

C. BECKER SDS

**EARLY HISTORY
OF
THE CATHOLIC MISSIONS
IN
NORTHEAST INDIA**

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

F. LEICHT SDS

S. KAROTEMPREL SDB

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

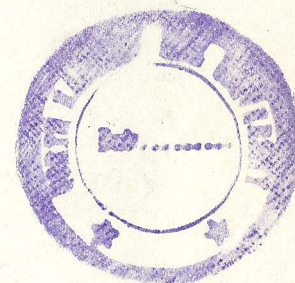
DR. J. B. BHATTACHARJEE

EARLY HISTORY
OF
THE CATHOLIC MISSIONS
IN
NORTHEAST INDIA
(1598-1890)

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Dr. J.B. BHATTACHARJEE

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Dedicated

*to the memory of
the Paris Foreign Missionaries
and the Milan Fathers
whose spirit of faith, courage and heroism
have lit the flame of the Gospel
in Northeast India*

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity in India goes back to the first century of the Christian era. According to tradition St. Thomas, the Apostle, is said to have landed in Cranganor in 52 A.D. There was a fresh wave of Christian missionary activity with the advent of the Portuguese in the 15th century. The policy of the crown of Portugal to introduce Christian faith everywhere was directly linked with the progress of Christianity in India. In 1500 A.D., the Franciscan missionaries followed the Portuguese ships to India. The diocese of Goa on the west coast was erected in 1533 A.D. and the Vicariate Apostolic of Deccan was erected in 1637 A.D. In eastern India, Christianity was introduced by the Portuguese when they gained a foothold on the river Hooghly in 1537 A.D., while a small colony of the Portuguese ex-soldiers in Bundasil, in Cachar, a few years later developed as the first Christian settlement in Northeast India.

The Franciscan missionaries were followed by the Dominicans, the Augustinians, the Jesuits, the Milan Fathers, the Paris Foreign Missionaries, the Salvatorians and the Salesians and other Catholic missionaries, besides the Baptists and the Presbyterians who came in the 18th and 19th centuries. No doubt, they were primarily driven by the desire to share their faith with the people in these distant regions but they had also discovered new lands and new peoples and contributed to the growth of awareness and a higher standard of life. The missionary factor in Indian Renaissance in the 19th century has been convincingly identified by historians.

In Northeast India, the missionaries have worked with exemplary zeal and dedication. They negotiated successfully with strange languages, customs and usages of the people, besides the difficult terrain and hostile climate in the hills and the plains of the region. The modern educational institutions, health-care facilities, and the introduction of several arts and crafts, plantations and cultivations owe their origin to the early missionaries who were the pioneers of development in the history of the region. Besides evangelical and humanitarian social works, they also took keen interest in studying the land and the people.

their history and culture, language and literature, religions, customs and traditions.) In fact, the observations of these missionaries in the form of notes, diaries and correspondence that have been preserved in various missionary archives all over the world constitute a primary source as recorded experience of the man on the spot for research in the social history of the region which historians have of late started to use to supplement the British archival materials with encouraging results.)

C. Becker's *Beginnings of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India (1598-1890)* is not just a narrative of the works of the missions. A missionary himself, he has covered all such aspects of the land and people that the missionaries of the old tradition were interested in. He has described the physical features of Assam and the adjoining hills including the myths and legends, the history of Assam in the pre-British period, the details of British annexation and the development of administration till the formation of the province of East Bengal and Assam in 1905, and finally, the religious beliefs, rites and practices before discussing the activities of the Catholic Missions till 1890 when the Assam Mission was abandoned by the Milan Foreign Missionaries and was entrusted to the Salvatorians. In fine, although "the cross followed the British flag" undoubtedly holds good in case of the missionaries who came to Northeast India after the British colonisation of the region had started in 1826, Becker's book reveals how a few lonely men of the Catholic Mission worked in the region and even tripped beyond it to Tibet long before the arrival of the British flag.

The study has been based on the records preserved in Rome, Milan and other missionary archives which the author handled with competence like a trained historian, besides the reports of the ethnographers and civil servants some of which were published in contemporary journals and a lot of secondary works. The author's personal experience through many years of dedicated missionary work in Assam also helped him gain a deep insight to the complexities of the Church and the region.

The book is a translation of the first part of *Im Stromtal Des Brahmaputra* written in German, first published from Munich in 1923 and a second edition from Wuerzburg in 1927. It has been

translated and edited by F. Leicht and S. Karotempel of Vendrame Institute, Shillong, under the title *Early History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India (1598-1890)*. The second part of the same book, as translated and edited by G. Stadler and S. Karotempel, has already been published by the Vendrame Institute in 1980 under the title *History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India (1890-1915)*. Between the two volumes, we find a complete account of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India till 1915 when the German missionaries were forced by the British Government to leave India due to the global war in which Britain and Germany were the main rivals.

Although published more than sixty years ago, the book could not be utilized by the historians of the region as an English edition of the work was not so far available. It is now sure to inspire further research on the theme in Northeast India, besides serving as an important reference to researchers in many other related fields. In fact, historians, anthropologists and sociologists will find the volume to be of absorbing interest. The editors have retained the bibliography of Becker's original book and added some relevant documents as appendices to the advantage of the researchers.

We are indeed grateful to the Vendrame Institute, Rev. Fr. F. Leicht and Rev. Fr. S. Karotempel and their colleagues for this monumental volume as well as other scholarly works that they have in the meantime brought out. I am confident that this book will also be acclaimed by the readers, like all their earlier publications as a significant contribution to scholarly literature on Northeast India.

Shillong,
15 August, 1988.

Professor J.B. Bhattacharjee,
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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1980, we published the *History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India (1890-1915)*. It was a translation of the second part of C. Becker's original German, *Im Stromtal des Brahmaputra*. It was the first serious work on the history of the Catholic Church in Northeast India, running into over five hundred pages, including a large number of photographs and maps.

The book proved to be an instant success. Nearly all the three thousand copies have been sold out, despite the fact that it dealt with a restricted area, period and part of Church history.

But it did not contain the first part of Becker's very interesting description of the geographical, historical and religious situation of Northeast India and in particular of Assam, and the early history of Catholic missionary activity from the 16th century up to arrival of the Salvatorians in Assam in 1890.

This volume presents the history of the heroic and daring missionary journeys to Tibet through Assam undertaken by the first French Missionaries, the martyrdom of Fr. Krick and Fr. Bourry, and the lonely struggle of men like Fr. Broy of the Milan Fathers to preach the Gospel in Northeast India and take care of the few European and Anglo-Indian Catholics of Assam.

The first volume dealing with the beginnings of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India takes us to 1890, when the "Assam Mission" was entrusted to the young Society of the Divine Saviour, the Salvatorian Fathers, Brothers and Sisters.

This is a fascinating story for Church historians and secular historians, sociologists and anthropologists, as Becker was a keen observer of nature, of men, their cultures, religions, economics, politics and government.

A very special word of appreciation is due to Prof. J.B. Bhattacharjee, Dean, School of Social Sciences, Northeastern Hill University who graciously wrote the introduction, to Sr. Margaret, IBVM, of Loreto Convent, Shillong, for re-writing the

entire text into fluent English, and to Dr. David Syiemlieh for his valuable remarks and suggestions.

It may be noted here that the bibliography of the entire book of Becker, that is, of part I and part II, is given in this volume.

May the story of our yesterdays light up our today and give new direction to our tomorrows.

Shillong,

1 January, 1989.

Sebastian Karotemprel, S.D.B.

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 gradens, 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 first-hand 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

Although published more than sixty years ago, the book could not be utilized by the historians of the region as an English edition of the work was not so far available. It is now sure to inspire further research on the theme in Northeast India, besides serving as an important reference to researchers in many other related fields. In fact, historians, anthropologists and sociologists will find the volume to be of absorbing interest. The editors have retained the bibliography of Becker's original book and added some relevant documents as appendices to the advantage of researchers.

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