur, the focus of the sisters was on adult women and their formation not only in the area of faith life, but also in the basics of literacy, domestic economy, home keeping, hygiene, childcare, maintenance of kitchen garden and fundamentals of healthcare.⁶⁸ The significance of the services rendered by the FMA in this field can be further gauged considering the fact that in the valleys of Assam, the formation of the feminine section was exclusively their mission since the women could not be approached either by the missionary priests or by the local male catechists.

With regard to the mission of touring the villages, it is essential to highlight the role of the FMA in the formation offered to the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in imbibing and living out their charism. In the first years of the foundation together with the FMA touring sister they learnt the different aspects of such a mission.

⁶⁸ Cf. FREDERICK DOWNS, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. V. Part 5. *North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Bangalore, The Church History Association of India 1992, p. 155.

From the time of their arrival till today in many different contexts of the North-East the FMA have made pioneering efforts in the field of education of girls and women. They have made remarkable contribution to education in the region in general and to the education of women in particular, with a special focus on the most marginalized sections of the villages and remote interior areas of the region.

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm with certainty that the FMA did play a significant role in the field of the education of women in the region. Initially and for the thirty years of history under consideration they gave utmost priority to uplifting the girls and women of rural areas. Their presence, therefore, did have a significant impact on the lives of the people of the rural areas, especially the feminine section.