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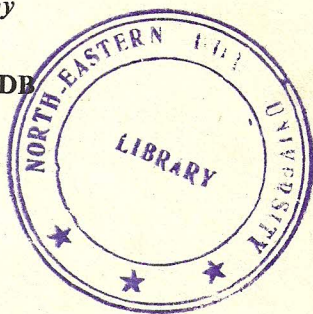
# HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

( 1890-1915 )

*Translated & Edited by*

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To  
The Sacred and Heroic Memory  
of the German Salvatorian  
Fathers, Brothers, Sisters,  
who sowed the seed of the Gospel  
and nurtured the infant Church  
in Northeast India

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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST GERMAN EDITION

These pages are intended to take the reader into one of the most interesting and enchanting lands on the globe. Situated on the border between India and China, the land of Assam appears as a link between the two and brings together a great variety of peoples and cultures. It is a land of contrasts and extremes! Sun-burnt, fever-infected plains look up to mountain heights caressed by salubrious cool air. The luxuriant tropical vegetation of the plains gives way to fragrant pine-forests of the mountains. It is a land of golden rice-fields, sweet sugarcane plantations, green velvet of tea gardens, virgin forests untrodden by the feet of man where centuries-old giant trees stand as sentries. Peaceful herds of cows, sheep and other domestic animals roam freely through its meadows while elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, monkeys, snakes, etc., which bring damage and destruction to the villagers govern the forests as their exclusive fiefdom. There are regions with moderate rainfall, and regions where the heavens open the flood gates freely and bring them the highest rainfall on earth. Evergreen fields that are never touched by frost are surrounded by mountains whose peaks are covered with eternal snow. There are extensive, unexplored and inaccessible regions without any means of transportation and rivers where modern steamers sail swiftly carrying goods and people, offering them profit and relaxation.

The legendary sacred river, Brahmaputra, winds its course through the whole length of this strange land. Entire races have been brought to its banks by waves of migration and again blotted out from the pages of history. The mysterious origins of the Brahmaputra in the secret caves of the Himalayan snows have puzzled mankind for centuries even to our day. The land of Assam is the land of the Brahmaputra and its significance to the land and its peoples cannot be overestimated.

In the world of men, as in nature, contrasts are sharp in this land. The land of Assam offers to anthropologists and philologists inexhaustible treasures. No other part of the globe can boast of a greater diversity of races, peoples and languages within the same area. People of ancient Indian culture and tribes with simple customs, the so called primitive races, live here side by side. Here we find an old classical language with a highly developed literature and a people proud of its long history. Yet there are peoples who are strangers even to a script, whose languages have not yet been subjected to scientific research and whose familiarity with their past goes no further than a few legendary and scattered traditions about their origins and their antecedents. Along with the Hindu, for whom every living creature is sacred, there are the hill people who do not shrink from human sacrifices and head hunting and who attempt to hallow such practices with the aureola of religion. The highly spiritualized religious philosophy of the Hindus and the pure monotheistic belief of the Muslims stand out in contrast to the crude idol worship and the cult of ancestors and spirits among the people of the hills. Here, marriage is a sacred and indissoluble bond for some, for others, it is an arrangement which can be broken off for trifling reasons. There are people here, among whom the enslavement and subjection of the women is taken for granted. Among others the mother's right is sacralized and man has no privileges over her ; rather, he is considered inferior to her. Strict laws and prohibitions regarding food and alcoholic drinks are prevalent among some, while no traces of them are found among others who consider the flesh of rats, dogs and cats as delicacies.

In this vast living mosaic of men and races so closely interwoven, mutual influences cannot be ignored. In general, these different worlds of men, customs, traditions and cultures have existed for centuries and still do to this day side by side, yet in splendid isolation and often diametrically opposed to one another.

Although such a land of contrasts is of extreme interest for ethnography and philology, it poses many problems for the missionary. At every step he is confronted by different languages, customs, mentalities, not to mention the barriers built by nature, and his work is hampered by enormous difficulties. Such a varied region also calls for far greater financial resources than a region with a homogeneous language and culture. Each people or race requires a separate and special organisation with expert personnel to evangelize it.

This book and each part of it, is based on personal and firsthand experiences, lived through many long years in the land of Assam and there can be no substitute for them and also on other original written sources. A bibliography of these sources is given at the end of the book. The historical information is drawn from different archives, such as the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam, the Generalate of the Salvatorians in Rome, and the mission House of St. Calocero in Milan. These have been of invaluable help in writing this book.

Political and social conditions do not always contribute to the external success of the work of the messengers of the Gospel. The edifice of the Church of Christ is built up through slow and toilsome work, gradually adding stone upon stone. These pages will surely give the reader a glimpse and an insight into the life of a Catholic missionary, his sacrifices and toils, his disappointments and hopes, his trials and setbacks and bring the reader closer to him.

May these humble pages be a lasting memorial to the courageous missionaries of our 'homeland'—the Priests, the Brothers and the Sisters of the Assam mission—who strove to extend the kingdom of Christ in a world culturally and geographically so distant and distinct from ours and gave of their very best to the peoples of that land through their sacrifice and toil for over two decades. Some of these missionaries now lie under little mounds of earth, enshrined in the soil of the land of their labours, among their first Christians who had

received the gift of faith from their hands. They owe a debt of gratitude to these missionaries who have left a lasting imprint upon the land of Assam through all their apostolic labours. The blindness and bitterness engendered by war gave them but a poor reward for their meritorious work, but the work itself, neither hatred nor passion will ever wipe out. The Judge, who stands above the fleeting march of time and who knows no distinction between nation and nation and who rewards each according to his deeds, has registered their names in the Book of Life !

#### FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book appeared in a modest format during the bitter post-war years. The Missionary Publishing House in Aachen now sends this book out to the world in a more attractive guise and with maps which were not in the first edition. These may help the traveller through the Brahmaputra valley and the Indian province of 'Assam'. It has, on the other hand, made a few necessary changes. The English spelling has been used for all names. This has also been adopted in the text in order to avoid confusion.

For the rest, this edition is faithful to the original. I have been busy with many other tasks and did not have the time to read the proofs. Hence I had to rely on the help of Dr. Titus Memmel, a member of the Medical Mission Institute (Wuerzburg), and the publishing house. The index too has been compiled by him.

May this second edition go out to the reading public eager to have some information of a distant land. May the story of the dedicated work of our zealous missionaries inflame the hearts of the readers.

Wuerzburg, October 1927.

The Author

#### TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

The first German Salvatorian missionaries came to Assam<sup>1</sup> in 1890. They had to leave the land of their apostolic labours in the wake of the First World War in 1915. After their return to their home-land they made several efforts to come back to the most difficult yet very promising field of mission work. But their plans never materialized.

In 1923, Mgr. C. Becker published a narrative history of the Assam mission under the name "Im Stromtal des Brahmaputra". It was re-edited with minor changes and published in 1927.

In the providence of God, the Salesians of Don Bosco in 1922 inherited the mission field of Assam where the heroic Salvatorians had already, against all odds, sown the seed of Gospel. Since then many unsuccessful attempts were made to translate the nearly six hundred-page history of the Assam Mission written by Mgr. C. Becker.

The idea of translating and publishing Mgr. C. Becker's "Im Stromtal des Brahmaputra" was once again taken up seriously after the establishment of our Vendrame Missiological Institute at Shillong<sup>2</sup>.

The work began in 1978 and much of it was done during December-January 1978-79 in the midst of teaching, preaching, missionary tours and pastoral care of young communities.

1. The whole of what is today Northeast India was then commonly known as Assam.
2. Fr. Constantine Vendrame, S.D.B., like Constant Lievens S.J., was an indefatigable apostle of Christ. He was another Paul of Tarsus. He has been rightly called the Apostle of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and must be ranked as one of the most extraordinary evangelizers of our time. A biography of this heroic missionary is under preparation by Fr. Patrick Burns, S.D.B. under the title, "No Frontiers."

The story that unfolds itself is a most inspiring and instructive saga of heroism, courage and sacrifice even to death. It can even serve as a practical course in missiology and is very instructive and inspiring reading for all, especially those engaged in the work of evangelization, be they Bishops, Priests, Brothers, Sisters, Catechists, or committed Christians. It is an extraordinary story by any standards.

Even today, much of Northeast India is an unknown and inaccessible land to the rest of the country. One can only imagine what this vast area, criss-crossed with mighty rivers, fortified with mountain ranges covered with virgin forests, and carpeted with extensive green valleys, was a hundred years ago. The means of communications were notoriously inadequate. Large areas were infested with malaria, and the deadly 'Black Fever'. Wild animals roamed freely around. The rivers were most unpredictable, whimsically changing their course from time to time and turning the great valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma into an ocean of water in the rainy season. Frequent earthquakes brought death and destruction to vast areas. Monsoon winds, storms, white ants, malaria, humidity, oppressive heat in summer and bitter cold in winter, made most of this region an inhospitable land.

Anthropologically, Assam is a mosaic of races, peoples, tribes, languages and cultures as perhaps no other part of the world is with comparable surface area.

To add to these, the first systematic Catholic effort to evangelize Assam was undertaken by a handful of priests, Brothers and Sisters belonging to a young religious society that was just establishing itself and struggling to marshal adequate personnel and means for such a gigantic task.

No wonder that Assam was among the most unwanted apostolic fields in the Catholic Church, for few missions presented such varied and difficult fields to sow the seed of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. But there were also positive elements : first, the indomitable courage and zeal of

the missionaries and their love for the people of the land of their adoption, and secondly, the natural goodness and openness of heart of the people to whom they had come. The former braved distances, isolation, lack of funds and personnel, illness, discouragement and death. The latter welcomed the seed of the word of God which soon grew and produced an abundant harvest.

We cannot but admire the courage and heroism of these missionaries, their far-sighted vision and planning for future developments, their evangelizing methods, their creative apostolic measures, their adaptation to local cultures, customs and languages and their practical sagacity. The history of such evangelizing efforts is bound to be a source of inspiration, and encouragement to all engaged in evangelization work.

To know the history of a person or a people is to love him or them. To know the past is to know how to live in the present and how to plan for the future. With man, in fact, nothing is totally past. Something of the past perdures into the present, lighting his way to the future and creating fresh impulse and momentum for present and future action. In a word, history is creative of the present and the future. And the extraordinary story that unfolds itself in this volume can be creative of apostolic light and energy for the Church today which is so keenly aware of its essential missionary nature and dynamism.

It is in this spirit that we offer this English translation to all those who are and will be engaged in the work of evangelization in Northeast India, India and anywhere else in the world where men and women seek to bring the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the total liberation of man.

This English translation is dedicated to the heroic memory of our Salvatorian Pioneers who laboured so valiantly to establish the Church in Northeast India.

We have endeavoured to be faithful to the original as far as facts are concerned and free as far as expression is concerned. Very little editorial work was necessary except in

names of places and some pre-Vatican II expressions that sound strange to ears accustomed to modern theological language. The bibliography at the end covers also the history of the Assam Mission prior to the arrival of the Salvatorians which we hope to publish. Wherever possible, bibliographical references in the footnotes are given in English. But in the 'Bibliography', the original titles have been retained. The blocks have been made not from original photographs but from the original German edition and they have a historical value.

We are grateful to His Grace, Archbishop D. S. Lourdu-swamy, Rev. Fr. Matthew Pulingathil, S.D.B., Rev. Fr. Mathai Kochupurampil, S. D. B. and Fr. John Kalupura S.D.B. for their constant encouragement ; Rev. Roy Parakal, S.D.B. for typing out the entire manuscripts very carefully, Rev. Paul Vedakumpadan, S.D.B., Rev. Mother Cecil, R.N.D.M., Mr. George Bradley, and Rev. Brother Foley, C.F.S. for reading through the entire manuscripts and suggesting various corrections.

GEORGE STADLER, S. D. B.  
SEBASTIAN KAROTEMPREL, S. D. B.

## INTRODUCTION

"The History of the Catholic Missions in North-Eastern India" is a timely and welcome addition to the annals of the Catholic Church in India. The present work is a translation of the German Book, "IM STROMTAL DES BRAHMAPUTRA" written by Mgr. Dr. Christopher Becker, S. D. S., Prefect Apostolic of Assam from 1906 to 1921, made by Rev. Fr. George Stadler, S. D. B. and Rev. Fr. Sebastian Karotem-prel, S. D. B., S. T. D.

The story is told with exactness and precision, sober realism, vivid detail and occasional bursts of feeling. It is a comprehensive work which gives a complete and very readable account of "the most difficult mission in India". The author follows the contour of the land in relating the story, beginning with the mission in the valley of the Brahmaputra, then moving over the Surma valley, and coming to a fitting climax in the mission in the Khasi-Jaintia hills which rise between the two valleys.

The treatment is methodical and well-documented, giving a carefully drawn picture of the evangelical work, the educational and humanitarian undertakings, all enlivened by copious quotations from the missionaries' own accounts, letters and reports. The political and religious conditions in Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are clearly sketched, showing the background against which the story of the Catholic mission unfolds. The history of earlier missionary work in the neighbouring parts of India adds interest to the work. The power of the message of the Gospel shows everywhere in the encounters of the missionaries with persons and forces which, even when bitterly opposed to it, were won over by the devotion of the missionaries and the evident good effects of their work among the people.

Mgr. Ladislaus Zalecki, Apostolic Delegate of India, wrote on 10th April, 1892 :

“The Assam Mission is the most difficult one in India, not only regarding the mission work itself, but also the conditions of life for the missionaries which require from them no small spirit of sacrifice and self-denial”.

The difficulties arose from the geography of the country—trackless jungles, rugged hills, steep precipices, months of incessant, torrential rain, blistering and enervating heat, wild animals, poisonous snakes, swarming insects which brought on fatal diseases or destroyed buildings, earthquakes, tropical storms which in a few moments demolished the work of years.

The difficulties arising from the people were no less perplexing than those posed by the elements. The mission territory of Assam at the time was inhabited by sixty-three peoples and tribes, with as many languages and more dialects. There were Hindus with their centuries-old civilization and caste-system, Muslims equally tenacious of their traditions, animists whose lives were overshadowed by the constant fear of evil spirits.

The Salvatorian missionaries who evangelized this almost unexplored territory were few in number, their congregation was newly founded ; they had no resources of money or influence, yet glorious things are told of them in these pages. We who read their story almost a century later stand in wonder at the deeds which they accomplished, deeds which can bear comparison with the work of the most up-to-date, numerous and well-endowed congregations of today.

The Salvatorians travelled endless miles to preach the Gospel. They wrote books of instruction and devotion for their neophytes. They set up a printing press to spread the teaching of Christ, in a monthly magazine and occasional pamphlets. They organized a training school for catechists.

Next to evangelization, their greatest care was for education. They provided opportunities for primary and high

school education, higher education and technical training for tribal boys and girls, and for the children of officials, tea planters and the military. The school boys of those far-distant times shone in sports competitions and enlivened community gatherings with the music of their brass band. The Salvatorian Sisters were pioneers in the education of girls and women in Assam, and of technical education for tribal girls.

Besides caring for the sick and the needy, providing a home for the aged and orphanages in every mission station, the Salvatorians introduced the societies of St. Vincent de Paul and of St. Elizabeth, in which the new Christians could learn the practical exercise of charity.

This masterpiece of planning and achievement was the work of a society, the Society of the Divine Saviour, which, at the end of twenty-five years of missionary activity, could boast of a Christian community of 5000. Truly, the mustard seed was well on its way to becoming a mighty tree.

The position of prestige which the Catholic mission achieved in Shillong under the Salvatorians especially through the work of Mgr. Becker and his collaborators is another page of mission history that deserves to be more widely known.

That after so much fatigue, work and achievement, the Salvatorians should have been expelled from India and should not have been allowed to return to India even after the war, was indeed a shameful act of injustice, which shows how blind politics can be. Our Christians, even after so many years, still remember “the German Fathers”, and in our Catholic cemeteries the tombs of those who laid down their life for their people are still honoured by a grateful people.

The Salesians, who were sent by the Holy Father to take their place, after the first World War, during which the Belgian Jesuits had come to the rescue of this orphaned mission, will never forget what they owe to our predecessors.

As a Salesian and as Archbishop of Shillong which saw the first Salvatorians die of hardship and overwork, I welcome this publication as a homage we sincerely pay to our predecessors.

**HUBERT D'ROSARIO S.D.B., D.D.**  
**Archbishop of Shillong and Gauhati.**