

| SPECIAL FEATURE |

Just 50 years after the ascension of Jesus the messiah, Saint Thomas, one of Jesus's 12 apostles set foot on the Indian subcontinent to preach the prophet's holy words. In the southern coasts of India, impoverished and marginalised fishing communities, who used to be considered untouchables by the upper caste Hindus, welcomed the message of egalitarianism and converted to Christianity as early as 50 AD. However, it was not until the 16th century that Christianity gained foothold in the geographical boundary of modern-day Bangladesh.

Portuguese missionaries, who entered through Chittagong port and established their mission in the Diang area of the city, were the flag-bearers of Christianity in Bangladesh. They built their first churches in the region in 1600 AD (some say 1599 AD).

The Holy Rosary Church at Dhaka's



Dhaka's Armenian Church bears the testimony of a once prosperous Armenian Christian community in the city.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# NOT JUST A MINORITY

## The Christian community's contribution to Bangladesh

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Tejgaon area, built in 1677 AD, is also one of the oldest churches in Bangladesh. Under the patronage of Mughal and British rulers, Christian missionaries gradually expanded their activities to all parts of Bengal.

However, compared to other parts of the Indian subcontinent, expansion of Christianity was relatively slow in Bengal, which was already populated by another Abrahamic monotheistic religion—Islam. Today, Christianity comprises only 0.5 percent of Bangladesh's 16 crore population whereas Islam comprises 89 percent. However, thanks to their charity-based initiatives, the small Christian community has made notable contributions towards the cultural and economic prosperity of the people of Bengal.

For instance, Christian missionary William Carey's mission at Serampore, West Bengal laid the foundation of the Bengal renaissance in the 18th century. He established Serampore College and took the initiative to spread modern European science-based education among Bengalis. He encouraged village *paathshalas* and affiliated those to Serampore college to ensure that students could learn modern subjects through traditional teaching-learning methods. He established a printing press at Serampore College and translated numerous English books into Bengali and Persian and vice versa. Later, his missionaries also contributed to

promulgate the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 which recognised the rights of Bengali peasants and curtailed powers of the zamindars or feudal lords.

Following in the footsteps of the Serampore mission, Christian missionaries in Bangladesh spread their knowledge and charity-based approaches in the remotest parts of the country. They established missions in the impenetrable jungle and hilly areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Garo Mountains, isolated islands and in the remote northern indigenous villages. Wherever they established their churches, they established a primary school and a charitable dispensary or a small clinic with it for the local people.

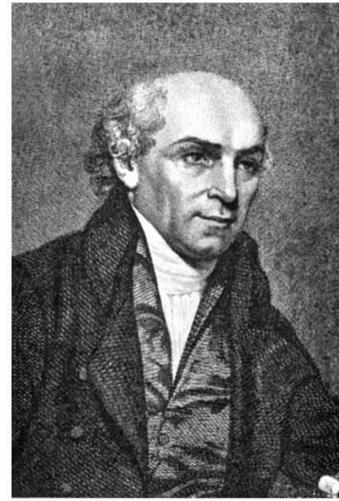
The Christian community was also an ardent supporter of Bangladesh's liberation movement. Many Christian missionaries were killed by the Pakistan army for supporting and harbouring freedom fighters. On April 17, 1971 when the Mujibnagar government was being organised in the mango orchards of Meherpur district, the Bhabarpara Catholic Church at Meherpur came forward and donated their furniture and resources to organise the oath-taking ceremony of the Bangladesh Government-in-Exile. Father Marino Rigon, an Italian Christian missionary at Mongla sheltered thousands of freedom fighters and provided medical care to the wounded fighters. Due to his immense contributions during the Liberation War, he was conferred with honorary citizenship in Bangladesh.

However, their contributions became more apparent during the reconstruction of war-torn Bangladesh. Holy Family Hospital, run at the time by the

Missionaries of Charity, provided healthcare to war-affected people all over the country. The missions provided food, education and healthcare to the remotest communities where the fledgling Bangladesh government could not reach during the post-war period.

In this regard, the contribution of Caritas, a non-government development organisation run by Catholic missionaries, is mentionable. According to Theophil Nokrek, Director, Caritas Development Institute, Caritas implemented development projects

**The Christian community's contribution towards the development of Bangladesh's education sector is also significant. Educational institutions like Notre Dame College, St Joseph Higher Secondary School and St Gregory's High School are deemed some of the best educational institutions of the country.**



William Carey, a Christian missionary from England, established the first degree awarding university in India.

PHOTO: COURTESY

worth BDT 350 crore to rehabilitate people affected by the war in 1972. They also invited 200 Japanese scientists to Bangladesh to produce high-quality rice breeds and introduce them to Bangladeshi agriculturalists and farmers. Till date, Caritas has been contributing to the country's development sector by running 95 projects in the areas of formal and non-formal education, healthcare, women empowerment and financial security. It is now one of the largest development organisations operating in Bangladesh.

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However, Dr Harold Bijoy Rodrigues, Provincial Superior, Brothers of Holy Cross, St Joseph Province, Bangladesh thinks that the main contribution of Christian missionaries' lies in the expansion of primary education in Bangladesh. "When there was no

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government primary school in the entire Chittagong Hill Tracts, our missionaries spread the light of education by establishing primary schools in the remotest indigenous villages. Currently Christian missionaries in Bangladesh are running more than 5,000 primary schools, most of which are located in the hard-to-reach areas," says Dr Harold. Over the last few years, the Catholic missionaries undertook a project called Lighthouse, through which they established 1,300 primary schools in remote villages. "Our goal is to hand over the schools to the government so that these schools and the quality of education that is taught is maintained in the long run," says Theophil Nokrek.

However, these altruistic missionaries are now facing obstacles in continuing their educational services. Dr Harold says, "The biggest obstacle we face is government intervention in our admission procedure. According to the government, we must enrol the students with higher GPA scores on a priority basis, but according to our goals, we have to give equal priority to these students, even if they do not have better grades. We still face a lot of trouble enrolling students from marginalised communities and must defy the government orders to some extent.

"We should realise that the merit of an indigenous student with a GPA of 4.40 who doesn't have electricity at his/her home should not be compared with the GPA 5 scorer who lives in Dhaka and has access to all modern amenities. We must encourage the less privileged by giving them the opportunity to access quality education."

Besides their contribution to

education, the Christian community's support in providing quality healthcare is also notable. Every Christian church or monastery is fitted with a charitable dispensary or a small clinic where everybody can get primary healthcare services for free and medicines at a nominal price. Health workers of these

benefits. We are also the pioneers in providing treatment and care for patients with chronic infectious diseases like small pox, leprosy, cholera, malaria and AIDS.

Christian missionaries now operate in over 10,000 charitable clinics and dispensaries all over Bangladesh. In many districts they have established



Serampore College established by Christian missionary William Carey was the centre of spreading modern European education in Bengal

PHOTO: COURTESY

clinics run awareness raising campaigns all over rural Bangladesh. Dr Edward Pallab Rozario, Project Co-ordinator (Health), Caritas says, "Our most prominent contribution to healthcare has been in ensuring quality maternal and paediatric healthcare. In the last five years, more than 80 percent of births in our clinics were normal deliveries and we encourage mothers to go for natural births by informing them about its

well-equipped hospitals such as St Vincent Hospital in Dinajpur, St Mary's Hospital in Khulna, Our Lady Fatima Hospital in Barisal and sick shelters and leprosy shelters in all the major cities of Bangladesh.

However, like many other minority communities, the Christian community too is suffering. According to Archbishop Moses Cosa, Metropolitan Arch Bishop of Chittagong, "We don't have any

prayer time on Sunday which is our religious weekly holiday. As a result, many of our devotees particularly the youth are becoming less interested in performing religious rituals." He also adds that in many places missionaries are not allowed to operate and have been evicted with the accusation of forced conversion. "We conduct charitable activities because we believe that providing service to humanity is a form of prayer. We have never converted anyone forcefully," says the Archbishop. "More than 90 percent of Christians in Bangladesh are indigenous. They have been facing different types of discriminations for decades. They do not even have rights to their own lands. If we consider their situation, Christians in Bangladesh are not in a good position at all," he adds.

Over the centuries, Bangladesh's Christian community has set unparalleled examples of providing altruistic humanitarian services through peaceful and harmonious practices, but scores of attacks and threats have been reported against Christian missionaries and several of them have been killed by religious extremists in the last couple of years. Again, most of the members of this religious community are doubly marginalised due to their indigenous identities.

During his recent visit, Pope Francis applauded Bangladesh's religious harmony saying, "Bangladesh is one of the best examples of inter-religious harmony." Now the ball is in our court to defend this appraisal by fulfilling our constitutional pledge of freedom of religion and social justice.

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| ECOLOGY |

### PRIMATES OF OLD DHAKA

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playing or bickering with one another to their heart's content. I find a lone monkey, sitting isolated atop an iron gate, thoughtfully studying his loyal subjects as they wreak havoc across the courtyard. "They steal clothes, only to return them when they get food. Rowdy as they are, they don't harm people," explains Sohag Mohajon, General Secretary of Dhaka Youth Club International and an environmental activist.

"The children enjoy throwing food at the monkeys or watching them grab it out of their hands. They're very entertaining!" muses Mohammad Jahid, a local resident of Gandaria who often visits Sadhana with his family. But ever so often, the monkeys' innocent playfulness goes too far, evoking the wrath of the locals. There have been incidents when the monkeys have been slashed with boiling water or beaten.

The message is clear: the only thing protecting the monkey population is the community's willingness to integrate and accept them. If this delicate balance is ever toppled, the monkeys will be ousted from their century-old natural habitat



PHOTO: SOHAG MOHAJON

which humans have urbanised. Thus the question at the forefront of my mind: if this fragile local acceptance is ever breached, what happens to the monkeys?

Ten years ago, Dhaka City Corporation began a feeding programme for the monkeys which promptly increased their numbers to 500 in Old Dhaka. No budget allocation in the later

years necessitated the shutdown of the programme in 2013. Local NGO Pokkhikul had undertaken a similar initiative years ago. "Members of Pokkhikul would provide bananas to the monkeys daily. However, they stopped their programme after a year because of rising debt and a lack of funding," says Bhabatush Dey.

Sohag estimates that there's roughly 100-150 monkeys remaining. This was the very realisation that drove Dhaka Youth Club International, along with Dhaka Women's Club, Puraan Dhaka Mancha, and the local residents, to conduct a human chain on December 8. They rallied to urge the city corporation to take responsibility for the rehabilitation, medical treatment and sustenance of the dwindling monkey population. "Unless there's adequate funding to ensure regular food supply and medical help, survival of the monkeys will be threatened. The ministry and city corporation must step in once again to ensure their safety," elaborates Sohag. "The locals too have a duty. A community fund could be set up to feed them."

My final minutes with Dey are the most telling, though they're spent in silence. He accompanies me outside the premises, yapping at nearby bickering monkeys by way of habit. Familiarity echoes in each of his interactions with them, borne over 17 long years. I'm left with a sense of reverence for our capacity to coexist with these creatures, and the profound consequences if we fail.

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