

## GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS AND THEIR IMPACT IN PATNA ARCHDIOCESE

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**Abstract :** *In Bihar the earliest Christian Mission was the Catholic Mission which made Patna the centre of its missionary works. Therefore it was known as Patna Mission, organized and managed by 'Society of Jesus', Jesuit Mission. There were a number of missions which came from time to time and made remarkable contributions in the field of education in Bihar. These were: The Roman Catholic Mission, Baptist Missionaries, the Gassner Evangelical Lutheran Mission (later Church) in Chotanagpur, Anglican Mission in Chotanagpur, the Santhal Mission of Northern Churches, Roman Catholic Mission in Chotanagpur, the Santhal Mission of the United Free Church of Scotland in Bihar, the Methodist Church in Bihar, the Dublin University Mission in Chotanagpur, the Catholic Mission in the Bhagalpur District and adjacent Santhal area in Bihar, The Fellowship of Christian Assemblies Mission Bihar, The Seventh Day Adventist Mission in Bihar, The Zenana Bible and Medical Mission in Bihar, British Churches of Christ Mission in Palamau, The Brethren in Christ Mission in Bihar, The Assembly of God (A.G.) Mission in Bihar, The Catholic Mission to the Santhali land of the districts of Purnea and Santhal Parganas. These Missionaries continued their work throughout the State. But it was from 1846 onwards that their work started more vigorously, when the Patna-Bettiah sector of the Mission in North India was separated from Agra Vicariate and constituted into new Patna Visceral. This paper develop deep understanding about the growth of Christianity in Patna Archdiocese.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Christian presence in Bihar began in 1620, when a Jesuit mission was founded at the old city of Patna, capital of Bihar. As the mission was abruptly wound up within a year, the beginning of active Christian work began only around 1706 when Italian Capuchin missionaries came to work in their newly founded mission, the Tibet-Hindustan Mission whose territory comprised of Northern India (Hindustan), Nepal and Tibet. Among the several Church organizations working in Bihar since then, the Catholic section is the oldest and has the largest following.

The three major ethnic Christian communities in Bihar are: the Bettiah Christians, Tribal Christians, and the Dalit Christians, mainly located respectively in West Champaran district in North Bihar, the Chotanagpur Plateau in former south Bihar, and the central plains of Bihar, south of the Ganges. After the bifurcation of Bihar State into Bihar and Jharkhand in 2000, two ethnic communities largely comprise Bihar's Christian community: the Bettiah Christians and Dalit Christians. The Santhal tribal Christians in Bhagalpur diocese

(which has territories in Bihar and Jharkhand), are local converts, who number some 17,000.

The Tibet-Hindustan Mission was the first Church organization which worked in Bihar. Since the proper mission field of the Capuchins was Tibet and Nepal, they did not concentrate on the Indian Territory until the founding of the Bettiah and Churhari missions in mid-1750s. With the winding up of the missions in Lhasa in Tibet (1745) and Nepal (1769) due to local opposition, they were able to invest more resources and personnel for evangelization in Bihar.

The credit for founding the first Christian community in Bihar goes to the Italian Capuchins who came to Patna in 1706 and established a hospice there en route to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, their destination mission. Since the Capuchins were pre-occupied with their Tibet Mission they did not undertake any major work in Bihar except building a church (1713) at Patna City, which remained as their transit point from Europe to Tibet. In fact, it was the short lived Tibet Mission (1707-1745) that paved the way for the founding of the oldest Christian community in Bihar, the Bettiah Christians at Bettiah, West Champaran District. Having had contacts with the European traders at Patna, the Hindu Raja of Bettiah, Dhurup Singh, came into contact with a charismatic, healing priest, Capuchin Father Joseph Mary Bernini, then at Patna. The Raja invited the priest to his Kingdom, extending patronage to establish a Christian Church at his capital, for which he obtained the necessary permission from Pope Benedict XIV in 1741.

The Bettiah Mission, founded in 1745, became home of a new Christian group, which gradually drew its membership from ten caste groups (upper and trading castes) from far and near Bettiah town. Individual converts were settled within the Capuchin Mission compound and the community grew in an enclosed quarter which still bears the name "Christian Quarter," within the walled capital of the Bettiah Raj in Bettiah. Nearly after 100 years the Bettiah Christians began to migrate to other cities in north India, particularly Calcutta, the Colonial capital which offered jobs for them, and to Asansol, Patna, and other cities in Bihar. The total number of Bettiah Christians, at Bettiah and elsewhere in India and outside comprises over 15,000.

From its first centre at Patna City, the Capuchin Mission expanded to several other places besides Bettiah: Chuhari, Chakhni, Rampur, Ramnagar, Motihari, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur, Morpa, Latonah, Chanpatia, Purnea, Bhagalpur, Bankipur, Danapur, Khagaul, Jamalpur, etc. The Capuchin Mission was succeeded by American Jesuit Mission in 1919 which opened some 60 Mission stations in central and north Bihar by the end of the 20th century.

Christian Mission work among the Santhals of Purnea had started in late 19th century by the Bengal Jesuits. The work was carried on by other missionary bodies in the 20th century. The Santhals in Bhagalpur District was begun by Patna Jesuits in 1925 and has expanded under other missionary societies, especially the Franciscan Third Order Regular. In terms of numbers, the Santhals (50,000 members) and other tribals together comprise the largest ethnic Christian community in Bihar. The term "Dalit" refers to a situation of social subjugation and brokenness and has been loaded with political, cultural and social connotations. According to Habil Massey, Christian missionaries have greatly improved the situation of the Dalits since the 16th century, the period of the Portuguese mission. During the British period a number of reform movements were started by missionaries who attempted to uplift them from bondage through conversion to Christianity and education. Christian mission among the Dalits in Bihar began with the Protestants who established mission centers in Patna, Gaya, Arah and other places and had some converts among them in late nineteenth century. However, the Dalits' response to Christian evangelization became a 'mass movement' in Bihar only in the 1930s, following Jesuit missionary involvement in rural central Bihar.

The castes which entered the Catholic Church were Chamars, followed by Dusadhs and Musahars, whereas Dusadhs form a majority, followed by Chamars and Musahars, in the Protestant Churches. Certain Protestant groups (especially some 40 recent Pentecostal ones) have claimed that Bihar has some 68,000 Dalit Christians (excluding the 50,000 Dalit Catholics) from 17 Scheduled Caste groups. In contemporary times, the Catholic section of the Dalit Christians, the majority (95%) of whom are Ravidasis, are largely in Patna and Buxar dioceses which together have some 60 mission centers/parishes in 16 districts of central Bihar.

In 1845 the Province of Bihar - with seven mission stations (Bettiah, Chuhari, Patna, Danapur, Bhagalpur, Purnea and Monger), and the Kingdoms of Nepal and Sikkim, with the adjacent territories (Darjeeling in Bengal and Chunar, Banaras and Ghazipur from Uttar Pradesh) were brought under an independent Vicariate of Patna, with Capuchin Anastasius Hartmann as its first bishop (1846).

Zealous and earnest, Bishop Hartmann shifted his headquarters from the old Patna City, to new Patna, and invited missionaries from other congregations, such as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBMV now known as Congregation of Jesus (CJ) in 1852. Later the Irish Christian Brothers came to work in this diocese (1894). In 1886 when the Indian Hierarchy was established, the vicariates were re-organised and Patna Vicariate was named Allahabad Diocese with Bishop A. Pesci as its shepherd.

The Capuchin missionaries were charismatic. As motivated persons and imbued with certain avowed goals, they seem to have left indelible marks in the lives of the Bettiah Christians. Some prominent ones among them were: Joseph Mary Bernini (1740s-50s), the founder of the community at Bettiah, Mark della Tomba who produced some indological works in the 1760s), Romauld of Senigallia, the well-known pastor of Bettiah and Chuhari for 40 years(1780s), John

Gualbert of Massa who built up Chuhari Mission (1790s), Bishop Pezzoni, a prolific writer of Christian literature (1830s), Anastasius Hartmann of Lucerne, the first Vicar Apostolic of Patna (1846-66), and Hilarion Abtei, the great builder of north Bihar missions (1890s). The American Jesuits under the leadership of the first Bishop of Patna, Belgian Jesuit Louis Van Hoeck (transferred from Ranchi Mission) took charge of the diocese in 1921. During the seven years of his ministry, Bishop Van Hoeck initiated the founding of many schools and founded in 1926 the indigenous Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Bishop Van Hoeck was transferred to Ranchi to become its first Bishop in 1927. In the first few years the Jesuit-run Patna Mission, like the Capuchin Mission, generally limited itself to pastoral works in the established Mission centres. In early 1930s they began to work among two subaltern communities: Santhal tribals in Santhal Parganas in southeast Bihar and Dalits in central Bihar.

The Jesuit missionaries in Patna focused on the Dalits in central Bihar. Though the Methodist and Anglican Churches had established missions in Patna, Gaya, Arah and other places, in late 19th century and attracted some Dalits into Christianity, the Dalit response to Christian preaching became a mass movement only in the 1930-60 period, which resulted in the founding of Christian churches in most districts of central Bihar, south of the Ganga.

#### Patna Archdiocese: Major Events in Mission History

1620 First Jesuits, led by Fr. Simon Figueredo, came to Patna at the invitation of the Christian (convert) Nawab of Patna, (John) Maquarum Khan: a short-lived mission.

1703 Tibet-Hindustan Mission established. Capuchins en route to Lhasa stayed at their hospice at Patna.

1713--- The first Church at Patna City built.

1745 Capuchins wind up Mission in Tibet. Tibet Mission transferred from Tibet to Nepal. Bettiah Mission founded.

1769 Capuchin Mission wound up in Nepal.

1773 Patna under the Vicariate of the Great Mughal

1820 Patna under Agra Vicariate

1845 Patna made a Vicariate and Bishop Anastasius Hartmann OFM (Cap) ordained first bishop of Patna in 1846.

1853 Arrival of first women missionaries to Patna Mission; Congregation of Jesus (formerly IBMV)

1887 Purnea which was part of Patna, was transferred to Calcutta: later in 1998 it became a diocese, being carved out of Dumka diocese.

1892— Bettiah Prefecture established, entrusted to Tyrolese Capuchins.

1919 Patna Mission assigned to Missouri Province Jesuits.

1921 March 6, Belgian Jesuit Bishop Louis Van Hoeck ordained Bishop of Patna.

March 16, First five American Jesuits arrived in Patna.

1926 Founding of first indigenous women congregation (Sisters of the Sacred Heart) in Patna Diocese

1928 Bishop Van Hoeck becomes first bishop of Ranchi. Bishop Bernard Sullivan ordained Bishop of Patna diocese.

1938 Bhagalpur Region handed over to American Third

Order Regular (TOR) Franciscans.

1947 Bishop Sullivan retires. Bishop Augustine Wildermuth ordained bishop of Patna.

1952-- Re-entry of Catholic Missionaries (Patna Jesuits) into Nepal.

1956-- Bhagalpur erected a Prefecture and made a diocese in 1965

1980 Bishop Wildermuth retired; Diocese bifurcated: Bishop John Baptist Thakur appointed Bishop of new Muzaffarpur diocese; Bishop Benedict J. Osta appointed new Bishop of Patna (and Nepal).

1984 Nepal became an independent ecclesiastical unit with Msgr. Anthony Sharma as Apostolic Prefect of Nepal.

1998: Bettiah made a new diocese; Bishop Victor Henry Thakur made its first Bishop.

1999: Patna diocese becomes an archdiocese; Bishop Osta elevated as Archbishop.

2005: Episcopal silver jubilee of Archbishop Osta and Bishop John B. Thakur

Source: Archbishop Osta Episcopal Silver Jubilee Souvenir, Archbishop House, Patna 2006

In North India Bihar sector of the Mission was separated from Agra Vicariate

and constitute into Patna Vicariate in 1846. On 15 March 1846, Fr. Anastasias Hartman was consecrated at Agra as the first Vicar and Bishop of the Patna Vicariate. When he arrived at Patna city a few days later, he felt unhappy about the management and work of the Mission. The Mission House was in ruins. There were no schools anywhere in the whole mission, no sisters and no brothers. There were only four priests - Fr. John Baptist of Melegnano, caring for some 1400 Christians of Bettiah and Chuhari, Fr. John Baptist of Giglia at Bhagalpur, Fr. Damasus at Purnea and R. Lawrence with the troops at Danapore Cantonment. Great importance was given to education by Bishop Hartman. With eight stations - Bettiah, Chuhari, Patna City, Danapore, Monghyr, Bhagalpur, Purnea and Darjeeling - and about 2000 Christians, he had nowhere a single Catholic School. He set to work once to found Catholic schools throughout his territory. Bishop Hartman was succeeded by Msgr. Paul Tosi, who was consecrated in June 1868, by the Archbishop of Calcutta, Msgr. Steins as the Chief Priest of the Patna Mission. More schools were opened. Sisters came from different countries of Europe and from India too. Improvements were made in the school at Bettiah. New buildings were erected and many handicrafts were taught to the boys. Of these, blacksmithing and carpentry proved to be most popular and a large number of orphans were given a means of independent livelihood. In 1874, the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who had established a girls' school at Bankipore, were asked to set up a school for girls at Bettiah. Three Sisters reached Bettiah, which later on became St. Theresa's High School. Two years after their arrival at Bettiah, the town was ravaged by famine and plague and the number of the orphan children dependent upon the Bettiah Mission became so great that new land was purchased at Pakirana, where the same Sisters began a home

for the orphan girls. An Indian sisterhood, the Sisters of St. Clare was started at Chuhari. The famine and plague forced the authorities at Bettiah to move the boys' orphanage to Chuhari. A Middle School and a handicraft school for boys were conducted by the Fathers, while the girls were instructed by the Sisters of St. Clare.

In 1881, Bishop Tosi was succeeded by Bishop Francis Pesci, who was the last Vicar Apostolic of the Patna Vicariate. In 1882, more land was acquired at Chakhni, a village thirty miles north-west of Bettiah, where fourteen couples of once orphaned children were settled. A middle school was developed there and the charge was given to the Sisters of St. Clare.

After twenty years of management, the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary handed over the school and orphanage at Bettiah and Pakirana, to the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross of Switzerland in 1892. The Indian Sisters of St. Clare opened girls' schools in Bettiah, Chuhari and Chakhni. They were assisted in administration by the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

At Latonah now in the Saharsa district, Fr. Pius, in 1897, built a church and a school. The school was staffed by the Sisters of St. Clare from Bettiah. In Ramnagar to the North of Bettiah, Fr. Jerome, some time in 1895 began a school for the Tharu (a tribe) children. His successor, Fr. Cosmos, completed the school and built a church and an orphanage. The school and orphanage were staffed by the Sisters of St. Clare. The Sisters followed up this work in Ramnagar with a like project in Rampur, a village not far away, near the Nepal border, where they met with success.

In course of time, the school at Rampur took precedence over the Ramnagar School and, in 1907, the two schools were combined at Rampur, where there was sufficient land to settle the orphan children as they grew up.

In 1900, Fr. Florin founded a Girls' school at Chainpattah, where, in addition to the regular curriculum, the children were taught weaving and basket making. Fr. Hilarian in 1899 rented a house in Muzaffarpur to provide a chapel for a group of Catholics, who were resident in that area. He later placed the house at the disposal of the Holy Cross Sisters for an English school for girls.

This failed after a year and the house once more became a residence and chapel for Fathers. In 1907, the Fathers were offered some land in Marpa in the district of Muzaffarpur. Fr. Pius and a lay brother went there and established a small congregation of Catholics around their Church and Bungalow. The Sisters of St. Clare were later brought in to conduct a small school. At the end of the First World War, the Roman Catholic authorities in Rome declared Patna a Diocese. The Patna Diocese, constituted in 1919, included in its boundaries, the districts of Patna, Gaya, Shahabad, Champaran, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, North and South Bhagalpur, North and South Monghyr and the Kingdom of Nepal. The new Diocese was given to the American Jesuits. On March 16, 1921, five American Jesuits, Frs. William Eline, Henry Milet, Edward Anderson, Thomas Kelly and Patrie Troy, from the Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus in the U.S.A. reached Patna. Fr. William Eline, the Superior, at once took up the task outlined by Bishop Van

Hoeck which was to intensify Catholic education throughout the Diocese. More recruits came to man the schools and churches north and south of the Ganges.

After building the Cathedral at Bankipore, Bishop Van Hoeck went to the U.S.A. to secure funds and more personnel for the Diocese. On his return he founded a new congregation of Catholic Sisters, the Sisters of Sacred Heart, who were to be trained to expand the work in the girls' schools in the Diocese. The foundation took place in 1926. The Sisters later conducted schools and orphanages and dispensaries in nine sections. At Bettiah, the Jesuit Fathers took over the century-old Middle School for boys. Soon it became the largest Middle School in the district.

It was decided to make it a High School and in 1928, at Turiatola on the southern side of Bettiah, the foundation stone of the beautiful and imposing Krist Raja High School was laid. At Chunhari, new hostel and school buildings were erected. Students came from as far away as Shahabad district and the Santhal Parganas. The Chunhari Girls' School too was improved with new buildings. On 15 February 1928, Bishop Van Hock was made the Bishop of the newly constituted Diocese of Ranchi, and Right Reverend Bernard Sullivan was appointed Administrator Apostolic of the Diocese, and a year later, on 17 March 1929, he was consecrated Bishop of Patna at the Pro Cathedral. School expansion was given top priority in Bishop Sullivan's programme. Early in 1930, a school for Santhals was opened at Bhagalpur. Later it was transferred to Gokhla in the same district. The Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary opened a school for Santa/ girls there.

In 1934, Fr. P. J. Sen tag replaced Fr. Elive as Superior and the programme of opening new schools in the new sectors was accelerated. Fr. Westropp secured a large tract of land at Gajhi village in Monghry district where he introduced the Santhals to cottage industries. The earthquake on 15 January 1934 damaged many schools and church buildings of the Patna Diocese. The work of reconstruction and expansion went on. At Padri-ki-Haveli in Patna City, a Middle School and orphan home for boys were started by Fr. Sontage.<sup>41</sup> In Shahabad district, Fr. Westropp brought the Sisters of Sacred Heart to conduct a school and an orphan home for girls at Buxar and a widow's home at Arrah. From 1936, a number of churches and schools were opened under the direction Fr. M. Batson in the areas to the East to Patna. The first was at Mokarmeh, where a building was erected to serve both as church and residence. A primary school was started there with arrangements for boarding poor boys. With Mokarmeh as headquarters, Fr. Batson moved about to establish centres at Barbiga, Nawadah, Biharsharif, Gulni, Bakhtiarpur and Sheikhpura. In each of these centres, primary schools were established along with churches and hospitals.

Turning their attention more to the Dalits, the Jesuit and diocesan missionaries in Bihar started intensive evangelization work in the Bhojpuri and Magahi speaking divisions, south of the Ganga. Educational institutions, hostels for students, health care centres, relief and rehabilitation works became part of the activities of an increasing number of mission centres in Bihar where conversions had become a mass movement. Appealing to

collaborators for help the Jesuit Bishop Bernard Sullivan (1927-1947) invited many religious societies to work in the vast Patna diocese which had the whole of central and north Bihar under its jurisdiction. Consequently the Medical Mission Sisters (MMS) started the Holy Family Hospital in Patna City (1939), the Sisters of the Apostolic Carmel (AC) opened the Patna Women's College in Patna (1940), the Sisters of Notre Dame (SND) and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth (SCN) joined in late 1940s, and many more congregations extended their presence in the subsequent decades. Some of the missionaries who are endearingly remembered by the Catholics are: Jesuit priests Henry Westropp (d.1952) Marion Batson (d.1960), Peter Sontag (d.1963), Kevin Angelo (d.1963), Frank Loesch (d.1972), Paul Dent (d.1980), Nicholas Pollard (d.1984), Joseph Mann (d.1985), James Tong (d.1986), Robert Ludwig (d.1989), Ignatius Vellaringatt (d.1990), Marshall Moran (d.1992), and diocesan priests Joseph Padamattam (1983) and Gregory Thekkel (1986).

#### Patna Archdiocese

With the addition of more Church personnel recruited from various Catholic regions of India more geographical areas were covered which necessitated creation of more ecclesiastical units in Bihar. In 1980, Patna Diocese was bifurcated (Patna and Muzaffarpur dioceses) and local Bihari bishops were made shepherds (p.86) over these. In 1998 two new dioceses (Bettiah and Purnea) were bifurcated from Muzaffarpur diocese. Raised to an archdiocese in 1999, Patna has now five saffragon dioceses (Muzaffarpur, Bettiah, Purnea, Bhagalpur and Buxar). An understanding of the impact of Christianity can be had by reviewing the development of Church institutions. This may indicate the volume of humanitarian works done by the Christian Churches in the area on the one hand, and the extent of mobility achieved by the target Christian communities, on the other. As mentioned earlier, although Church membership in the state is less than one percent of the total population, its visibility through its institutional structures is very significant. A large number of public institutions serve the society in general and the Christian communities, in particular. The Catholic community alone runs 3 colleges, some 50 high schools, 160 middle and primary schools, 25 vocational training institutes, 15 non-formal training centres, 15 hospitals, 100 health care centres, a few old age homes, leprosaria, over 40 social welfare centres, in 280 mission centres, with the help of 1800 Church personnel and thousands of lay collaborators. While Christian missionary institutions and humanitarian undertakings were preferentially available to the convert Christians, the dominant majority of the beneficiaries of the Christian educational institutions and health care centers, have been non-Christians. In recent times several non-Christian subaltern communities and marginalized sections of society also seem to have benefited through Church's social action programmes for empowerment, such as mass literary and adult education programmes, conscientization, conducting self-help groups, legal aid and so on.

## II. CONCLUSION

The Mission, with its multi dimensional, spiritual and temporal programmes covering preaching, educational service, medical service, humanitarian works and the like, affected the Dalits, who adopted Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, the wider ambient society. In short, the objectives, strategies and programmes of the missionaries were multi pronged: religious, cultural, material or economic, and so on. In conclusion, we can say that the specific impact of Christianity among them has been characterised by empowerment of the powerless and re-discovering of human dignity which had been lost due to centuries-old socio-economic, religio-cultural subjugation and subalternity.

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- [29] Ibid, p.8.
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