

Christian Mission and Evangelization in Bangladesh

Dr. Father Tapan De Rozario*

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Abstract. “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation” (Mk. 16:15), is the last commandment of Jesus Christ to his disciples. Therefore, the Christian Church is a missionary church and her special concern and mission is to preach the Gospel, the Good News, to all the nations. Bangladesh is a South Asian country in which Christian history had its beginning in the early sixteenth century through the efforts of Portuguese missionaries. This essay discusses the evolving sense of Christian mission in Bengal and sketches the major Christian churches and denominations, Protestant as well as Catholic, and their activities in Bangladesh. It also indicates some of the enviroing political, demographic and social factors that impinge upon Christian religious, educational and social endeavors.

Religio-cultural and socio-political context for mission in Bangladesh

Throughout its long history, the Bengal region has been characterized by a unique coming together of many races, languages and religious traditions. There are represented in Bangladesh Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religious traditions and also different groups within each major religious tradition. In terms of language and culture the vast majority of Bangladeshis are Bengalis, but there are various small tribal groups and twentieth-century Hindi-speaking Bihari immigrants and their offspring. As a minority, Christians always try to dialogue with those of other traditions of religious faith. It is important to do so in order to build up mutual fellowship. For example, Catholic institutions, such as schools, colleges and hospitals, serving not only Catholics, are living witnesses of Christian faith. The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-Religious Dialogue in particular is very active arranging various kinds of programs with other religious communities to share Christian values.

While the Christian churches enjoy freedom of worship, the government tends to be wary of their activities. Bangladesh was founded in 1971 as a secular democracy, but in 1975 ‘secularism’ was removed from the Constitution as a ‘pillar’ of the state. Then in March 1988, Islam was declared the state religion. The government has been moving the

*Assistant Professor, World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
E-mail: trozario@neksus.com

country toward the Islamic bloc internationally and Bangladesh is an active member of the Organization of Islamic Conference. This is heightening tension between Muslims and followers of other religious traditions and there is a vociferous minority of Muslim fundamentalists. The government is torn between its identification with the Islamic world and Bangladesh's ethnic affinity with the people of India. This has resulted in some uncertainties regarding the presence of Christian missionaries from registered foreign mission societies. Policy in this regard could change at any time.

The major ethnic group in Bangladesh is the Bengali, which comprises nearly 98% of the population. The Biharis, an immigrant group from India, number between 200,000 and 300,000 and live in crowded refugee camps. Because they supported the former Pakistani government in the war of independence, they are generally unwanted and oppressed. Their number is decreasing due to emigration and absorption of some of their offspring into the Bengali population. Although Bangladesh officially does not recognize the caste system, its effects still linger among the Hindu people. There are some twenty-five major Scheduled Castes (a category designating endogamous groups of low status) in Bangladesh of which the Namasudra caste is the largest. Though Islam does not perpetuate a caste system as such, the Bengali Muslims can be divided into three status categories: Ashraf (better class), Ajlaf (lower class) and Arzal (lowest class). Each of these can be further sub-divided into many sub-groups. The remaining 2% of the population are divided among thirty or more Adibasi or tribal groups, each having its own distinct language.

Bengali is the official and almost universal language of Bangladesh. Over 98% of the people speak it. Urdu and tribal languages make up the remaining 2%. English, however, is widely used in government and business and by the educated elite. Altogether there are forty or so languages in use in Bangladesh. The literacy rate of the population at large is low (ca. 45%) and has not risen dramatically since independence.

In terms of religio-social community, Muslims (almost entirely Sunnis) constitute nearly 90% of the Bangladeshi population, Hindus close to 10%, Buddhists and Christians about 0.5% each with just a scattering of Bahais and others.

Christian missions in Bangladesh: overview of responsive and unresponsive groups

Christian missions have carried on work in Bangladesh for over 400 years. The famous

legendary local preacher, Dom Antonio, had tremendous success in preaching the 'Good News' in the Dhaka-Bhawal locality known as Nagori. Some of the finest missionaries, including the famous nineteenth century Baptist, William Carey, labored in Bengal. Moreover, millions of dollars for relief and development have been sent to help this afflicted nation. Yet, after all these efforts, the number of Christians in Bangladesh is less than half of one percent and increasing only slightly above the general population growth rate. After becoming Christians, many people are isolated from their culture, particularly the Muslim and Hindu converts. They become dependent on the mission station for their support.

Among Hindus all the higher castes are virtually unreached. Of the lower castes, many have shown some response to the Gospel (over 2% have become Christian), but from other castes, there are hardly any converts. The Bengali Muslim majority has hardly been touched by the Gospel, since most evangelism is being directed to the religious minorities. The Bihari immigrants from India are also Muslims and they too have been resistant to evangelization. The disturbed political situation in the tribal hill area restricts evangelical work and witness there. Amongst the animist Mru and the Buddhist Chakma, Magh and Khyang, so far only a tiny minority have become Christian.

Churches and missions that concentrate on a single tribe or caste and adapt their strategies accordingly, however, have realized greater growth. This is graphically seen in the amazing receptivity in some tribal areas. Christian groups have been noted for their help in the area of relief and development work. They have enabled the homeless, the hungry and the destitute to start over after the disasters of war, famine and cyclone. Although Bangladesh is officially an Islamic nation, the Church has won many supporters. Because of the Christian response to natural disasters and food shortages, the people and the government view most Christian agencies favorably. Unfortunately, much of the missionary manpower is concentrated in the urban Dhaka region, which has the worst evangelistic record of all the districts. There is only one missionary for every 313,000 people in Bangladesh and thus potentially responsive but unreached peoples are often neglected, notably the tribal groups and Hindus of Namasudra caste. The Baptist, Anglican and Catholic churches have received requests from whole Namasudra villages stating that their members wished to become Christian. But there are simply not enough missionaries to go to them. Another responsive Hindu caste is the Paliya or Rajbansi caste. In 1972-73 a Baptist preacher received requests from 102 Paliya villages to become Christians! Both the Baptist and Lutheran missions are experiencing growth among the Paliyas of Dinajpur District. Among the responsive tribal groups there are two

native churches, the Garo Baptist Union and the Evangelical Christian Church. There are also other mission groups working with these peoples. The Santals are being evangelized by the Bangladesh Lutheran Mission and that Christian community is growing. More than half of the members of the Khai tribe have responded to evangelistic efforts of the (Presbyterian) Kristo Dharmasava. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts various Baptist groups are evangelizing the tribes.

Ministering to the less responsive Hindu and Muslim Bengalis are several Bible correspondence schools located in Dhaka. The Voice of Prophecy School, operated by the Seventh-day Adventists, was the original correspondence school ministry in the country. In 1960 the International Christian Fellowship established an interdenominational and cooperative outreach known as the Bangladesh Bible Correspondence School. The British Brethren Group in 1963 translated the well-known Emmaus courses and formed the Emmaus Bible Studies Correspondence School. Recently, the Assemblies of God mission have launched the ministry of the International Correspondence Institute.

The Christian community and its denominations in Bangladesh

Though the Christian community is very small, there are numerous denominations. The Christian denominations are living side by side. However, there is some competition among them. There are significant numbers of marriages across denominational lines, a practice necessitated by the small size of the various communities. In some areas, joint prayer meetings are very popular.

Roman Catholic

Christianity came to Bangladesh in the middle of the sixteenth century when the Portuguese set up trading centers. Catholic missionaries—Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan and Jesuit—soon arrived and began ministering to the Europeans and their Bengali wives and children. Around 1670, a young Bengali was converted and, known as Dom Antonio, returned to his people. By his own efforts, about 20,000 people professed to be Christians. The descendants of this movement of people form the bulk of the Catholic communities of Dhaka and Pabna districts today. By 1673 there were over 30,000 Catholics in the region. Portuguese influence upon the Church ended in 1934 when Pope Gregory XVI set up the Vicariate Apostolic of Bengal. Catholics have had greatest evangelical success by concentrating on responsive groups of people. For

instance, by concentrating on tribal peoples Catholic missionaries succeeded in Christianizing many of them. Likewise, Christians coming from certain caste groups, such as Haris, Muchi or Hrisi, are predominantly Catholic. Many of the Namasudra Christians are also Catholic.

The Roman Catholics account for about one half of Bangladeshi Christians. In 1950, Dhaka became an archdiocese with Chittagong, Dinajpur and Khulna as dioceses. The first Bengali bishop was appointed in 1968 and by 1970 all four dioceses had Bengali bishops. Now there are altogether nine local bishops administering the congregations under their jurisdictions. But even though Bangladesh now has its own Bengali bishops, many of its priests, brothers and sisters still are foreigners.

Catholics in Bangladesh can be divided into five groups by origin: (1) descendants of the Portuguese and their early converts (ca. 30%), (2) converts from lower-caste Hindu groups (ca. 20%), (3) converts from tribal groups (ca. 45%), (4) anglicized Christians (ca. 2%) and (5) converts from Islam (ca. 3%). There are now six dioceses (Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rajshahi).

Protestant

The oldest Protestant missionary work in Bengal is that of the British Baptist Missionary Society, which began its ministry in this area in 1793. This society was followed by the Church Missionary Society and the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1805. After the British dropped their policy of non-interference in religion in 1813, missionaries were allowed to enter British Bengal more freely. Nine mission organizations had entered Bengal by the time the British left India in 1947. Since that time, others have begun work here and four British-derived groups have consolidated to form the Church of Bangladesh. By 1980 there were twenty-one mission groups (apart from the Catholics) with nearly three hundred missionaries, more than a third of whom are Baptists.

Currently the largest Protestant missionary denomination is the Association of Baptists for World Evangelization. Among other relatively large missionary groups are: Baptist Missionary Society, Australian Baptist Mission, New Zealand Baptist Mission, Bangladesh Mission of the Southern Baptists, International Christian Fellowship and the Bangladesh Lutheran Mission. Other denominations (with starting dates of their missions in Bengal) include: Anglican Church (1838), which in Bangladesh is known as the Church of Bangladesh; the Baptist Missionary Society (British, 1793); The Bangladesh

Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (1957); the Bangladesh Lutheran Church (1979); the Evangelical Lutheran Church (1957); the Garo Baptist Convention (1890); the Church Missionary Society (1805); the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship (1919); the Bangladesh Baptist Shongho (1922); the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (1958); the Churches of God (1905); the Australian Baptist Mission (1882); the New Zealand Baptist Mission (1886); the Seventh Day Adventists (1919); Assemblies of God (1954); the Oxford Mission (1895). In addition are another score or so Protestant denominations active in Bangladesh.

Cooperative Agencies

The Bangladesh Christian Council (BCC) is acting to coordinate church and relief ministries throughout the country. The BCC represents the majority of the Christian missions and national bodies in the country. Efforts have been made to draw together people of similar theological persuasion for unified action in a land where there is only one missionary for every 313,000 people. Areas of cooperation include correspondence schools, relief, theological education, literature production and the Bangladesh Bible Society. Other cooperative enterprises include a language school in Barisal to serve most of the missions. A cooperative evangelistic campaign known as "New Life in Christ" was held in 1970, with a broad base of cooperation. In 1970 a Spiritual Life Convention for missionaries was held in Dhaka with 105 missionaries in attendance. The convention continues to be an annual event.

Challenges and opportunities

Several reasons may be adduced for the very slow growth of Christianity in the area that is now Bangladesh. The first is the resistance to the Gospel by the two dominant religious traditions in the region. Islamic and Hindu traditions are deeply rooted in the history and soil of Bangladesh and together claim at least nominal loyalty of 99% of the people. While it is not impossible to communicate the Gospel to the followers of these faiths, they have historically been among the least responsive, especially when they have identified Christianity with Western ideologies or cultural imperialism. Secondly, the very resistance and apparent indifference of Muslims and Hindus (especially of middle and upper castes) to the Christian message led early missionaries in India to concentrate on education at the expense of evangelism. In time education frequently became a substitute for evangelism. The degree to which education was emphasized by early missionaries in Bengal is indicated by the report that 80 percent of the Christians in

Bangladesh are literate, compared to the national average of less than 50 percent. But, however desirable the benefits of education may be, education as an evangelistic tool has not proved particularly effective here. Absent in Bangladesh has been the emergence of any "people's movement" to Christianity of the size and scope found in parts of India and Pakistan. Where such movements have begun they have been primarily among the tribal peoples, leaving the Bengali majority largely unaffected. There was only a small Christian movement among Bengalis in the nineteenth century.

A third factor impeding the growth of Christianity in what is now Bangladesh has been neglect. The problems of resistance and unresponsiveness, coupled with an enervating and debilitating climate, have discouraged many missionaries from continuing—or even beginning—persistent efforts for evangelization of the Bengali people. When Pakistan was formed in 1947, several hundred additional missionaries began to serve in that new Muslim country, but the eastern wing (now Bangladesh), with more than half the country's population, received only about one-third as many missionaries as the western province. The ratio of Protestant missionaries to the population is the lowest in any major country open to Christian missions.

Missionary approach: strategy and activities

Evangelism

The religion of Islam traditionally has been resistant to any presentation of Christianity. Nowhere are Muslims accepting the Christian faith in any significant numbers. Most of the vital outreach among the Muslims has been spearheaded through the ministry of the correspondence schools, which are uniformly regarded as the prime evangelistic ministry in Bangladesh. However, among Hindu Bengalis there is a growing openness, particularly among the Namasudra caste. The Baptist Union of Bangladesh, for instance, invited the Liebenzell Mission to evangelize this responsive people. As discussed above, when evangelical efforts of a denomination or missionary organization are concentrated, not on individuals, but on a particular tribe or caste as a whole--and when their strategies are adapted accordingly--greater growth is realized. This is graphically seen in the amazing receptivity in some tribal areas.

Distribution of literature

As traditionally missions have put their emphasis on education as a means of

evangelism, Christians are now the most educated of the population with an 80% literacy rate. However, except in the case of the Garos, Christian education has not been effective in evangelizing large numbers of people. Even so, distribution of Christian literature continues to play an important role in evangelistic efforts. Many churches and missions sell or give away huge amounts of literature. The Christian Literature Center produced over one million copies of tracts in 1973. The Every Home Contact organization has its people involved in the largest free distribution of tracts in Bangladesh. They follow up their contacts with a simple Bible correspondence course. Literature distribution is an especially useful tool in establishing contact with individuals. The Holy Bible has been translated into various vernacular languages.

Education: theological and lay Christian

A number of missions have sought to involve themselves in theological education over the past 175 years or more of Christian ministry in Bangladesh. The Garo Baptist Union has a small Bible school in Birisiri. A short-term Bible school for Santal believers is sponsored by the Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Church. The Association of Baptists for World Evangelism has conducted short-term Bible schools since 1963. Tipperahs, Moghs, Murungs and Bawns from the Chittagong Hill Tracts attend these schools annually. In 1968, ten mission bodies pooled their resources to establish an extension theological study program. The effectiveness of this College of Christian Theology of Bangladesh has been limited due to lack of textbooks and operating funds.

Social Concern

Christian relief and development work has done much to show Christ's love for the people of Bangladesh. Christian relief after the war of independence in 1971 and after cyclones and famines has opened many people to accept the Gospel. Every mission has been involved in social concern in some way. There are several general hospitals, a leprosy hospital, numerous dispensaries and a family planning organization run by Protestant denominations. Protestant agencies are also involved in home and school construction, childcare, agricultural development and job training. The Catholic Church in Bangladesh likewise has been very active in disaster and famine relief, medical services and a variety of development initiatives especially through its umbrella organization, Caritas (formerly Catholic Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation, i.e., CORR).

Current missionary aspirations: a Roman Catholic example

A very important part of Christian service is interior spiritual conversion while in conversation and cooperation with peoples of other traditions of religious faith, especially with Muslims, who are the most numerous. Forgetting past conflicts and in a spirit of humility and love, Christians wish to recognize and appreciate better the spiritual gifts of others, moving ahead in mutual harmony, peace and prosperity. We feel one in spirit with so many of our people, who toil so hard, yet joyfully, for their living; we feel one with the poor and those suffering, with the sick, with those who are ethnically or otherwise marginalized. We remember the people in various professions, the young people, and their children. We earnestly desire for the proper education and formation of the vast number of the young, and for the rightful and proper social integration of our women. We keep all the people of Bangladesh in our prayers.

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