

Catholic Missions among the Garos of Mymensingh: Some Reflections of its Early History 1909–1942*

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The history of the Catholic Church in East Bengal goes as far back as the late 16th–early 17th centuries when Augustinian, Dominican and Jesuit priests first took interest in this mission field. With the trust of the East Bengal mission given by the Vatican to the Holy Cross Congregation¹ in 1852, fresh Christian mission enthusiasm came to this eastern Indian province. Catholic priests, Brothers and Sisters from France, Canada and after 1889, the United States of America nurtured their Bengal mission working among descendants of Portuguese settlers and growing numbers of Christian converts in Dacca, Toomilia, Barisal, Chittagong and other urban centres and the country side. Attempts by the Holy Cross Congregation to move beyond East Bengal into Tripura and the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills to the north was hindered both by their small numbers and the Holy See entrusting in 1889 the new Assam Prefecture to the German Salvatorians.²

While the Holy Cross mission was settling into its various apostolates among the Bengali and *Firingi* population, the Garos were being opened to Protestant Christian missions—particularly the American Baptist Mission. Theirs was an extensive mission stretching the entire length of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam,

* The author is thankful to SAP-DRS UGC, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, for the facilities extended for the preparation of this paper. The research for this paper was conducted at Notre Dame University, USA, while on a Fulbright Fellowship (1999–2000).

the Naga, Mikir, Garo Hills and the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur. An Australian Baptist Mission and the English Oxford Mission were early at work among the Garos of Mymensingh where a considerable number of the tribe inhabited: Garo diaspora included migratory groups moving from Mymensingh into Sylhet and as far east as Tripura. British administrative policy allowed only one Christian mission to operate in any one hill and tribal inhabited area of India's north-east. There being no restriction to Christian missions in the plain areas even if largely populated by tribals, the Garos of Mymensingh were to be opened from the early part of this century to Catholic missions pioneered by Holy Cross missionaries.

By the turn of the 19th century a fairly large following of Garos living in the plains fringe of the hills had become adherents of Christianity. Because of this start and the familiarity of mission work among the tribe, the pioneering Catholic missionaries did not face the difficulties often challenging Christian missions in other tribal areas. Rather the start of the Catholic work in Mymensingh was occasioned after an invitation was given by the Susung Garos to Bishop Hurst of Dacca. The visitors were Baptists. Disillusioned with their faith they told the Bishop, "We have heard recently that the Catholic Religion is the *Adi Dharma* of the Christians and that the chief guru lives in Dacca. We have come to learn."³ The venerable Bishop gave them catechisms to read, apparently all were literate, but regretted he could not spare any priest to minister to them. The Garos made three other visits to Dacca. Bishop Linnborn who had meanwhile succeeded as Bishop of Dacca, was so impressed by the Garos' desire to become Catholics that he sent Brother Eugene Lefebvre (the first Indian Holy Cross Brother) and Fr. Jean Marie Fleury, to study the possibility of starting a mission among the Garos. They resided among the Garos of Susung Durgapur for ten days. The report they submitted to the Bishop was to result in a significant beginning and long connection of the Holy Cross with the Garos of Mymensingh.⁴

Fr. Adolphe Francais was to be these Garos' first priest. Accompanied by Fr. Timothy Crowley on some of his visits to Garo villages through 1910–1913, he set up base at Ranikhong, overlooking the Sumeswari river. After a year of solitary mission work he was joined by Fr. Mathew Kearns. At the end of two

years hard work he could report that there were 400 Garo Catholics.⁵ As the Garo mission grew the original Ranikhong Parish was divided in 1924 when Fr. Christopher Brooks started the Bhalukapara mission. One of his confreres Fr. John Delaunay made a long tour of the Garoland mission in the early part of 1926. He there found a missionary opportunity such as existed nowhere in the world. He wrote for the Holy Cross Foreign Mission magazine.⁶

American missionary literature boosts China as the Klondike of God's miners, but I doubt that there is anywhere in China such prospects as lie at present in this part of the Dacca mission.

He however noted the sadness that glowed in the eyes of the two missionaries and that there was so much to be done and that they were unable to do it from lack of men and finance. He understood why Bishops turn a deaf ear to appeals to open new fields, for to open one and to neglect it was to actually do harm to the cause.⁷

The Headquarters of the district at Mymensingh town provided a railway connection after which the Garo missions could be reached by various modes of transport—bullock cart, bicycle and later by bus or jeep. In 1927, Fr. Charles Finner started a third parish located in the Mymensingh town. With the arrival of Catechist Sisters from France the town had a dispensary, convent, catechist school and a presbytery—but no church. Mymensingh got its church in a rather interesting manner. The organizers of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932 wanted pictures of every church in the world dedicated to St. Patrick. "Dacca, with an Irish citizen as Bishop, had no church to St. Patrick and Crowley could not stand the shame. A rush order went out to Calcutta for material and in a few months Dublin got its photo of St Patrick's Church in Mymensingh."⁸ In one of his letters to *The Bengalese*, Bishop Crowley who in turn had succeeded Bishop Linnborn, wrote that he found the growth of the Church among the Garos very encouraging with close to 2000 Garo Catholics. Forty-five Garos were studying at the Apostolic School at Mymensingh, two Garos were already professed nuns and "the movement towards the Church has spread to the whole tribe and to a lesser extent among a tribe akin to the Garos, the

Hazunj" (Hajong).⁹ Fondly remembered were Francis Dongo, the first catechist, the *factotum* of Ranikhong and travelling companion of Fr. Francais, and Alban, another among the early Catechists. Alban was sent out to Sengpara village when it was afflicted by small pox. He stayed on, cared for the sick till he himself was inflicted and died of the disease.

As the mission work grew centres were opened at Taulsapara, Gauradi, Haluaghat and Daripani, the last two by Fr. Joseph Harel assisted by Clement Dutt, the only literate catechist. Missionaries found their catechists indispensable in their ministry for it would be long before any of them would master the Garo language and its nuances. Fr. Brooks describes one of his difficulties under which he ministered:¹⁰

Before coming to India, it seemed to me that our tasks would be to preach and baptize. I had pictured myself, like Saint Francis Xavier, with uplift crucifix preaching to the natives. But how different is reality from this romantic picture. We find that for the most part we must remain in the background and work through teachers and catechists.

The attention Bishop Crowley was giving the Garos is reflected not only in the increasing numbers of believers but also in the opening of new centres and parishes. Biroidakuni was started by Fr. Francis Wyss in 1927 and Baluchora and Bowiebada, renamed Mariamnagar, were built up by Fr. Dominic D'Rozario. Something of fulfillment was experienced by these foreign missionaries in the beginnings of a local church in the ordination on 29 January 1938 of Fr. Damian Ruram, the first diocesan Garo priest.

As Christian missions grew in number and work their impact was felt by the Garos. Christianity in a short time had become the preferred agent of acculturation to the two other institutionalised religions practised in that district.¹¹ Christianity was coming into the lives of these Garos at a time to stay the process of Sanskritization that was evident in their lifestyle. No doubt by conversion to the new faith they were becoming poorer in one respect as they were making a break with their primal past.

Christianity disturbed the social fabric of the Garos but without complete upheaval. The new faith brought on a new way of life for Christians were expected to have character and conduct,

not that such qualities were lacking among those not converted. They were urged to go slow in consuming the local brew—the Catholics were known to have been more liberal than the Baptist on this condition of conversion. And as recent as the 1950s the anthropologist Robbins Burling noted that the Garo Hills was “one part of the world where Christianity has not required women always to cover their breasts.”¹² Research on the Catholic connection in Mymensingh does not mention the missionary was alarmed at the near nakedness of the Garos. Photographs of the period covered in this essay reveals that the Garo women in this plains area had use of more cloth—not the men however, to cover their bodies. It would not perhaps be wrong to assume that the Garo women here, as distinct from their counterparts in the hills, covered themselves under the influence of the dominant Bengali Hindu society among whom they lived.

By their nature the Holy Cross Foreign Mission in East Bengal in terms of sending out missionaries was transitory. This was one of the bases for their working on the principle of adoption in the missions whereby “the missionary destroys nothing that he finds good in the people among whom he works, their arts, society, or general culture.”¹³ In the Catholic missions the Christian Garos were permitted to keep their Wangala festival shorn of its “pagan” elements. One of the priests in this mission field thought it was quite possible that it was similar to American Thanksgiving Day! He believed that a festival of this type could promote Christian charity, tribal solidarity and religion.¹⁴

The missionaries were however particularly drawn to Garo matriliney. Coming from patriarchal Western families the missionaries must have been both amazed at the structure of the Garo society and its operation amidst the more dominant plains people who like them were patriarchal. Bishop Crowley found that in practice the “matriarchal system” (only much later was the society understood to be matrilineal) worked fairly well. The Garo heiress was generous with her sisters and she had to treat her brothers kindly or her fields would remain unploughed. With drawbacks in the system as perceived by the missionaries, they tried to modify the custom by substituting the Christian law of inheritance providing for all children an equal share in the family property and particularly put an end to the migratory habits of the tribe. Crowley noted that “the better instructed Catholic women

had made the sacrifice willingly in the interest of their children," and that Christian families of the tribe "desire to abolish the rule of women but the pagans are more conservative."¹⁵ He realized that any change in the system was by no means an easy matter but was convinced that "a solution to the matriarchal system difficulty is possible with the conversion of the tribe."¹⁶ Fortunately, the changes contemplated for the society would not be drastically changed and these plains Garos have continued to remain matrilineal. Just how the faith took so strong roots among this matrilineal society has not been studied from a sociological perspective, the study of which promises tremendous opportunities.

The contribution of Christian missions to the economic uplift of societies has not received much attention. It is to this aspect of mission work in Mymensingh that we now turn our attention as material has recently become available for study. From the start of organized efforts among the Garos it was obvious to the missionaries that something had to be done to better the material conditions of the people. The Garos were struggling with unequal circumstances living among the Bengali people. Their problems included chronic indebtedness largely because they had no proprietary rights over land and therefore continued a migratory lifestyle. Moreover there were many vexations and cruel injustices to which a poverty stricken and isolated group of persons were subjected when the dominant society knew that the poor were unable to seek redress of their grievances at law.

The first experiment of the American missionaries to ameliorate the economic hardship of the Garos was when Fr. Adolphe Francis started a bank in 1916 to help the people. No detail is known of this endeavour or of his efforts to improve agriculture among the Garos. Later cash loans were arranged to purchase livestock and grain. The worry experienced by Fr. Christopher Brooks was that there were cases of even baptized Christians, who finding that after the first loan usually small, the mission refused to give a second loan, returned to their former manner of life. He felt uncomfortable having to disburse loans because it was said that by doing so, "we thus make only rice Christians."¹⁷ The missionaries among the Garos assembled at Bhalukapara between 30 June and 1 July 1929 to review the loans and to implement a different form of help—Mission Rice Banks, the concept of which had been operative in the tribal inhabited Chota

Nagpur mission. It suggested that people in need of money should notify their priest around December, deposit the equivalent of 1/3 of the loan in rice in January–February and receive the loan in March–April. No additional loans would be disbursed unless the interest of the old debt would be cleared. The rice banks were to have an additional advantage that surplus rice could be stored with the missionaries, with the idea of selling the grain later at a higher price. Such loans were primarily for Catholics, “small loans may be given to catechumens, not on the first petition, but after they had given proof of their sincerity!”¹⁸

Bishop Crowley set aside Fr. Joseph Rick to devote himself to this experiment. Fr. Rick visited Ranchi. He was so impressed with the programme started in Chota Nagpur by the Jesuit priest, Fr. J.B. Hoffmann that he persuaded his confrere, the then Director Fr. Liefmans, Director of Cooperative Works in the Ranchi diocese to visit Mymensingh. The Belgian missionary gave his American counterparts and Garo leaders the benefit of his long experience at uplift in the Santhal mission of Chota Nagpur. Soon Fr. Rick was organizing groups of villagers into societies or units of self-help. At each of the mission headquarters rice barns were constructed to stock harvested rice. Once stocked in the mission barn the rice would remain untouched and when the season for sowing would arrive—instead of taking loans with very high interest rates from money lenders, the villagers could receive a loan of rice on their bond to return at the next harvest to the mission one and half *maunds* for every *maund* borrowed. The rice banks were also open for the non-Christian neighbours of the Garos who could draw from the rice banks on condition of returning one and three quarter *maunds* of rice for every *maund* borrowed. As the rice bank was virtually the creation of the people themselves, it was their responsibility to see that every borrower honoured his bond. Each depot was managed by five elected Garo farmers.¹⁹

This simple plan toward self-help was much appreciated by the Garos. Realising the benefits that would accrue to them through the programme under the guidance of the parish priests and direction of Fr. Rick, Garo village credit societies and rice banks were started in many Garo inhabited villages. When the programme was explained by Fr. Raymond Switalski to the Daragachella villagers after the success of the programme in three

other Catholic missions, the southern Garos voted unanimously for a reserve fund of Rs. 10,000 to come from a deposit of Rs. 50 from each village. Garo *matebors* also promised to open rice banks in their respective villages and to refrain from resorting to money lenders.²⁰ Apart from saving them from recourse to the money lender, the value of the cooperative system lay in training the farmers in habits of thrift and responsibility. For the missionaries the success of this assistance and guidance gave them the realization that it was an integral part of their apostolate to build up the economic and social as well as the spiritual life of believers. Bishop Crowley summed up the effect of this special drive:²¹

The lesson in self-help, practically demonstrated, is second in importance only to the lesson of the catechism. A Catholic who is chronically poverty-stricken is a poor advertisement for the Church in this land where health and wealth are regarded as evident proofs of divine favour.

Fr. Rick was still in this "business" in the early 1940s. It was only that like many other missionaries long attached to their missions his was also a combination of lawyer, an impartial judge, a skillful physician, an expert educator, architect, builder and banker. These social action activities of rice banks and credit unions and efforts to provide land settlement for the migratory Garos were in operation until 1964 when the East Pakistan state vigorously followed a policy of settling large numbers of the dominant Bengali community in the Garo lands and the violence committed against the tribals in Mymensingh. This resulted in large numbers of Garos fleeing to Assam.²²

From these beginnings the Catholic Church took roots among the Garos of Mymensingh. Despite the large migration of Garos into India following their persecution in the 1960s²³ and the tumultuous developments of the independence of Bangladesh, a large Garo population remains in the country. *The Catholic Directory of Bangladesh* (1981) reports that there are 46045 Garo Catholics.²⁴ Here as elsewhere in East Bengal and North East India the Garos were able to adapt Christianity into their culture without fear of too serious a break from their tribal moorings. It is without doubt that the success of the Garo rice banks were a contributing factor for their steady conversion to Christianity, for apart from their spiritual care their collective economic uplift

made them more receptive to missionary activities. While American Holy Cross missionaries were toiling in the hot plains areas, Catholic Salesian missionaries had started to work in the Garo hills. The pioneering works of Frs. Rudolf Fontaine, Gil, Pianazzi, Vincent Scuderi and their Garo Catechist, Peter Shem Momin has been briefly chronicled by the late and lamented Fr. George Kottuppallil.²⁵ His work remains to be updated and elaborated in a possible combined mission history of Christianity among the Garos.

ENDNOTES

1. Founded in Le Mans, France in 1837 by Fr. Basil Anthony Moreau, the Holy Cross Congregation first sent out a "colony" of missionaries to Bengal in November 1852. For details of this mission and its development see Etienne Catta and Tony Catta, *Basil Anthony Mary Moreau* (translated by Edward L. Heston), Vol. 1 (Milwaukee, 1955), Chapter 30; Raymond Clancy, *The Congregation of Holy Cross in East Bengal 1853-1953* (Washington D.C., 1953).
2. For a brief discussion of this development see David R. Syiemlieh, *They Dared to Hope* (Bangalore, 1998), pp. 26-27, ff 66, p. 37.
3. R. Clancy, *op. cit.*, p. 160. Another version may be read in James Connelly (ed.), *Holy Cross in Bengal 1853-1988* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1988), p. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-162.
5. James Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
6. *The Bengalese*, Vol. VII, No. 9, July 1926, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*
8. James Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
9. *The Bengalese*, Vol. IX, No. 10, August 1928.
10. Letter of Fr. Christopher Brooks, *The Bengalese*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1926.
11. Frederick S. Downs discusses this aspect in the context of the tribal communities in North East India. It may be extended to apply to the Garos of Mymensingh. See F.S. Downs, *Essays on Christianity in North East India*, Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syiemlieh (eds.) (Indus Publishing Co., N. Delhi, 1994), pp. 178-180.
12. Frederick S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. V, Part 5, CHAI, Bangalore, 1992, p. 43.
13. *The Bengalese*, editorial "The Meaning of Missions", Vol. 33, No. 3, March 1952.
14. Francis Burton, "In Garoland", *The Bengalese*, Vol. 25, No. 6, September, 1944.
15. Bishop Crowley's letters *The Bengalese*, Vol. 18, No. 6, June 1937 and Vol. 24, No. 5, May 1943.
16. *Ibid.*

17. Foreign Mission Center, Notre Dame University, Bengal Bouts Misc. Charles Young, "Social Action in the Dhaka Archdiocese", p. 1; Fr. Christopher Brooks, "From the Field", *The Bengalese*, Vol. XI, No. 1, December 1929.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Charles Young, *op. cit.*, p. 2; Bishop Crowley, "American Cooperative Methods Tried in a New Field", *The Bengalese*, Vol. XII, No. 2, February 1931; "Among the Aborigines", *The Bengalese*, Vol. 14, No. 10, November 1933. A detailed account of the Catholic Church's efforts to improve the economic conditions of the people of Chota Nagpur, where Fr. Liefmans worked has been researched by Peter Tete, see, *A Missionary Social Worker in India: J.B. Hoffmann, The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Catholic Cooperatives 1893-1928* (Universita Gregoriana Editrice, Rome, 1984).
20. *The Tin Horn*, Vol. 1, No. 25. April 30, 1931. *The Tin Horn* was an in-house journal published from the Bandhura Seminary.
21. *The Bengalese*, Vol. XII, No. 2, February 1931.
22. Charles Young, *op. cit.*, p. 4; Sister M. Canisius, "A Closer Look", *The Bengalese*, Vol. 23, No.10, December 1942. Mention may here be made of another Christian mission which got involved in the economic uplift of the Garos. See for details Neville A Kirkwood, *Independent India's Troubled Northeast, 1952-69: An Australian Missionary's Story*, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, 1996, pp. 31-34.
23. James Connelly (ed.), *op. cit.* Chapter VIII, pp. 35-52.
24. *Ibid.* 7 n. of Chapter VI, p. 52.
25. George Kottuppallil, "Roman Catholic Work Among the Garos (1911-1933)," *Proceedings of the North East India History Association* (9th session, Guwahati), pp. 361-373; George Kottuppallil, "A Historical Survey of the Catholic Church in North East India from 1627-1990: A Souvenir," Shillong 1990, n.p.