

CHAPTER XIV

CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

ACCORDING to the last (1901) census, there are 7,912 Indian Christians in the Nadia district. This number is exceeded only in three districts in the Province, namely, 24-Parganas, Santal Parganas and Ranchi. Out of the total number of Indian Christians returned, 5,715 belong to the Anglican Church, and 2,125 to the Roman Catholic Church. In the following pages a short account is given of the work of the different Missions in the the district.

CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY

The first recorded visit of Church of England missionaries to the district occurred in 1822, when Messrs. Hill, Warden and Trawin of the London Missionary Society went to Santipur to see whether it would make a suitable mission station. They reported that "the people have much simplicity and received the truth more earnestly than the Bengalis generally." They recommended the establishment of a station here for various reasons, among which was "the favourable disposition of the moral feelings of the people, which, we conceive, has been cherished materially by the general instruction which has been diffused by the Company's school." No specific action, however, appears to have been taken upon this report.

In 1832, a Mr. Deerr, who was then stationed at Kalna in the Bardwan district, went to Krishnagar for a change of air, and, while there, opened two schools in the town of Nabadwip and one at Krishnagar itself. For the next few years work consisted mainly in the establishment of more schools, but, in 1838, 560 persons

were baptised at Krishnagar, Ranabandha, Bhabarpara, Solo and Anandabash, and a mud church was built at Bhabarpara. In 1840 mission houses were built at Kapasdanga, Chapra and Ratnapur, and another church was built at Solo. The following year the foundation-stone of the present church at Chapra was laid, and the church at Krishnagar was commenced. The plans of the latter were drawn up by Captain Smith, and the cost was met from subscriptions from the residents and others, on condition that the Church Missionary Society should hold English as well as Bengali services in it. Both these churches were opened in 1843, and have been maintained ever since. By 1843 the Christian community numbered 3,902, and free boarding-schools had been started in which 42 boys and 22 girls were being fed and taught. During the next few years one or two other churches were built and mission houses opened, and the work spread over the greater part of the district; but most of the missionaries engaged in it appear to have been disheartened at the progress: the general trend of the reports submitted by them was that they distrusted the motives of the converts. There can be little doubt that the large access to the community in 1838 was caused mainly by the distress which resulted from the great inundation of that year and the hope that admission to the church would secure some relief from temporal necessities. The question of caste had also begun to give trouble. In 1850 the school at Chapra was commenced, and in the following years some attempts were made to impart industrial training. The conditions that prevailed in the church about this time were not considered satisfactory, as may be seen from the following extract from a report submitted by the Revd. S. Hasell in 1859:—

“It is of course possible to sketch a very dark picture of any of the congregations in this zillah, and perhaps one of the darkest might be Chupra, but still there is another view, and the people are not, I firmly believe, so much to blame as would appear on the first glance.

They have been trained to be what they are, by the over-anxiety, kindness and liberality of England.

“I will try to explain. There has always been an anxiety to get a number of Christians and to get all their children to school. There has been no lack of funds for the erection and maintaining in efficiency the machinery as schools, churches, etc. The poor have been, until very recently, liberally provided for. The Missionary has been all things to all men, always ready to listen to any tale of distress or suffering, and always anxious to assist to the utmost of his power every applicant. The teachers have always been employed, when necessary, in pleading the cause of any oppressed by zemindar, and in every possible way the whole mission establishment has been at the service, so to speak, of the Christian, and they have not failed to perceive that in some way or other are they of some importance. The education provided for their children they neither want nor appreciate, and the anxiety for their spiritual welfare, which leads the missionary to beseech them in Christ's stead to be reconciled to God, they regard as the result of fear lest they should leave the Mission; in short, may put on the profession of Christianity as a means of improving their worldly condition, and it is not surprising, after the number of years during which they have realized that as a fact that they should avail themselves of any new opportunities which may arise apparently tending to that end. To be more explicit, it may be put thus: for years my predecessor here, with untiring zeal and self-denial, devoted himself wholly to the people. He made their care his own, and wearied himself to provide for their temporal wants and necessities, in the hope of securing their attention to spiritual things. Many, now the heads of families, have grown up under his kind, fostering care, and treasure up his name among their household treasures. Surely neither he nor they can be blamed; but he leaves for Europe, I take charge, and gradually reveal my inability to follow in his footsteps. I have no money to lend. I cannot, and will not, superintend the many modes of employment which

his ingenuity had devised to assist them. They are told over and over again that they must now begin to help themselves. The style of living in the schools is reduced almost to the standard of that of the parents of the children; clothes are no longer dealt out with a liberal hand to those women who called themselves poor. The burden of supporting the really poor is thrown at once and for ever on the congregation, and, in short, everything by degrees is being cut off that in any way partakes of the nature of support. As a natural consequence, the people are displeased; the teachers, who are so intimately mixed up with the people, that they have scarcely an independent opinion, secretly agree with them, whatever they may say to me openly; and thus the whole community is prepared to murmur, and the least spark leads to an explosion. There is, however, still enough left, and more than enough, to keep the congregation together: unless some greater inducement present itself... They would join any man, be he Baptist, Independent, or Papist, if he came and really paid down enough to render it worth their while to leave us. The Gospel has not taken such a hold upon them as yet, as to render them proof against temptations, especially when the zemindar is pressing them hard for money. This must be considered before any judgment is passed upon them. The Mission has been very like a damp hot-house, and it is no wonder that some of the plants should fade and look sickly for a time, now that they are exposed to the influence of a more natural atmosphere.

"I believe, however, that in time they will be healthier and more independent; but it will take time, it may be years; meanwhile we may go on gradually withdrawing aid, and wait, and watch and pray."

In 1863, the Christian community was reckoned to be about 3,800. In the following year the Training or the Normal School, which had first been established at Solo, then transferred to Kapasdanga, then located for a time at Santipur, was finally moved to Krishnagar, where it

has remained and been maintained ever since. There is nothing special to record of the next ten years or so, but towards the end of the seventies the caste question had become acute. The following extract from a report submitted by Mr. Vaughan in 1878 may be quoted:—

"When fifteen months ago I arrived in this district, my first anxiety was to understand the actual state of things. I had a general impression that the condition of the mission was far from satisfactory. I am bound to say that the reality has proved to be worse than my fears.

"The standard of education throughout the whole district was found to be mournfully low; a painful state of ignorance marked great numbers of our Christians; a general neglect of religious ordinances, disregard of the sabbath, or other inconsistencies were all too apparent. The lack of earnestness and piety in too many of the Society's agents was also a very disheartening feature. Then, again, the fact that, for a long series of years, not a single convert had been made from the surrounding heathen, was strange and anomalous. The outer circle of darkness and death had derived neither light nor life from the Church in its centre. Indeed, a bare idea of the church being an aggressive and evangelizing agency seems to have never entered the minds of the Christians.

"Not a little struck was I the other day in coming upon an entry made by Bishop Milman in a church book here. His Lordship had made a visitation of the district just two months before his death. His words are, 'the Church has come to be looked upon as a kind of "jat," (caste,) which is well enough in its way and may be acquiesced in, but not to be wondered at, or attractive to others.'

"And yet there are elements of better things in the Church. The people are affectionate and trustful, they are intelligent, they are industrious and fairly energetic, nor are godly souls wanting among them.

“But the elements of good spoken of are no new thing; they have existed all along in the mission; yet, notwithstanding, a living death has for 40 years characterized the Church. This state of things has led some persons to ask whether there might not be some hidden evil, some radical error, operating to the prejudice of the Mission, and nullifying every effort to raise and improve it. This conjecture, I am convinced, was a true one: and God in His goodness has brought the root-evil to light. Within the last few months strange facts have been revealed, that the whole body of our Christians, the Society’s agents included, have for 40 years been fast bound in the bonds of caste: indeed, at no period has caste ever been renounced; it was brought over bodily with the people at the time of their baptism, and for all this time has that heathenish and deadly institution maintained its sway in the Mission.

“The first thing which awakened my surprise and suspicion was the discovery that the Christians were spilt up into sections bearing distinctive names, answering to their caste-standing prior to their conversion. Thus the Hindu converts and their descendants have ever called themselves ‘Hindu Christians.’ In the same way the converts from the Musalman pale have ever clung to the term ‘Musalman Christians.’ And as in their unconverted state it was unlawful to mingle their blood, so to this day the ‘Hindu’ and ‘Musalman’ Christians, respectively, refuse to intermarry. Nay, the very sub-castes of the former standing have been maintained in unbroken integrity. Thus the Christians are subdivided into two sections called ‘Satgeya’ and ‘Soterapera,’ answering to Musalman sects in this district. These again kept up the traditions of their Mosiem forefathers and refuse to intermarry. The grandchildren of the first converts as rigidly maintain their caste prejudices and exclusiveness as did their ancestors ages ago. The hallowed fusing power of the Gospel has been lost, and the glorious oneness of that family which is the Church and household of God has never been realized.

“But it is in relation to other sections of the Christian community that the worse aspect of caste feeling presents itself. The members of this section are called ‘Moochie Christians.’ As their name implies, they were converts from one of those despised castes who occupy the lowest place in the Hindu system. As dealers in skins and leather, they were abhorrent to orthodox Hindus, who worship the cow. Hinduism thus fixed its unmerited stigma upon them. Christianity has not removed that stigma; for although baptised and grafted into the Church of Christ, their Christian brethren have ever regarded them with loathing and animosity. Besides personal dislike, a selfish consideration had actuated the other sections in their treatment of these brethren. They found that by denouncing the moochies they obtained perfect toleration, and even caste recognition, among their heathen neighbours; but to own the moochies, and treat them as brethren in Christ, would have severed the dubious tie which they wish to maintain with the outer circle. Accordingly for all these years their effort has been to ostracise those poor brethren, and even to drive them beyond the pale of Christianity. If a native Pastor ventured to baptise a moochie infant, he was threatened with desertion by the rest of his people; when a poor moochie brother ventured into a church, the congregation indignantly protested; if they presumed to approach the holy table, the other communicants declared they would withdraw. It is a sad and strange story, and one ceases to wonder that under such a state of things the Church’s life was faint and slow.”

In 1880 Mr. Vaughan wrote:—

“It will soon be two years since the outbreak at Bollohpore, with its strange revelations, startled us. That unlooked-for event brought to light hidden evils of which hardly any one had dreamt, and went very far towards accounting for the past history of this Mission. It largely explained the strange enigma that, despite all effort to the contrary, the Church in these regions had remained lifeless and inactive, and had made for well nigh forty

years hardly any accessions from the outer mass of heathen darkness.

"It showed that caste, with all its deadly and deterrent influences, had been imported into the church by the first converts, and had lived on in unbroken integrity for all those years; that the same impassable barriers, as Hindus, Musalmans and moochies before their conversion, continued still, to divide them as fellow Christians; so to divide them that not even would they meet at the Holy Supper of love.

"But it is important to guard against too sanguine expectations : indeed, few persons who rightly comprehend the nature of the evils which have oppressed this Mission, would look for a speedy triumph. To suppose that caste prejudice, which is burnt into the very nature of the people, will expire in a day, is a great mistake.....

"Sombre, therefore, as the general aspect of things may be, it is not unbroken gloom; streaks of light and hope cheer us on every way. For these we are most thankful, but I am particularly anxious that too much should not be made of the signs of good which have been vouchsafed us. I have seen more than once the statement that 'the caste struggle is well nigh over, and that signs of spiritual awakening are appearing throughout the district.' I cannot bear out such a statement. The caste struggle is not over, and we could not make a greater mistake than to assume that it was."

In 1881 Mr. Vaughan reported that for some time no outward expression of caste feeling had given trouble, and the following year Mr. Clifford, who succeeded him, reported to the same effect, but added that the feeling was not eradicated, but only suppressed, and that the hope lay in the next generation. This hope appears to have been fulfilled, for there is no further reference to the matter in later reports, and it is to be presumed that the caste question has now ceased to cause trouble.

After a period of financial difficulties, which led to the closing of some outstations, work was resumed with vigour, and in 1855 the Bishop visited the district and remarked that "the wonderful improvement effected during the last five or six years shows how much depends upon wise, systematic supervision and mutual confidence : there is now no more hopeful and interesting mission in North India than that in the Nadia district." In the same year the Church of England Zenana Mission Society commenced work in the district.

In 1886 was held at Balabhpur the first meeting of the Nadia District Native Church Council, which, together with a sister council in Calcutta, had been constituted in accordance with a resolution of the Bengal Native Church Council held at Krishnagar in May 1884. The ultimate object of the District Council is to provide the native Christian community, which inhabits 65 villages, distributed among the nine parishes of Balabhpur, Chapra, Ratnapur, Kapasdanga, Solo, Joginda, Ranabandha, Bahirgachhi, and Krishnagar, with a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending system, thus giving the scattered congregation a federal union throughout the district. The council has a Chairman (also known as Superintendent), Vice-Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, and the body is composed of all the pastors under the District Council and two delegates from each of the Church Committees in the district. The income of the Council is derived from the grant from the Church Missionary Society; from a fixed rate paid compulsorily every month by the workers under the Council; and from contributions from friends and from the members of the Churches. The Chairman, or Superintendent, has to be constantly on the move, visiting the parishes, keeping the workers up to the mark, examining schools, checking accounts and aiding Pastors and Committees with advice. The Council has provided many native Christians for work in Bengal and other parts of India, and has certainly influenced missionary work in India.

Steps were taken in 1886 for evangelizing the northern part of the district, in the commencement of the system known as the Associated Band of Evangelists' scheme, with head-quarters at Shikarpur, at which place a house, church, and hospital and dispensary were subsequently built. In 1891 the Church Missionary Society Girls' School was put on a satisfactory basis, and has done excellent work since. During subsequent years great improvements were effected in the large school at Chapra and in the Training School at Krishnagar.

In 1906 the Society took over the Ranaghat Medical Mission, of which an account has been given below. It is reported that in 1907 the numbers attending the dispensary continued at about 800 a week up till August, when the increase became rapid and the numbers nearly doubled during September. The plan of having two days a week at the dispensary at Ranaghat was adhered to, and from February till the end of June the outstation at Kaliganj was open at first two days a week, and thereafter one day a week, on account of the small staff and the difficulty of reaching the place during the rains : the total attendances at Kaliganj were about 37,000. In the Ranaghat hospital 282 in-patients were treated, and 37 major and 76 minor operations were performed.

The following extract is taken from the report of the Superintendent of the Chapra School for 1907 :—

“Last year two hundred and fifty-two pupils were on the roll, divided roughly into—

Christian boys 150 (114 are boarders).

Mohammedan boys 20.

Hindu boys 20.

“One boy died of fever, but the general health of the school was good. We stood first and second both in the Middle Vernacular and Middle English sections amongst the Church Missionary Society Schools of the district at the annual examination in September, though we did not get a coveted Government scholarship.

“The Industrial Department needed further arranging and development and its funds replenishing, and I found it necessary to collect money for it from Home friends who sent £160. One believer in industrial work, living in Calcutta, sent me £100 unsolicited. In my letter I also mentioned the need of a European Manager or Foreman for the Department. I have just found a man with experience, who, I trust, by giving his undivided attention to it, will carry out the purpose of its establishment, viz., the proper training of the boys, now 30 in number, who are learning carpentry and smithwork. A new opening for boys appeared in the newly established Rifle Factory at Ichapur, not far from Kanchrapara, and there a hostel was opened and placed under the care of a catechist last April. It has suffered the ups and downs of every new project, and has added much to the financial burdens which the missionary at Hat Chapra seems always bound to bear.”

The report for the year 1907 of the Chairman of the Native Church Council of the district contains some remarks of general interest, and a portion of it is reproduced below :—

“To take the year as a whole, its characteristics have been very sober. It has been one of the unhealthiest years I have ever experienced, and many of my workers have been laid aside with protracted illness, and more with occasional spells of sickness, incapacitating them for work; so that in many places it has meant leading the sick and wounded to the fight. Cholera and malaria are still laying many low all round me as I write.

“In addition to this, it may be said that temporally I have never known a worse year. Famine prices have ruled and for persons of small fixed income, it is specially hard to have food-stuffs of all kinds doubled in price right through the year. It has meant real privation to many, and at such a time as this, it has been especially trying that a diminished income from home has kept us from granting increases urgently needed, and made it

necessary to reduce our staff while straining every nerve by urgent appeals to friends, withholding special help, and spending every pice that came to our hands to keep the existing work going. It has also been a year of political unrest. The growth of the nationalist movement is having a marked effect upon the Missionary cause, for it spurns and repudiates all European connexion, including religion, and seeks to cling to all indigenous things, including Neo-Hinduism. Throughout the educated classes all over the country there is a growing impatience toward European authority and control, and dim perception, or foreshadowing of a national life and spirit, among races and creeds hitherto absolutely separated and aloof, and an utter absorption in political questions to the exclusion of all else. The Native Christian community has been also stirred by this movement; its spirit has penetrated the churches, and several members have been prominent in it. Through all its trials the year has been a year of grace, and in many cases one is able to report more than usual patience, un murmuring loyalty and growth in grace. Writing of the workers, brings the work to my mind. I read in your pamphlet on the Bengal Mission 'that the post of a European Superintending Missionary is no sinecure; he has to be daily in the saddle (whether supported by bicycle or horse), visiting the different villages (he has nine parishes having an average of seven villages attached to each), examining the schools, one in each village, and generally seeing that each one of his 75 or 80 workers is doing his share of the work faithfully and realously', and, it might well be added, this in a climate almost as deadly as West Africa, that invalids men home, stricken down by fever year by year, so that a really old Missionary is not to be met with in this plain that either drowns or burns, a desert and a swamp, by turns."

According to the returns for 1907 five European and eight Indian Clergymen were at work in the district at the end of that year. There was one boarding-school for girls, at Krishnagar, attended by 76 pupils, all Christians, and maintained at an annual cost of Rs. 5,700. There

was one High School, also at Krishnagar, attended by 233 boys, of whom 50 only were Christians, and maintained at a cost of Rs. 5,402, of which sum Rs. 1,540 was provided by Government. Throughout the district 43 day schools were maintained at a cost of Rs. 10,717 (Rs. 1,400 being provided from public funds), and were attended by 1,241 boys (including 200 Christians) and 412 girls (including 282 Christians). The above figures will show that a large proportion of the expenditure of the Society in the district goes towards providing secular education to non-Christians.

RANAGHAT MEDICAL MISSION

The Ranaghat Medical Mission was established in 1893 by Mr. James Monro, C.B., a retired member of the Bengal Civil Service. During his service Mr. Monro had been struck with the need for Mission work in Bengal, and the members of his family resolved to join their parents in the work. The district of Nadia was well known to Mr. Monro, who at one time was in charge of it, and when, in 1892, the Secretary to the Calcutta Committee of the Church Missionary Society suggested Ranaghat as a suitable place for the work of Mr. Monro and his family, the suggestion was accepted. The Mission is conducted in accordance with the principles of the Church of England, and the sphere of its operations was in 1901 constituted a Missionary district by the Lord Bishop of Calcutta. It was carried on by Mr. Monro and his family, assisted by various workers who joined them from time to time, until the end of 1905, when, owing to various difficulties, chiefly in the matter of staff, it was made over to the Church Missionary Society, by which it is now being maintained on the same lines as those conceived by its founder.

The Mission opened a dispensary and a hospital in Ranaghat in July 1894, and in the first nine months gave free medical advice and medicine to nearly 28,000 out-patients, subject only to the condition that they attended a short service which was held before the medical work

commenced. During this same period 49 in-patients were treated in the hospital. In the cold weather evangelistic visits were paid to a good many villages in the neighbourhood of Ranaghat. In 1895 the medical work was continued in the same manner, except for a period of one month, during which it was necessary to give the much overworked staff a short rest. In this year, the enormous number of 68,000 out-patients, coming from 1,349 villages, were treated at the dispensary and 122 in-patients received into the hospital. A small school was started in connection with the Mission, and bible-classes and services on Sundays were commenced. Itinerating work was carried on to a certain extent, so far as the exigencies of the medical work allowed. The record of 1896 was much the same as in the preceding year, but the work in 1897 was interrupted by the great earthquake which played havoc with the buildings occupied by the Mission. Between 1898 and 1902 the medical work was extended by establishing out-dispensaries at three or four outlying villages, and a considerable number of patients were attended by the members of the Mission while on tour. In 1902 the head-quarters of the Mission was removed to a site about a mile from Ranaghat, where a village has now been built, to which the name of Dayabari (home of mercy), has been given. The settlement at Dayabari contains a dispensary building, which, with the waiting sheds attached, is capable of affording accommodation for 1,000 out-patients; hospitals (with operation-room and store-houses attached) with room for 40 beds; barracks for the unmarried subordinate staff; accommodation for women attached to the Mission; school for girls and infants; seven bungalows containing an aggregate of 44 rooms for the accommodation of the members of the Mission; and a small church with mud walls, which it is now intended to replace with a masonry building. Four-fifths of the cost of this settlement, which was considerable, was borne by the members of the Mission, and the balance was met by contributions received from friends. The work was carried on with full vigour during 1903 and 1904, but operations had to be

limited during 1905 owing to illness among the staff and other difficulties, which led, as has been stated above, to the handing over of the Mission to the Church Missionary Society on 1st January 1906.

During the 12 or 13 years of its existence as a separate entity, the Mission did an enormous amount of good, as may be gathered from the following statistics; at the head-quarters dispensary over 250,000 out-patients were treated, and 100,000 at out-stations; about 30,000 patients were treated by members of the Mission when on tour; and well over 2,000 in-patients were received in the hospital. This is indeed a noble record of human suffering relieved, and the poor of the Ranaghat subdivision owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Monro and his family.

ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION

In 1855, at the request of the Right Reverend Dr. Carew Archbishop of Calcutta and Vicar-Apostolic of Western Bengal, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith sent out three missionaries from the Seminary of St. Calocera in Milan, namely Fathers Albino Parietti, Antonio Marietti and Luigi Limana. They arrived in Calcutta on 17th May 1855, and on 15th June following they reached Berhampore, which they made their head-quarters. They worked in the districts of Murshidabad, Rajshahi, Malda, Bogra, Nadia and Jessore, and in a part of the Sundarbans. In 1857 Father Limana went to Krishnagar and settled down in a small house, which served also as a chapel for the few Catholic residents who had hitherto been receiving occasional visits from a Calcutta priest. These converts having left the place or died, the house was let to the Municipality, and was used as a small hospital. In 1860 the Mission was re-started by Father Limana with the help of another Father and four Sisters of Charity. They founded a boarding-school for boys and another for girls. Four years afterwards other missionaries and nuns joined them, and they were able to start work in the interior of

the district. In 1866 the first village mission was started by Father de Conti and Father Brioschi at Dariapur in the Meherpur subdivision. Not being very successful there, Father Brioschi moved to Fulbari, where he built a church, and commenced working in the neighbouring villages. In September 1886 the Diocese of Krishnagar was constituted, comprising the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Khulna, Murshidabad, Faridpur, Dinajpur, Bogra, Malda, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Cooch Behar. Monsignor Pozzi, the first Bishop, died in October 1905, and he was succeeded by the present (1909) Bishop, Monsignor Taveggia.

At Krishnagar there is the Cathedral Church of the Divine Saviour, built in 1898. There is also a boarding-school and orphanage for Bengali boys, and the Convent and Orphanage for Bengali girls. Attached to the Convent is a home for widows and catechumens, and also a refuge for the aged and incurable under the care of the Sisters of Charity. There are churches at Bhabarpara, Fulbari, Meliapota, Ranabandha and Pakhura, with resident clergy at Bhabarpara and Ranabandha. At Bhabarpara the Sisters of Charity maintain a school and an orphanage for Bengali girls. The Catholic population of the district is about 3,350 and of the Diocese about 6,300. The girls at the Convent in Krishnagar make beautiful Italian hand-made lace of any design or pattern. Attached to the Mission there are many primary schools, some of which receive stipends from the District Board.