

Oldest missionary casts vote in Guwahati



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CM Paul 11 April 2016 9804 views

A 98 year old Italian missionary, who has spent 75 years in [India](#) marking 51st year of becoming a naturalized Indian citizen, cast his vote on Monday at the Assam Assembly elections, 11 April. He could be the oldest voter in northeast [India](#)'s gate way [city](#) Guwahati.

Accompanied by Salesian provincial Fr V.M. Thomas, Fr Uttam Molsom Hubert and his faithful [assistant](#) Mr Rajiv, nonagenarian Fr Mario Porcu cast his vote in Pan Bazaar Girls School around 9.00 am today.

“The Polling Officials and voters standing in long queues gave him preference and showed lots of appreciation for taking much trouble to cast his vote,” says Fr VM Thomas.

“I am happy to take the trouble for the sake of our people and elect the [leader](#) who can ensure governance for the [welfare](#) f the people,” says Fr Mario enthusiastically returning to his car.

Fr Mario became an Indian citizen at a time when Indian government was expelling foreign missionaries from the northeastern [state](#) of Assam, recalled Fr. V.M. Thomas, president of the [Conference](#) of Religious [India](#) and head of Guwahati Salesian province.

Fr Mario was then the rector of [Don Bosco](#) School in Shillong, a prestigious institution in northeastern [India](#).

Government of [India](#) records estimated that there were some 5,000 foreign missionaries operating in [India](#) during mid-1960s.

The [Home](#) Minister of then [Congress](#)-led Central government is claimed to have said, “Foreign missionaries already in [India](#) will be allowed to stay so long [as](#) we [don](#)'t have many things [against](#) them.”

Fr Mario was one such “harmless missionary” who became an Indian citizen in 1965.

A pioneer missionary in the Khasi and [Garo Hills](#), [as](#) well [as](#) in the Assam plains and neighboring Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, Fr Mario was a frontier missionary in several parts of northeast [India](#).

Fr Mario recalls, “It was indeed a sad time for the region when all foreign missionaries were turned out of then Assam when their residential permits were allowed to lapse without renewal on expiry.”

Fr Mario recalls that many schools, dispensaries, hospitals, agricultural, industrial and other social projects had to close down or remain hopelessly understaffed until missionaries from southern [India](#) volunteered to replace the expelled missionaries.

Scores of missionaries expelled from Assam went to neighboring states of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh [as](#) well [as](#) south [India](#).

Then Chief Minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha declared that all foreign missionaries would have to leave the [state](#) in decision with the federal government’s [policy](#), communicated in May 1967 to the Catholic Bishops’ [Conference](#) of [India](#) and the [National](#) Christian Council (Protestant), that eventually all foreign missionaries in the country should be replaced by Indians.

Yet close on the heels of Chaliha’s declaration, the Press Trust of [India](#) released a statement from the Indian government that it was only the border areas from which, for security reasons, foreign missionaries would be asked to leave, and that the rest of the country would not be affected.

Church records of 1960s reveal there were 764,553 Christians in Assam with 299 foreign missionaries working in their midst. The expulsion order accordingly hit at least, a hundred Catholic missionaries, including Italian Salesian Bishop Orestes Marengo of Tezpur in Upper Assam and three of his priests whose residential permits expired in September 1968.

Charges that foreign missionaries were taking advantage of famine conditions in Bihar and elsewhere to obtain mass conversions by unlawful means were repeated in [Parliament](#) so often that Archbishop James R. Knox, the former Internuncio to [India](#), was constrained to say in his farewell message in 1967 that the atmosphere of the Niyogi Report of 1955 was raising its ugly head in the country once again.

The report recommended the “legal prohibition” of religious conversion not “completely voluntary,” which was not implemented [as](#) it would have been “difficult to formulate and indeed to apply without violating the precepts of religious liberty enshrined in the Indian Constitution”.

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BY CM PAUL

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