

Historical Sketch of the Christian Tradition in Bengal

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Abstract. The history of the Christian tradition in Bengal extends for about five hundred years. Though the total number of Christians in the region is not large, theirs is a complex and interesting history. There seems to be no single volume that satisfactorily reconstructs that whole complex history of Christians in Bengal. There are a number of books and other sources that focus on one particular denomination or missionary project or historical event or period. Several that are available in Dhaka are listed at the end of this brief sketch. The sketch itself begins with the founding of a Catholic community by Jesuit, Augustinian, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries in southern and southeastern Bengal in the wake of Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century and later. After some two centuries Protestant missionaries from diverse denominations and European nations began ministering in Bengal, among the most notable being William Carey and his fellow Baptists based at Serampore. With the revision of the charter of the British East India Company early in the nineteenth century, Protestants, Anglicans and Unitarians could more aggressively proselytize, but they gained minimal converts. Subsequently they adopted more respectful attitudes toward Hindu and Muslim religion and found greater acceptance thanks to their educational and medical services. Eventually native-born Christians came to take leadership in most of the Christian churches and denominations in Indian West Bengal and independent Bangladesh.

Indian Christians claim that the Christian religious tradition reached the Indian subcontinent in the first century A.D. Legend has it that St. Thomas the Apostle introduced Christian faith to India in 52 A.D. and converted a group of people of the Malabar coast of Kerala in South India by 58 A.D. Thereafter, various missionaries—Syrian, Roman Catholic (especially the Jesuits) and Protestant—labored in Kerala at different times.

Bengal's contact with Christians started with the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century A.D. For two centuries missionary work was carried on mainly by Roman Catholics. The Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route to India and landed at Calicut in 1498. From that time, Portuguese traders settled down in Cranganore, Cochin and Goa. Following the footsteps of Portuguese traders, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries came to those places. The Portuguese traders tried to establish their businesses in Bengal but failed at first. Only in 1537 were they allowed to settle and open customs houses at Hugli and Chittagong. Mughal Emperor Akbar permitted the Portuguese to build permanent settlements and ¹churches in Bengal. In 1598-99 the Jesuits established a school and hospital at Hugli with the permission of Akbar. Augustinians established a monastery at Hugli in 1599, from where they reached out to other centers including Dhaka. By about 1630 there were some 7,000 Christians at Hugli consisting of Portuguese, their wives, their Eurasian descendants and converts. The Portuguese sometimes used force to convert other people to profess Christian faith. The monastery at was destroyed in 1632 when Shah Jahan's forces attacked Hugli and the priests were driven away from there.

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The Portuguese also settled at Chittagong in the sixteenth century under the auspices of the king of Arakan. The Augustinians established themselves there in 1621 and baptized thousands who had been captured in piratical raids. Later in the seventeenth century, Nagari became an important centre, following the conversion of about 20,000 mainly low-caste Hindus by Antonio de Rozario, son of the raja of Bhushna (Jessore), who had himself converted. R.C. Majumdar (1966) discusses a dispute between the two orders of priests, Jesuits and Augustinians, over the supervision of converts and reports that later the converts came back to their previous religion.

The first church in Bangladesh was built in 1599 at Chandecon (also called Iswaripur or old Jessore) near Kaliganj of Satkhira District. Jesuit Father Francisco Fernandez built the Church with the permission of king Pratapaditya. The church was called "Holy Name of Jesus". The second church was also established by the same person in 1600 in Chittagong with the help of Arakan's king. When Dhaka was made the capital of Bengal in 1608, the missionaries started to come there. In 1612, the Portuguese Augustinian missionaries introduced Christian religion in Dhaka. In 1628, they established the church of the Assumption in Narinda. The second church in Dhaka was built in 1677 at Tejgaon. In 1764, Portuguese missionaries built a church at Padrishipur in Barisal.

The Protestant missionaries started to come into Bengal only about two hundred years after the Roman Catholics. Even before the coming of William Carey in 1793, there were individuals in the service of the East India Company who wished to propagate the Gospel in India, but the Company discouraged it. One such individual was Dr. John Thomas, the Company's surgeon in India. But regular Protestant activity can be dated from 1793, when William Carey of the Baptist Missionary Society arrived. In 1800 Carey settled in Serampore together with Joshua Marshman and William Ward. Although the East India Company had officially banned missionary activities, in 1814 the bar was lifted. Cary laboured in India for seven years without making a single convert. But in the year 1800 the first conversion took place. The convert was Krishna Chandra Pal, a carpenter by profession.

The Serampore pioneers translated the Bible into thirty-six languages, including Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, Gujarati etc. The Serampore missionaries were the pioneers in the field of education in India. The missionaries concluded that most of the social evils of the country were the result of ignorance or improper education. That is why they devoted themselves to the dissemination of knowledge in general and Christian knowledge in particular. When the ban on missionary activities was removed in 1814, the activities of the Serampore mission spread to wider fields. They established vernacular schools providing elementary education and Christian religious teaching. They prepared textbooks in Bangla for their schools. In 1829 the famous Serampore College was established to provide higher education in arts, science, history, philosophy, medicine and theology for Christian and non-Christian students. The Serampore missionaries made other contributions to the development of

Bangla language. These include *A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*, and the periodicals *Digdarshan* and *Samachar Darpan*.

The other missionary groups who came to Bengal after the Baptist Missionary Society included the Church Missionary Society (British) in 1805, Council for World Mission (British Presbyterian) in 1862, Australian Baptist Mission in 1882, the Church of Scotland, New Zealand Baptist Mission in 1886. Oxford Mission in 1895, Churches of God (American) in 1905. After the 1971 war for Bangladeshi independence, there was an influx of yet more Protestant missionaries into Bangladesh, some of whom did relief and development service as well as evangelizing or preaching.

In 1830 a Scottish missionary named Alexander Duff came to Calcutta and founded the Scottish Church College. Carey had been a protagonist of instruction in Indian language. But Duff introduced English as the medium of instruction and this brought a revolutionary change in the educational system. The missionary schools were considered centres for preaching Christian doctrine. Though they provided education for people in general, their main concern was conversion. They tried to convince people that their salvation lay in Christ alone. In this venture their achievement was not so significant. By 1838, the Baptists had converted 3,000 people in Bengal. Most converts were from lower castes. There were some elite *bhadralok* converts, like Protestant Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885) and Catholic Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907). Mass conversions were unusual. The Baptists achieved some success in Barisal among Namasudras.

The attitude of missionaries towards Islam and Hinduism was negative. Ram Mohan Roy mentioned that for ten years missionaries had tried to convert Hindus and Muslims in various ways. They distributed books among general people expressing criticism of both religions. They preached the superiority of their religion and the inferiority of other religions in front of the houses of general people. They tried to convince the lower castes and poor people by giving money, education and jobs. Hinduism was considered a false religion and its adherents were condemned for worshipping various gods and goddesses. But by the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries were beginning to show a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of Hindu and Islamic religion.

In spite of these efforts, the influence of Christianity on upper and middle class Hindu religion was not significant. Those who embraced Christianity were mostly from lower castes and tribal peoples. The reason is clear. The lower caste Hindus, who were suppressed and oppressed in Hindu society, could lift their social status by becoming Christian. They were sometimes even provided food, education and medicine without any cost. Though conversion among upper class Hindus was very rare, educated Bengalis were influenced by Christian principles and ethics. English-educated people accepted much of Western culture. The missionary challenge also stimulated reform movements among Hindus such as the Brahma Samaj. Rammohan Roy and Keshub Chandra Sen were highly influenced by Unitarian ideas. Even girls' education and the abolition of sati and polygamy were in part the result of Christian influence.

When conversion was not taking place at what they considered a satisfactory level, Christian missionaries realized that Christian faith would most effectively be spread in India by Indians. So there was a serious move towards Indianization. Thus more Indian clergy were trained and ordained. In 1930 the Anglican Church in India became independent of the Church of England. In 1935 the Baptist Missionary Society transferred to Indians the responsibility for its activity in India. After partition and independence, India and Pakistan saw a historic movement towards union between the Anglican Church and several Protestant denominations. Dhaka became the seat of a Roman Catholic archbishop and an Anglican bishop. The Baptist Missionary Society in Bangladesh is now called Bangladesh Baptist Songha.

The number of Christians in Bangladesh in 2001 was only around 500,000, about 0.5% of the country's population. The largest single denomination is the Roman Catholic with about 200,000 to 250,000 members. There are more than thirty Protestant denominations in Bangladesh. Nowadays the Catholic Church in Bangladesh is hardly involved in seeking conversions. It gives more importance to social work. Some Protestant denominations, especially Evangelical ones, are more involved in gaining converts particularly among indigenous Adivasi people.

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