

Catholic nun honoured for social service

Contributed by Correspondent

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A Catholic nun of Irish origin has been conferred one of India's highest civilian awards. Sr Cyril Mooney of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary reacted with shock and disbelief on 26 January 2007, Republic Day, when she received a phone call from the Home Ministry of India that she had been chosen for the Padma Shri award for social service. Sr Mooney, who dedicated herself to the service of the marginalised children of Kolkata, rightly deserves this honour. Leaving her own beautiful green land, Ireland, she came to serve India by educating children with moral and spiritual values. Sr Mooney was born in Ireland on 21 July 1936 and arrived in India 10 October 1956. She has a Ph D in Zoology, which she acquired in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Her missionary zeal to bring about transformation of society began with her work with child-to-child outreach programmes in 1964 in Lucknow. She took college and school students, each Saturday into the surrounding villages and sent them every evening to slums in the city to teach children who did not go to school. She also worked for liberating gullible domestic workers from the exploitative clutches of professional moneylenders. Her arrival in Kolkata in 1973 was a great boon to Loreto House, where she worked for six years. She built up a network of relationships, staged a mammoth Social Justice Exhibition in 1975 at Loreto House, which showcased the difference between the rich and the poor in terms of wages earned for work done, types of health and educational facilities available, service facilities, ratios of residential space available, and analysed the causes and suggested remedies. The nun was transferred to Loreto Sealdah in January 1979 when the school was on a very low key. With her wisdom, grit and experience she opened up the school to the poorest of the poor. Now, it has about 1400 students, 50 per cent of whom are from financially deprived backgrounds. She introduced programmes like barefoot teachers' training, hidden domestic child labour programme, Rainbow Educational programme, child-to-child village programme, Shikshalaya Prakalpa (working under the Sarva Siksha Abhyan) to train 1400 teachers to teach 26,000 deprived children in the slums of Kolkata, in collaboration with about 60 NGOs of the city, CLPOA and KRGEDUC of which she is convenor. She is also responsible for creating a system of value education, which has been introduced in many schools all over India. This has developed into a new course on Human Rights Education and introduced in about 50 government schools as well as other secondary schools here in West Bengal. The creation of the Rainbow Homes concept began with her initiative, where girls from the street are housed in big schools, which usually lie empty from 2 pm to 8 am. There are four such homes catering to 600 children. Recently she held a seminar for over 80 principals from all over the country to spread this challenging concept. The Padma Shri Award is a recognition of her works in the field of education. By living the charism inherited from Mary Ward, the foundress of IBVM, she has shown how the poor can be served within the structure. Among the many awards she has received are the UNESCO International Award, the NOMA Award for spreading literacy among the poorest (1994), the Telegraph Award for Social Service (seven times), the Hall of Fame (2005), the Telegraph Award for creative excellence (2000), International Christian Stewardship Award Toronto (2002), CINI - Friend of CINI Award, Ladies Study Circle - 'Woman of the Year', Alexander Award for Excellence in Science and many others. The Padma Shri is accorded to her for the social work of a high order in India. However, she feels, her cause to educate the poorest of the poor and the marginalized remains primary. When she was asked what should be her message to the people of India, while she gets this highest civilian award, her instant reply was: 'Give what you have received freely and the reward is hundred-fold.' (Source: mangalorean.com)