



## **Christianity In Tripura Before The Arrival Of The New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS)**

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The earliest reference to Christianity in Tripura can be traced to the period between 1676-1685. It was during that period the Maharaja of Tripura Ratna Manikya invited the Jesuits, Roman Catholic Missionaries to come to his palace and preach the Gospel. The Maharaja before adopting the Hinduism as the religion of his kingdom wanted to hear about the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> However, the seriousness of the Maharaja could not be assessed as Sir Edward Maclagan writes, "In 1676-1685 at one point of time there seems to be a possible outlet in the small kingdom of Tipperah as the people there were less trying than in Bengal, and the raja had invited the Jesuits to come and discuss Christianity with them; but before it was discovered that the Raja was a drunkard and his main object was to secure help against the Mogul officials, so that alternative also had to be rejected."<sup>2</sup>

The Raja's interest in Christianity resulted in Ignitius Gomes, S.J. making a visit to Agartala for a missionary in 1683. He returned disappointed.<sup>3</sup> According to him, a good number of "so-called converts" had settled there. He writes disparagingly that "the Christians were not much good; they are little more than baptized Hindus"<sup>4</sup> and the Raja was a drunkard and not serious to the commitment made earlier. The presence of a Portuguese community in Tripura during this period was due to the Raja, like other rulers of India, who used the services of the Portuguese and the Indo-Portuguese to serve as gunners, doctors and surgeons and to man their frontier forts.<sup>5</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here that the Portuguese were once well known for their art as fighters and medical services and were attached in these professions with several Indian states.

The beginning of the Christian village in Tripura began during the time of King Amar Manikya as he was the first to employ the Portuguese mercenaries in his army to ward off the Mughls of Arakan and the Chittagong Hill Tracts adjoining the state.<sup>6</sup> The need for the Portuguese mercenaries became more important as the state capital at that time was at Udaipur in south Tripura. The capital was later shifted to Agartala in and around 1760 and many of the Portuguese followed the Raja. These Portuguese Christians were given rent-free land in a village not far away from Agartala and their village was given the name Mariamnagar i.e. Mary's village.<sup>7</sup> By then they were reduced greatly in numbers and settled down as cannoniers and cultivators in the rent-free land given to them. However, when Bishop Laynes visited Bengal there was no mention of Agartala.<sup>8</sup>

The British Baptist Missionary Society, which was founded in London in 1782, began their work in India in 1792. It established a Mission centre at Dacca.<sup>9</sup> Side by side they carried on their missionary activities along the border of Tripura, near Comilla about half way between Chandpur and Brahmanbaria. They were interested to work in Tripura but the kingdom was closed for missionary activities.<sup>10</sup>

Thereafter there was a long gap and nothing is known about the activities of Christian missionaries. It was not until 1818 that the Maharaja again invited the missionaries and wanted them as teachers to teach children in his palace. By then the missionaries were identified as educationist. Responding to the invitation of the Maharaja, Felix Carey, son of William Carey of Serampore visited Tripura.<sup>11</sup> Earlier Felix had received some assurance from the *Vakil* of Tripura that he would secure an employment for Felix in that state. The *Vakil* told him that the Rajah would be glad to employ him at a salary of Rs. 300 per month. Felix waited for a long time to receive the good news from the *Vakil* of Tripura but it never came. Felix hoped against hope, so we find him writing to his father, William Carey on 23 March 1818, "I am much inclined to think I shall be able to procure a situation in his (Rajah of Tripura) service but here again I must procure the leave of the Government if I succeed,"<sup>12</sup> Thereafter there was no correspondence from the either side and ultimately Felix returned to Serampore. That opportunity could have been utilized for the propagation of the Gospel and would have brought the missionaries closer to the Maharaja and his subjects. The reason might be that at the early stage, Protestant missionaries had high hopes that most of the Bengalees could be converted. There were Bengalees in the millions around the Serampore Mission and though the need was urgent, Tripura could be evangelized later on.<sup>13</sup>

In 1843 Fr. Barbe the pastor of Chittagong visited Agartala. He set out from Comilla on 16<sup>th</sup> May on two elephants loaned to him for the purpose and intended to stay in the house of the Raja's *mooktear*, a Mr. Wats, but as it was situated at a great distance from the community of 118 persons in 28 houses, he preferred to spend the six days in the house of one of the Christians.<sup>14</sup> Fr.Barbe was informed that one hundred years ago the ancestors of the village Mariamnagar had came from Chittagong and Noakhali as hired soldiers in the Raja's army. The Raja initially had given these soldiers rent-free land for their settlement. The Raja was quite favorable to Fr.Barbe and on his request gave some more plots of rent –free lands to those other Christians who had just arrived from Noakhali. Although the land was given rent- free initially, but at the time of Fr. Barbe's visit he notes that they were paying as others did, a tax of 11 *anans* for a *kane*.<sup>15</sup> He also found the community “very happy, and I may say their food is better, their dress more clean and their houses more comfortable than in the case among people who lived under the British flag”. Of the sacraments administered, four persons were baptized, baptism ceremonies were administered to 78 others; four marriages took place and the marriages of fourteen others were blessed.<sup>16</sup> Fr.Barbe encouraged the people to build a church.

With the coming of the Holy Cross Congregation in Bengal, Fr. Louis Augustine Verite took care of Mariamnagar or Mary's village from Dacca. In February 1856, in what was his fourth visit to the village, he reports having stayed there for fifteen days. He counted 108 Christians in Agartala of whom only six had previously received Holy Communion and only nineteen of them had confessed. He occupied himself in “visiting these poor people whom I endeavor to instruct Catechism”. He “induced” forty-three besides the other six to receive Holy Communion and seventy- nine to confess. He mentions a chapel, which was magnificently ornamented one Sunday with the finest clothes of these Christians.<sup>17</sup>

In 1879, the Maharaja wanted someone to teach tailoring to the women of the palace. The task of finding a suitable person was entrusted to the Royal Estate Manager in nearby Comilla, East Bengal. The Manager found out that the most suitable person was the wife of the Comilla Pastor and accordingly informed the Maharaja. The pastor and his wife were very much willing to come and serve in the palace.<sup>18</sup> After a journey of about forty miles from Comilla, the pastor and his wife were given a warm welcome in the palace and provisions were made for their accommodation. The wife of the pastor taught the women of the palace to sew. The pastor belonged to the British Missionary Society and reported from Agartala to his supervisory missionary Rev. Duffafar in Dacca that they might be allowed to work in Tripura and to send someone for the work. To confirm the situation Rev. Duffafar himself visited Agartala.<sup>19</sup>

On his visit he found that there was a possibility of spreading the Gospel and the attitude of the Maharaja was friendly. After his return to Dacca, he wrote and informed the Home Mission about the conditions and urged to send someone. But there was no action taken from the Home Mission and the opportunity of spreading the Gospel in Tripura was missed.

Some years later J.H.Lorrain, a British Missionary and one of the first missionaries of the Arthington Aborigin Mission tried to enter Tripura in 1890 but was not given permission.<sup>20</sup> The failure of the first attempt did not discourage Lorrain. He waited patiently for a year at Brahmanbaria which is very close to the capital Agartala of the Tripura State to see if anything positive could happen. But his attempt failed in the second year for the second time. Apparently the attitude of the Maharaja towards the Missionaries was not favourable. A year later Lorrain was joined by his friend and close associate E.W. Savidge. Both friends tried again to enter Tripura but in vain.<sup>21</sup> Having failed in their attempts to enter Tripura and having wasted their time they decided to leave for South- Eastern part of the Chittagong Hills to try and enter South Lushai hills. They were to become the pioneer missionaries amongst the Lushais. J.H. Lorrain did not have any intention for any other place other than Tripura as can be noted when he writes in 1919: “when I first came to India 29 years ago it was with the intention of taking the Gospel to the people of Hill Tipperah. To my great disappointment, however, the door was fast closed. The Raja would not allow missionaries to live in his country”.<sup>22</sup>

In 1891 Rev. H.G.E. de St. Dalmas, the first New Zealand married male missionary to serve in Brahmanbaria had an eye to take the Gospel to Tripura. He asked for more workers and helpers. “Many more workers will be needed” he reported, “not to speak to the neighbouring tribes in the hill country between Bengal and Burma”.<sup>23</sup> In spite of this information there was no action taken by the Home Mission and the opportunity could not be availed.

In October 1898, the Rev. George Hughes of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society had the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister of Tripura and was well received. At the same time Rev. George also met the Maharaja of Tripura and shared his willingness to spread the Gospel in Tripura. The Maharaja refused to grant permission to Rev. George and was unwilling to allow any missionary in to his territory.<sup>24</sup>

A year later in 1899 Rev. John Tackle of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society tried to get permission for his Mission to preach the Gospel in Tripura but was not allowed.<sup>25</sup> He did not give up hope like the earlier missionaries and waited for an opportunity. In 1901, another of their missionaries, Dr. Charles North of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society tried to enter Tripura to preach the gospel but was not allowed entry. In 1902 Rev. John Tackle made a visit to Agartala and writes:<sup>26</sup>

While on tour on the border of this independent state, I was led to go up to Agartala- I say "led" advisedly, for, some days the idea possessed me that I ought to go- but what the result of my visit would be, I could not anticipate. Thinking that I might return at night I satisfied myself with a rug and a hand bag containing some lunch and a few Gospel and tracts, and securing an elephant we were soon shuffling along to "fresh fields and pastures new". In two hours we entered Agartala and the first thing which took the eye was the new palace standing up like "a dream in marble" amongst the low tumble-down huts of villagers.

He called on the Maharaja's Private Secretary, Mr. Sandys and found him very kind and hospitable and was ready to give information about the hills and the tribes round about. He was informed about the Roman Catholic Christians living three miles from the palace, who were practically "sheep without a shepherd". Thereafter Mr. Sandys remarked, "perhaps our new judge would like to see you, he is a Christian". It was during that time that Rev. John Tackle met Mr. H.C. Bose and his daughter Rosella E.M. Bose.<sup>27</sup> Although Bengalees they dressed and lived in European style. They came from Seona in Bengal and belonged to the Free Church of Scotland. Rosella had associated herself for some years with several Missions in Central India helping in the work of bringing India's women to her faith. She was an accomplished speaker in Hindi, Urdu and English but her mother tongue Bengali she has almost forgotten. She took up the study of Bengali with great zeal after arriving at Agartala to enable her to do something for the women of Agartala. She was provided with a teacher to teach her Bengali language and Mukand Babu was entrusted with the job. By September 1903 Mukand Babu was baptized. Rosella gives an interesting account of the problems she had to face in her work after Mukund Babu became a Christian. She wrote in February 1904 that:<sup>28</sup>

January month has been a very full one for us – meeting many people-explaining Mukand Babu's baptism last September-myself trying to regain the confidence of the parents and the girls; for they firmly believe, Mukand Babu became a Christian because he used to teach me Bengali, and I gave him lessons in Bible! I required a servant this month; and the A.D.C. to H.H. sent me a man, only requesting me not to baptise him! I replied if the man himself desired I would not forbid him to become a Christian.

In 1904, Rev. Tackle and Findlay made a brief visit to Agartala and again met the Judge and his daughter Rosella. The repeated attempts of Rev. John Tackle of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society to gain entry in to Tripura ultimately bore fruit in 1909 when permission was given by the Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya to send two Bengali Christian workers to preach the Gospel.<sup>29</sup> In January 1909 Asita Ch. Chudhuri, the Officer-in-Charge, Revenue and Political Department of Tripura, in a letter permitted the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society but with certain restrictions as was indicated in the letter when he writes, "You may send your Babus here for selling religious books. But it is not desirable that they should go into the hills least the ignorant hill-people should molest them".<sup>30</sup> However the permission was restricted and the Christian workers were not allowed to move beyond the city Agartala. At the same time they were also not allowed to preach but could converse with the people. They nonetheless had hope that this little concession given by the Maharaja would be fully utilized to spread the gospel.

Although the missionaries were not allowed to enter Tripura to preach the Gospel several persons in the service of the Maharaja were Christians. An interesting account is the activities of Rosella E. M. Bose daughter of the Chief Judge Mr. H.C. Bose in the service of the Maharaja. She stayed of three years and five months (June 1902- May 1905) in Agartala. Rosella wrote frequently in *Our Bond*, the monthly news organ of the Christian activities of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society. Rosella voluntarily used to teach sewing to the girls in the palace. In the process she was able to influence the girls with the Gospel and quite a few of them showed interest and as the classes for sewing was held in the official residence and many girls would often slip to her father's room and have access to the Gospel booklets and tracts.<sup>31</sup> After knowing that Rosella was a Christian and learning about her Christian activities at one stage the parents of the girls whom she taught sewing hesitated to send their children. Rosella wrote, of trying to regain the confidence of the parents and the girls. In her report in March 1902, *Our Bond*, she writes:<sup>32</sup>

You will be glad to hear that many of the Hindu gentlemen have taken the pamphlets you sent, and most of them say 'Jesus was a noble and great teacher'. A Brahma gentleman said: "we read your Bible in our churches and follow the percepts of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus." Another gentleman, tutor of the *jubaraj* (heir apparent) sang some of the hymns you gave us and seemed much touched by them. I daresay these were the first hymns of Jesus ever sung in Bengali in Agartala.

Rosella also describes the first Christmas celebrated at the palace in Agartala in 1902. She writes: <sup>33</sup>

A few days before the 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1902, a happy thought struck my father and me; to have a Christmas tree for the *Maharani's* School girls....we gave Christmas and New Year cards and suitable pictures along with the parents to each girl.....the *Maharaja's* band played throughout the evening. The latter was thoughtfully arranged by the Dewan, and this gave the common people the news that something was going on at the Judge saheb's !They flocked to our compound, and they too, had some idea of the wonderful story of the prince of Peace. All went off well- thus one barrier was broken down.

In 1904, Christmas was celebrated in the palace and the Maharaja very graciously sanctioned the 25<sup>th</sup> of December to be observed by the State as a Christian holiday on the representation of Mr. Bose.<sup>34</sup> Rosella gives an interesting account of the preparation and celebration of the second Christmas:<sup>35</sup>

The servants had decorated the front of our house, with the usual complement of marigold garlands, flowers, plaintain tress and buntings; 'this made the Agartala world to enquire what was going on to the Judge

sahib's", and brought them indoors. We spoke a word for Jesus to all our visitors. The *Thakur* boarders brought loads of flowers; so also the Senior School girls of the Maharani's School. All were given a packet of sweets and fruit, and a card each; the latter was kindly supplied me, for the occasion, by our Baria friends. The senior girls got a card needle case and a doll, or strings of beads, also the woolen balls, according to their age and class. This I was able to do due the liberality of our New Zealand friends, which enabled Mrs. Tackle to spare me some for Agartala need; and I here avail myself the opportunity to thank those friends who have helped us to preach Christ, directly or indirectly, through those gifts.

Meanwhile other developments were in progress in other part of the state. In 1905 a group of the Lushais/Mizos consisting of 130 families under their chief, Dokhuma Sailo, migrated from the Lushai Hills to Hmuntha near Kailashar in North Tripura. After five years the entire population shifted to Jampui Hills, North Tripura and settled at Phuldungsei village. There were 70 Christians among them.<sup>36</sup> The migration of the Mizo took place after the conquest of the Lushai Hills by the British. There are three major reasons for the migration one being due to the ban on gun, second being the imposition of forced labours and high taxation imposed by the British. Another cause that attributed to migration of the Mizos was also due to *Mautam* <sup>37</sup> or the flowering of bamboo that brought great famine in the Lushai Hills, which caused immense sufferings to the people. They became Christians during the great people movement that brought faith in Christ among the Mizos. G.T. Beilby in describing the Mizos writes, "These were a great people who in the days of old had been feared far and wide. It was said of them they had passed from headhunting to Halleluiahs Chorus within the sphere of one great generation. They now had better things, 'the Gospel' to offer those they became amongst them fear and domination".<sup>38</sup> Among the Christians the most prominent among them are Deacon Hrangvunga, Sumtina, Liantawna and Liantea.<sup>39</sup> The Mizo Christians belongs to the Presbyterian Church. As soon as they arrived in Tripura, they started witnessing their fellow non- Christians and constructed a Church building at Phuldungsei. The Christians were left to themselves, as there was no Pastor or any organized mission body to look after them. Occasionally Rev. Phawka of the Presbyterian Church from Lushai Hills would visit to conduct Lord's Supper and baptismal service. In the absence of the Pastor the Deacon conducted most of the services. Thus it was at Phuldungsei village that first Christian faith took deep root in Tripura.

### Endnotes and References

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23. M.J.Eade and S.L.Edgar, p.151.
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25. Ibid, p.151.

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26. *Our Bond*, 1902 February, Vol.8, No.3, p.2.
  27. *Ibid*, p.2.
  28. *Our Bond*, 1904 February, Vol.10, No.2, p.7.
  29. M.J.Eade and S.L.Edgar, p.151.
  30. Letter of Asita Ch. Chudhuri, Officer-in-Charge, Revenue and Political Department, Tippera State, addressed to Rev. John Tackle, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1909, Tripura State Archives, Government of Tripura, Agartala.
  31. *Our Bond*, 1902 June, Vol.8, No.7, p.4.
  32. *Our Bond*, 1902 March, Vol.8 No.4 p.4.
  33. *Our Bond*, 1903 March, Vol.9, No.3, p.5.
  34. *Our Bond*, 1905 January, Vol.11, No.1, p. 5.
  35. *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.
  36. *Tripura Baptist Christian Union, Golden Jubilee Souvenir 1938-1988*, p.60.
  37. Flowing of a bamboo (family-Gramineae; sub-family- Bambusoideae) or bamboo grove is a common natural phenomenon. Based on the variety of the bamboo, the flowing may occur once in 25 years, 35 years, even 75 years. First, the bamboo plants die after flowering and seeds formation. Second factor is that rats, which feed on the flowers and seeds of the bamboo plant, multiply rapidly. It leads to tremendous increase in rat population. The rats attack on agricultural crops in the fields and granaries and cause famine.
  38. G.T.Beilby, *Bread on Water (The Story of the First Seventy-five years of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society)*, New Zealand, 1960, p.54.
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