

The foundations of Catholic mission Education in Manipur.

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Before 1891, there was not any remarkable social or religious reform movement in Manipur. Yet the acceleration of the process of Sanskritization of Manipur's society was noticed at this period....The process of Sanskritization of Manipur had multi-faced expressions in the realm of political organisation, religious worship, social organisation and even in historical and religious studies. After Hinduisation, all the Meiteis were classed as Kshatriyas; the Brahmins who were all Indian immigrants formed a group already. There were no other castes given to the Manipuris. The British conquered Manipur in April, 1891, and the advent of Christianity in the state, is a significant factor of the British rule in Manipur.

Though North East India came into contact with Christianity in the seventeenth century, through the Catholic missionaries' search of a route to Tibet, real work began in the nineteenth century, when the British Baptists began work at Cherapunjee and at Gauhati'. In 1836, the American Baptists established a centre at Sadiya in upper Assam. Meanwhile, the Welsh Methodists began work in the Khasi hills. Protestantism spread fast. The story of the Catholic Church in the region before 1890 makes fascinating reading. The contact was minimal and not much could be done. In 1899, with only 6 priests and 17 brothers in the Apostolic Teaching Society, the founder, FR. Frangiskus Marie of the Cross Jordan applied to the Holy See for a foreign mission. The mission to Assam with 2 priests and 2 brothers, was the society's first foreign mission. Chronologically speaking, the first Catholic missions in the whole of north-east India, of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, were Badarpur in Cachar district (1890), Shillong and Raliang in the Jaintia Hills (1922), Gauhati (1923), Jowai (1925), Cherapunjee and Dibrugarh (1931), Tezpur (1932). When the

Salvatorians came to Shillong in 1890, there were a handful of European and non-local Catholics. In 1915, there were 5, 176 Catholics in 10 mission centres, scattered all over North East India³. FR. Paul Albera accepted the 'Assam' missions in 1921, and this triggered off the growth of Catholic missions in North East India. With the advent of the *Salesians* of Don Bosco in 1922, led by the indomitable FR. Louis Mathias, rapid expansion began and the Church entered into hitherto, unknown areas. It is admitted by all, that the most astounding expansion of the Church in North East India took place during the post-World War II period. This was probably due to the increased availability of men and means. It was also due to the fact, that the monopoly, that the Protestant Churches had received under the British, was removed after Independence. The Church spread to both the banks of the Brahmaputra, entered Nagaland and Manipur and touched new peaks of glory during this period⁴. Through a large network of primary schools practically in every remote village, the Salesians contributed enormously to raising the level of literacy from 0% to 30% to 70%. Dr. Frederick Downs, a leading Protestant Church historian, confirms this view: "Without question, the most important post-war development, was the rapid expansion of the Roman Catholic Church. At the beginning of the war, there were about 50,000 Catholics in the region, by 1977, there were 3,69,681. Now they began to expand throughout the region, the cutting edge of their new thrust being on ever-expanding network of educational institutions of high quality⁵"

After the British conquest of Manipur in 1891, Churachand was selected as the future ruler of the state, but during the period of his minority (1891-1907), the British Government in India, decided to administer the state, and appointed Maj. Maxwell as Political Agent of Manipur, and Superintendent of the State. In consequence, changes took place, not only in the administrative set up, but in other spheres as well. In his instructions to English navigators, Edward VII, stressed that the service of Christianity must

be the chief interest of such as should make a foreign discovery⁶. Rev. William Pettigrew was the pioneer Christian missionary in the state. He arrived in Imphal on Feb. 6th. 1892, 'to start a school', which turned out to be only giving tuition to the children of some government officials. He was however asked to desist from his missionary activities in Imphal, and if he wanted to continue to stay in Manipur, he should transfer his missionary activities to the hill people of Manipur. The foundation of the Baptist missionary movement was laid in 1907, the Church of Ukhrul was established with 7 members. "Christianity has come to the Tangkhul Naga Hills less than a century ago, but today it claims 85% of the population⁸". While Rev. Pettigrew concentrated his missionary activities among the Tangkhuls of North-East Manipur another foreign Christian missionary, MR. Watkin Roberts of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission of Aizwal, founded the Indo-Burma, Thadou-Kuki Pioneer mission in the south west area of Manipur.

Catholic Mission- In the year 1887, the Synod of Allahabad asked Rome (Vatican), for the creation of a Prefecture Apostolic of Assam, i.e. the province of Assam as under the British Commissioner, and inclusive of the principalities of Manipur and Bhutan. In 1881, out of Assam's total population of 4,881,426, only 351 were Catholics. On the 13th Dec., 1889, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam was created and entrusted to the Salvatorians. The first Prefect Apostolic of Assam was appointed in the person of FR. Christopher Becker in 1906. After 25 years of strenuous work, they could win 5,000 souls for Christ. Support came to the Catholic missionaries from an unexpected quarter. The Government insisted on elementary schools being opened for coolies children, and the planters, (tea-planters of Assam), approached the Catholic catechists, who were appointed as school teachers. In consequence, there was a significant increase in Catholic influence, and the planters appreciated the education offered by the missionaries as it resulted

in an increase of order and discipline among the tea-garden workers .

In Manipur after the events of 1891, education in the state was under the supervision of the British. In 1912, the first Catholic missionary, FR. Anogar Koenigsbaver came to Manipur, and was granted permission by the Raja (Churachand) to open a mission house at Imphal, but due to the limited resources of the Assam mission (both man-power and finance), was unable to commence the evangelisation of Manipur . In 1948, the Maharaja of Manipur, granted a permit for the Catholic missionaries to work in the hills of the domain, but since then, Maharajas in India, had practically been deprived of all executive power, which for Manipur, had been invested in the Chief Commissioner. In the early 50's, the Chief Commissioner was MR. Moon, an Ulster man, with no hereditary sympathy for the Catholics. To visit the hills of Manipur required a permit from the Chief Commissioner, and he held out that such a permit would never be granted. However, the S.D.O. of Ukhrul was Thiankam, it was easier to influence him and gain his support for the entry of Catholic missionaries into the hill area of Manipur .

Ravalico made his first trip to Manipur and the Tangkhul area towards the end of 1952, when he received into the Church a good number of Naga catachumens from the village of Hundung. Dominic Shami, the son of the Hundung headman had been studying at the Don Bosco School in Shillong. He had been baptised there and had been instrumental in making the Catholic Church known among his people.

The Catholic Church had not been allowed in Manipur by a strange law enforced through pressure from the Baptists till the early fifties. So there was no resident priest in Manipur till 1956. The change for the better had come, when 3 highly placed officials in the government, favored such a change. They were the Chief Commissioner of Imphal, the I.G.P. of Imphal, a Rajasthani,

whose wife was a Catholic, and the District Commissioner, MR. Sundaram from Tamil Nadu. This policy permitted a turn of events, and Catholic priests stepped into Manipur¹³. On the 9th March, 1956, the first Catholic missionaries of Manipur, FR. Ravalico & FR. P. Bianchi, in a rented house at Thameipham road, inaugurated the new mission in the presence of a gathering of distinguished persons, and about 300 Catholics. It was an auspicious day indeed, for on the same day arrived a delegation of young people from the south-west of Manipur, asking the missionaries to go also to them, the Paitel Shinte and Zou tribes¹⁴.

The first days of the foundation of the Catholic mission in Manipur, were hard and painful. The bountiful provisions brought initially in the maiden voyage from Dibrugarh to Imphal, were speedily depleted having been shared with those in want, and after a few weeks in Imphal, the missionaries found themselves in dire straits, lacking almost everything, in their small rented house. (Manipur was then part of the Catholic Diocese of Dibrugarh then under Bishop O. Marengo-it became a separate Diocese in 1980 with Rt. Rev. Joseph Mithathany as its first Bishop), But generous benefactors came forth and FR. Ravalico began the construction of 2 barracks, utilising boys from the villages, who were roaming the town-in search of work, or in pursuit of their studies. But soon more spacious lodging with a small compound was found for sale (Rs. 58,000)¹⁶. This house was in the heart of Imphal city and FR. Ravalico christened the house 'Nirmala Bas', (The present Nirmala Bas, reconstructed on the original plot purchased by FR. Ravalico, now a leading Catholic school, has approximately 1,700 students on its Rolls).

Almost from the very beginning, when the work in Nagaland and Manipur was yielding encouraging results, unexpectedly big trouble started that was practically to stop all work in Nagaland and slow down activity among the tribes of Manipur. The Nagas, both of Nagaland and Manipur, started

agitating for independence, and groups of hostile Nagas started operating from the fastness of their forests where they had absconded from their villages, organising themselves into camps, from where they would suddenly sally forth, and attack government centres, military posts and villages, also, when they were hard pressed for victuals. In 1957, Manipur was declared a restricted area, the Bishop's movements were greatly hampered. He had applied for a standing permit to visit Manipur twice a year, now that the Fathers were there, but this could not be granted. He had everytime to apply for a permit to the Home Ministry in Delhi and then submit a detailed programme of his tour to the S.P. of Manipur. Due to the hostiles activity, all the vehicles for Manipur Road (now better known as Dimapur), had to travel in convoy fashion, which took exactly 12 hours to cover the distance from Manipur Road to Imphal. The Bishop had to present himself to every checkpost, and that allowed him little time for a morsel of food or anything else. Later on, he was no longer allowed to travel to Imphal¹⁶ by the inner line road (the Manipur Road-Imphal).

In Nirmala Bas, the missionaries were holding every year, a one month training course for the Tangkhul catechists, followed immediately after by another month's training for the catechists of other areas of Manipur. The Bishop always attended to give a helping hand, for the compilation of the Tangkhul and Meitei prayer and hymn books. Nirmala Bas, although located in the heart of Imphal city, was neither sufficient or suitable for developing a mission centre according to FR. Ravalico's plans. There could be accomodated only a small group of boys, while there was a crying need for a big boarding school for Catholic children from different tribes, who from their villages in the interior, were coming down to the town to study in any school that would admit them, boarding in any house that would receive them, with no comfort for either body or soul. FR. Ravalico found a¹⁷ suitable place in a locality called Chingmeirong . It was low land, marshy,

full of mosquitoes and frogs, and the locals believed it to be inhabited by evil spirits.

The missionaries first drained the water, no easy task, destroyed the mosquitoes, raised the land level, and constructed what is today, the premier and most popular boys school in the state of Manipur viz., the Don Bosco School, then known as the Don Bosco Youth Centre, for affording education and all round development and formation of the youth. here FR. Ravalico gathered boys from all over Manipur, and some of the leading positions in the state, in various spheres of life, are occupied by the past pupils of Don Bosco, Chingmeirong.

On the 9th October, 1958, the Don Bosco Youth Centre was visited by the Chief Commissioner of Manipur. The programme included an orchestra of 20 instruments under FR. George Venturoli (he reached Imphal on the 17th March 1957) and an address in Hindi, which made a very favourable impression on the Chief Commissioner, for a common lingua franca binds a nation together. Said the Chief Commissioner, "My wife and I, are very happy to go around this institution. We found the boys happy and keen at their studies. They looked cheerful and happy. Extra-curricular activities are also in progress. There is a proposal to start a carpentry workshop and assistance is required. The institution illustrates the enterprise, the hard work, and zeal of the Don Bosco Fathers'¹⁸

As the work was expanding the much needed help started coming. FR. Joseph Felix reached - Imphal on the 20th Dec., 1956, followed by FR. D.J. Wollaston, and then the indigenous, secular clergy made its entrance, FR. Joseph Kanchiramattam and FR. Mathew Planthottam and later on FR. Mani. "The three of them were very worthy priests and zealous missionaries"¹⁹. The indefatigable pioneer missionary FR. Ravalico, now planned for a girls school, to be located at Imphal. He bagged the F.M.A. Sisters (Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice - Daughters of Mary Help of Christians), to take up work in Manipur. He

wrote to the Provincial of the order, pleading for help, but the sisters in Assam were already short staffed and over-worked. However, they were won over by Fr. Ravalico's zeal, humility and persistence, (he went down on his knees and reiterated his plea for assistance). The Provincial then sent Sisters Cleofe and Cecile Doyle to Imphal on the 10th February, 1958. Fr. Ravalico took them to Nirmala Bas which he had vacated, as he had shifted to the new boys school, Don Bosco (Chingmeirong) still under construction, where he and his companions lived, "literally among heaps of steel and cement, in unfinished and unfurnished rooms, lacking also the necessities of life"²⁰.

Immediately, the sisters (popularly known as the little Flower Sisters), started to enrol children in the new school. Soon supervision and teaching kept them so busy", they had not even a minute free for themselves to prepare their own meals. Of this modern Catholic School, MR. Raina, Chief Commissioner remarked: "This school fulfils a very genuine demand for a very good school of this type for very young children. I congratulate everyone²¹ concerned for the efficient running at the school." The school then had 200 children. But the number of children multiplied so rapidly that the sisters could no longer accommodate them within the precincts of Nirmala Bas, and so it was fortunate that they were able to move shortly afterwards to a more spacious place, acquired at Sangaiprou, where the present Little Flower School stands today. This school for day scholars, had a "hostel for Catholic girls capable of accommodating 80 inmates. All too soon, the 'big' school and the 80 bedded hostel were filled to capacity, and once again expansion became necessary"²². By 1968, there were 800 students on the rolls of the school, in 1985, 2000 students, with a long waiting list, which today keeps growing longer and longer.

About the same time that Little Flower School was established so also was the mission centre in Hundung. "The whole Hundung mission was still at its basha stage till the sixties, except for the Sacred Heart Church". To build anything in masonry in such a place and at such a time, was a real enterprise. We tried to bake the bricks on the spot, but it was

largely a failure, both because of poor clay and untimely rains. Bricks had to be brought from Imphal, sand from down the valley. Nor, could we launch out boldly in those days, when money was so scarce"²³

In Ukhrol was opened the St. Dominic Saivo school, which did very well from the start. The Hundung High School had been open already two years before it was possible to get a foothold in Imphal. One can easily appreciate it was not easy to run the Hundung school from Dibrugarh.

Churachandpur was a small town (during the first years of the Catholic Mission) and a rather important centre, on the east end of the manipur plateau. Different Protestant sects had established themselves here, but the Catholics were only a handful. At the sight of the cassocks of FR. Ravalico and Bishop Marengo who visited the town, some inhabitants spread the news that the 'Romans' had come, in not time, a crowd of youth and children gathered around the Missionaries. FR. Ravalico showed the film 'The Son of Man' in the Bazar square to a crowd of happy, well-behaved Christians of several different denominations. In a subsequent visit he purchased some land, and, the 'Donimic Saivo' school for primary school children was built 'basha style', right inside the market area, and it was soon frequented by a large number of children. The Mission centre in Churachandpur was established a few years later.

The year after the Fathers had settled in Manipur, FR. Ravalico and the Bishop had a long hard tour in part of the diocese where there were practically no Catholic as yet. It was a tour embarked upon to know better the territory of the diocese, in an area predominated by the Hmar. It was however, among the friendly and mild tribe of the Mayols, that FR. Ravalico and the Bishop experienced the only bodily attack during their missionary life. Liva Changning was the stronghold of the Mayol Baptists. Two Catholic young men from that village invited the missionaries to their home where a few of their friends had gathered eager to see some religious films. As the film was being shown to a small group of people, who had defied, the order of the village headman, that no Baptist should come to see the film,

some 4 or 5 people broke inside the house with sticks and smashed the projector, hitting at the same time, perhaps unintentionally, FR. Ravalico's hand. Then they rushed away. When the police sub-inspector came from Pallel, he advised a compromise, but the missionaries replied that "there is no question of a compromise, because we are not going to have any case, but since you have been so kind to come, we would like to ask you whether anybody can forbid us from accepting anybody else's invitation to his own house". The victory of the powerful Mayol Pastor Toma, who had led the assault, must have tasted bitter in his mouth, because all the Mayol villages around Liwa Changning, his own Baptists included condemned his act, and some came over to the Catholics. The Pastor himself subsequently asked for his daughter to be admitted to the Catholics, S.T. Mary's College hostel in Shillong.²⁴

Many villages on the border of Manipur and Mizoram had no Catholics, the people mostly Presbyterians and Baptists, hoped that the Catholic missionaries would soon open schools in their villages, or alternatively, help numbers of their young boys to pursue their studies outside their villages. The biggest village was Senwon; in a section of the village, there was an epidemic of malaria, Doses of quinine and aspirin administered by the catholic missionaries worked wonders. The elders of the village called a meeting, and were very earnest about the Catholic Church starting there, at least an English medium school. But the distance from Imphal to Senwon was too great to ensure the smooth and successful running of the school.

After building the boarding house the classrooms and workshops of Don Bosco, a beautiful church was built, blessed by the Bishop on 24th May, 1961. The Church was a two storey structure, the ground floor provided a hall and classrooms for more than 300 children. FR. Ravalico, although desirous of admitting more boys in the boarding, faced an acute shortage of accommodation, and there also cropped up the question of adequate supervision and messing facilities. "The assistance was provided by some lay teachers, but the daily bread (rice in our case) was an enormous burden, as only a few boarders contributed to their expenses, in the

form of bags of rice. Besides kitchen expenses, finance was needed to pay the teachers and catechists in Imphal, and villages, where Catholic communities had sprung up.

The Church in India is engaged in a massive education apostolate through a vast network of schools and colleges: besides the humanitarian services, education would be the one area, where she has contributed most to the nation. Vatican II has stated in its decree on Christian education "Since every man of whatever dignity of a person, has an inalienable right to education, corresponding to his proper destiny, and suited to his native talents, his sex, his cultural background and his ancestral heritage. At the same time, this education, should pave the way to brotherly association with other people, so that genuine unity and peace on earth may be promoted.

The object of Catholic school education is explained in the following words "School is one of the explanations for our missionaries existence before the non-Christian world. The influence of the Church in the field of education is shown in a special manner by the Catholic school. No less than other schools, does the Catholic school, pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth. Through the schools and hospitals, as well as other social institutions, we herald ourselves in society. But we have to upkeep these institutions with missionary spirit, despite formalities and expenditures. Since therefore, the Catholic school can be such an old to the fulfilment of the mission of the people of God, and to the fostering of dialogue between the Church and mankind, to the benefit of both, it retains even in our present circumstances, the utmost importance"²⁵

All Catholic missionary educators of youth in Manipur, use the preventive system (of Don Bosco - religion and reason) in their educational work - a system based on religion, reason and loving kindness. The primary aim of Catholic education is naturally to impart as much intellectual knowledge as the students can absorb. Spreading of good Christian principles which are nothing but guidelines for a right living, removing of ignorance, and formation of the child; these are the primary aims. Secondary aim is to prepare the students to face job opportunities, by inculcating in them a sense of responsibility, self reliance, and making them vocation oriented.

Education is also directed towards teaching cleanliness and hygiene, improving the standard of living, inculcating better healthier, nutritional food habits, eradicating diseases caused by ignorance, neglect, unsanitary housing conditions etc., teaching remedies for common ailments like the common cold, cough, fever, malaria, ridding the population of superstitions caused by ignorance eg. that death is caused by evil spirits and to propitiate such spirits, animal sacrifices are necessary.

Education in Manipur by the missionaries has been affected by the interplay of social, economic, political and religious factors in the state, as also the geographical location and physical features. Manipur has always been a place of strategic importance. Prior to the period of British Paramountcy, there existed a feudal social system in Manipur, with two distinct classes, the royal aristocracy and the commoners. The population was comprised of two major groups, based on geographical divisions, the Meiteis in the valley, and the tribals in the plains, the former professing Hinduism and the latter mainly Christianity. Under the traditional Manipuri system, the king was both the temporary and ecclesiastical head of the state. The Maharajas never favored modern education on the western model. But by the historic Merger Agreement of 21st Sept., 1947 Manipur was merged with India, and it provided for the transfer of the Manipur State Administration to the Government of India. This paved the way for dramatic advances in the realm of education, and the Catholic missionaries who came to Manipur in the 1950's were aptly fitted for this task for the missionaries teach man in his totality, in his relation to God and in relation to the world. After the advent of the Catholic missionaries who came to Manipur to begin work 50 years after the Protestant missionaries, there was an appreciable increase in literacy in the state, a fact borne out not only by the statistics showing this rise in literacy in Manipur²⁶, but by the overwhelming number of children trying to fight their way into Catholic schools by fair means or foul. (Each Catholic school has a limited number of seats, but most rejected candidates do not accept this, and parents try to pressurise, cajole and threaten the missionaries to grant admission to their offspring). Education is also directed towards raising

the standard of living especially in the rural areas, for which purpose many 'Grahany' schools have been established all over the state, to teach some professional skill to illiterate adults as for e.g. carpentry, weaving, tailoring, scientific methods of agriculture etc. to enable them to earn a livelihood. Catholic schools, which have proved to be useful and necessary additions to the educational system of the state are in constant demand, because they provide a sound education, their managing bodies are properly constituted, and proper attention is afforded to moral instruction, health, cleanliness, recreation, and discipline of students, and due care taken to see that the teachers employed are suitable as regards character, numbers and qualifications. Catholic boarding schools that have been established are meant for the poor and less privileged, and concessions are made for needy and deserving candidates. The early missionaries in Manipur have pioneered educational programmes and practices which have raised the standard of education not only in Catholic schools, but have stimulated government and private schools to raise theirs too. Many traditionalist attitudes that impeded modernisation have been undermined, students belonging to different communities study together in Catholic schools and carry the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding prevalent there, into public life.

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1901	-	0.9%	of	total	population	literate
1911	-	2.1%	"	"	"	"
1921	-	3.8%	"	"	"	"
1931	-	3.3%	"	"	"	"
1941	-	5.0%	"	"	"	"
1951	-	11.4%	"	"	"	"
1961	-	30.4%	"	"	"	"
1971	-	32.9%	"	"	"	"
1981	-	41.5%	"	"	"	"