

ST. XAVIER'S HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL UMOID

20TH September 2019

The First Exams:

At the time of writing this second newsletter, our students have just finished their first exams. Some of them, I imagine, would have done quite well. We enrolled a few students who were already high academic achievers. But I suspect a number would have fared poorly. I hope I am wrong, and in a few days the verdict will be out.

Many of our students had their early schooling in village schools where the teaching was often weak and usually done in the vernacular. They are the ones who, for no fault of their own, have been struggling the most.

The results of these examinations will be an indicator of how well they have learned, but will also reveal the progress they have made in English, the medium of instruction at our school. Based on the results of these first the examinations, we, the staff, may have to reassess our teaching methods and review our plans for the next semester.



The first exams in progress

Our Students:

We closed admissions this year with 57 students – 31 girls and 26 boys. Our students come from 14 different villages. While some of them carpool to come to school – at times with as many as 9 students packed in a mini taxi – others come walking, often taking over an hour each way.

In terms of religion, three of them belong to the traditional Khasi faith – Niam Khasi, five belong to a Protestant denomination, and the rest, 49 in all, are Catholics.

Most of our students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. Besides being full-time students, some of them do a considerable amount of work at home, ranging from cooking and cleaning, to fetching water from a village tank, to taking care of their younger siblings and doing farm work over the weekends. But if effort and commitment are indicators of how well or badly our students may fare in the future, I suspect that most of them, if not all, will gradually improve and succeed.



Rishankupar wears a cap he made only using forest leaves

A “Sacred” Forest, Of Sorts:

The Khasis, the tribe whom we serve, often demarcate certain wooded lands as “sacred forests” or groves. Traditionally, they have believed that spirits dwell in these forests and as a result the woods are sacred, to be respected, and that the trees may not be cut.

In keeping with this local tradition, we have started a “sacred” forest of our own on our campus, even if it is not necessarily an abode for the spirits. We have fenced off an area where we have planted over a hundred saplings. We hope to plant more trees and bamboos to extend our “sacred” forest after knowing which sites are earmarked for future buildings and playgrounds. Presently, our students look after the new saplings. They find consolation in knowing that the trees will be a living testament to their having been at St. Xavier’s.



Our “sacred” forest is coming up

Introducing Jainsems:



School assembly with the girls in jainsems

Talking of local traditions, on special occasions Khasi women typically wear a dress known as a *Jainsem*. Keen on ensuring our school serves to strengthen our students’ love for their culture, we introduced *jainsems* as part of their school uniform.

Unbeknownst to us, we later found out that we are the very first school to ever introduce this local dress as part of the school uniform. Pictures we took of our girls in *jainsems* went viral on social media. Two newspapers ran front page articles on the school. Two other TV stations also did a piece on our school. This publicity, we imagine, will help our school, which is located in a rural and neglected part of the state, to be better known in the state.

it – that we would choose to adopt their local dress for our uniform, and the pride of our local villagers in the publicity that their little village is receiving because of this initiative.

The most consoling aspects of introducing *jainsems* at school has been enthusiasm of the Khasis about

Our Growing Staff

In July, Rev. David Nukhu SJ, joined the school staff. A native of Nagaland, Rev. David is an experienced school administrator and teacher. His coming has been an asset to the school and a great blessing to our students. They appreciate his interest in their wellbeing.



In December this year, Rev. David, who is a deacon, will be ordained a priest. Needless to say, many of the students and several of the local leaders are planning to go to Nagaland for his ordination.

Rev. David Nukhu SJ

Our New Building:



Today, in addition to our students completing their first examinations, the workers finished casting the slab for the second floor of our new school building which is under construction.

The building will be a three-storied structure. The ground floor will house the offices and some common spaces. The first floor will have six large classrooms. And the second floor will have three more classrooms and a hall.

The work has been going smoothly, thanks to the meticulous planning of Bah Hamarles Thabah, a Shillong-based contractor, and his team of supervisors and workers. He visualizes having the building ready by February, and hopefully we will be able to occupy it by April 2020.

(A picture of the new building being constructed)

A New Path:

A good friend of ours, Mr. Elias, offered to construct a flight of steps leading up to the school. Earlier, all we had was a rough footpath which, because of the moss that grows in profusion here during the rainy season, would be slippery. The path was also steep, and the slipperiness made it so much harder to negotiate. So thanks to Elias, we now have cemented steps leading up to the school.

These steps also serve to remind us at St. Xavier's of the path our students have chosen to walk.

Coming to St. Xavier's has been a major change for most of them. They are in a school now where the teaching is all done in English, where expectations are high and hard work and regular attendance are the norm, where respect for the environment and others, and reverence for one's faith, are cherished and encouraged.

The path ahead for many of them will be steep.. But with the eagerness of our students to improve, with their openness to being guided and the work ethos they have inherited from their families, and most of all with their faith in God and their desire to succeed, we are confident that they will indeed climb the steps leading to a brighter future, even though for some it may be just one small step at a time.

At St. Xavier's, we thank God for His many blessings. We also thank you for your continued interest in our school and your unstinting support. Without these, not much would really have been possible.



Steps leading to the school built by Elias



Paul Coelho SJ