NORTHEAST HEAD OF CONGREGATION: CHALLENGES CHANGING

Book traces 100 years of service by nuns

VIVEK CHHETRI

Darjeeling: From educating Bhutanese royals to reaching remote Himalayan villages on horseback to provide healthcare, the remarkable history of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny is documented in a book that is set to be released in Kalimpong on Saturday.

History of the Province of North East India and Nepal (1926–2026), authored by Sr Dr Magdeline Singh, will be released at the concluding ceremony of the congregation's year-long centenary celebrations on Saturday.

The celebrations will also feature a thanksgiving eucharistic service and a cultural programme.

The congregation's journey in the eastern Himalayan region began on May 26, 1926, when four nuns — Mother Claire Whelan, Sr Marie-Thérèse Lejeune, Sr Thérèse McGuinness and Sr Edmond Angles —arrived in Kalimpong. They opened St Joseph's Convent school in Kalimpong on July 5 that year with three boarders and seven day scholars.

The institution's distinguished alumni include Bhutan royals, Ashi Kesang Choden Wangchuck — the gyalyum or royal grandmother of the Himalayan country — and the country's reigning queen, Ashi Jetsun Pema Wangchuck.

Other notable alumni of St Joseph's Convent, Kalimpong, include Anuradha Koirala, founder of the anti-human trafficking organisation Maiti Nepal and recipient of the Padma Shri; Ama Jetsun Pema, who has worked extensively for Tibetan children's welfare; and Surabhi Rai, who topped the Indian Forest Service examination in 2004.



The founding members of St Joseph's Convent, Kalimpong

Today, the Province of North East India and Nepal comprises 187 sisters serving in 35 communities across north Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nepal.

"Celebrating 100 years is an occasion of profound gratitude to God and an opportunity to honour the generations of missionary sisters whose faith, courage and dedication have shaped our journey," said Sr Eva Anju Lakra, provincial superior.

The congregation runs 23 schools, including a special school for children with hearing impairment, besides Cluny Women's College and Cluny Community College in Kalimpong.

Its contributions extend beyond education and include running dispensaries in the Kalimpong hills.

In 1954, the Gitdubling dispensary recorded nearly 10,000 consultations, while the Suruk dispensary served an average of 25,000 patients annually.

Documents show sisters travelled on horseback to attend childbirth emergencies and provide medical assistance in remote villages.

"As we enter our second century, we recognise that the challenges before us are changing, and our mission must continue to respond to the needs of the times," said Sr Lakra.