THE NEW ZEALAND BAPTIST MISSIONARY SOCIETY IN INDIA 1890 - 1974

A research essay
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts in History
in the
University of Canterbury

by
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University of Canterbury
February, 1974.

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Preface.

In a history of Christian missions in India, the work of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society would be insignificant. Since it's formation in 1885 it has sent out fewer than eighty missionaries, has operated in only two relatively small areas in the North East, and has achieved, for most of its history, little success in terms of conversions to Christianity. But despite its insignificance, the Society is a strategic one to study. It's missionaries have worked among Hindus, Muslims and animists, among Bengali plains people and Tripura hill tribals, among rural illiterate peasants and educated urban elites. They have used a wide variety of methods including the provision of extensive socio-economic services such as medical treatment, education and relief assistance. They have also been met with a contrasting response. In 1971 the number of Baptists in Tripura was 5,442, in Tippera 125. The reasons for the contrasting response will be the main emphasis of this study.

This essay does not pretend to be an authoritative account of the work of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society. It has been limited by the lack of available relevant material and the absence of any analytical New Zealand Baptist publication.

1. Brief History of the N.Z.B.M.S.

The decision of the New Zealand Baptists in 1885, "to take up at the outset Missionary work in India,"[1] was not only an expression of their evangelistic zeal, but also a reflection of the influence of the parent body, the British Baptists. Most of the New Zealand Baptists had recently emigrated from England and continued to support the British Baptist Missionary Society through regular prayer meetings and "mission boxes". They shared the conviction of the British Baptists that the Empire, especially India, had been providentially given by God to the British people, "chiefly in order that we might give to India the gospel to which our nation owed its greatness ... We felt that it had been conquered in order that it might be converted."[2] Their interest in India was stimulated by the arrival in the Colony of A.F. Carey, a great grandson of William Carey, one of the first and the greatest of Baptist missionaries to India. A.F. Carey subsequently served as President of the New Zealand Baptist Union and Missionary Society. Another great grandson, the Rev. W. Carey was also in New Zealand at this time. He had a brief pastorate in the Lincoln Church in 1884 prior to his joining the Baptist Missionary society in India.

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1. G.T. Beilby, Bread on the Waters, P. 11.
2. H.H. Driver, These Forty Years, P. 17.

With a light hearted optimism, which resulted in the death in India of the Society's first two missionaries, the early retirement of the third, and numerous resignations in the first fifteen years, the New Zealand Baptists proceeded to Bengal. In 1890 they chose Brahmanbaria township as their first permanent headquarters. In 1896 they opened a second headquarters at Chandpur, the main town of the third subdivision of Tippera.[1]

The pattern of missionary activity was soon established. Medical treatment, education and relief assistance were to assume an important position in the strategy of the missionaries.

A dispensary was established in 1891 at Brahmanbaria and under Miss E. Beckingsale, a missionary from 1895-1934, it was to treat 5,000 patients annually. A hospital was built in Chandpur in 1901 containing 28 beds and headed by a fully qualified doctor. During the first years of operation the hospital treated 175 in-patients and 6,534 out-patients.[2] H.H. Driver estimated that by 1914 130,000 patients including 2,000 in-patients, representing all of the 1,104 recognized villages of Chandpur subdivision, had been treated.[3] Alternative Government services were at a minimum. As late as 1923 there was no Government hospital in Brahmanbaria while the one at Chandpur had only twelve beds.[4]

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1. See map of Tippera in Appendix.

2. E.P.Y. Simpson, "The N.Z. Baptist Missionary Society 1885-1947". Unpublished M.A. thesis, Canterbury University College - 1948, P. 100.

3. Driver, P. 80.
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The New Zealand Mission established two type of schools. Elementary village schools taught by Bengali Christians were set up among the lower caste Hindu groups of Chamars and Námasudras. Attempts to introduce them into Muslim villages, however, were frequently rebuffed. Schools for the educated upper classes were set up at the Mission's headquarters. These were taught by the missionaries themselves, who offered education in English as a prime inducement. The Chandpur school was eventually closed in 1938, but the Brahmanbaria one was only closed in 1971 when it was bombed and looted during the creation of Bangladesh. In 1970 it had a roll of 400 pupils, mainly non-Christians.[1]

The missionaries were always ready to respond with material assistance in emergencies. Relying on funds provided by special appeals in New Zealand and on Government assistance, they regularly distributed food, clothing, seeds and building materials. For example in 1919, the Mission opened a special relief depot at Duhkhala to distribute goods and to employ the men in splitting bamboo and the women in weaving mats. In 1920 the Hope of Hope for orphans and widows was opened in Brahmanbaria. By 1932, 39 orphans were supported.[2]

These socio-economic services were regarded by the New Zealand missionaries as "indirect evangelism", as essentially a means to an end - the end of conversion to Christianity.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, May 1970, P. 17.
2. N.Z. Baptist, Oct. 1932, P. 317.

Medical work was seen not only as a natural expression of Christian concern but as "a powerful and extension leverage for the Kingdom of God, breaking down prejudice and opposition and opening the way for the preaching of the Gospel."[1] Education was to be used as a vehicle to instil "doubts as to the power of the gods to save"[2] and to break down "their abominations unutterably vile."[3] Thus regular preaching and literature distribution was done in the hospital, dispensary and schools as well as in the church, bazaars, homes and shops. The villages were not neglected. The missionaries travelled extensively throughout the district treating patients, selling or distributing literature, preaching and talking to all who would listen.

The missionaries had come into occasional contact with tribal people from the adjoining Indian State of Tripura and were keen to extend their work into that area. Three British missionaries who had served the Society in the early 1890's, had later been very successful among the Manipuri and Lushai tribals. The Australian Baptists were similarly successful among the Garo tribals. The New Zealand missionaries, disappointed with the paucity of converts in Tippera, hoped that they too could join in on this new "harvest field". It was not till 1909 however, that permission was given to station two Bengali workers in Agartala, the State capital.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, Nov. 1924, P. 264.
2. Year Book, 1906, P. 82.
3. Year Book, 1905, P. 78.

The permission was of little value as the two workers were restricted to private conversation and the selling of literature within the town. This outpost was abandoned in 1929. Meanwhile, back in 1911, 1,000 Lushais including sixty Christians had moved into the Jampui district of Tripura, from neighbouring Assam. By 1931 the Christian Community had expanded to over 2,000, including 18 churches. An independent interdenominational group, the North East India General Mission sent workers in in 1917, but because of a split among the missionaries in 1928 and because of declining support from its home base in the United States, the Mission was limited in its activity and usefulness. The tribal Christians were in danger of reverting to their former beliefs. The Kuki Christians appealed to the New Zealand Baptists in 1934 to send them a teacher. Permission was obtained for regular visits in the same year and in 1936 for a resident Garo worker. With the enthusiasm which marked the formation of the Society, renewed approaches were made to the Maharaja for permission to establish a permanent European station.[1]

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1. The Mission even requested the Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, Dr Rushbrooke, to interview the Maharaja on their behalf when the Maharaja visited London. The Maharaja had previously visited New Zealand and was later to develop a close friendship with the New Zealand missionaries. The Rev. M.J. Eade was to become a regular member of the Maharaja's cricket team, and was invited to the Maharaja's son's wedding.

The permission was finally obtained in November 1938 and in the following month the first Annual Assembly of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union was held to which 21 delegates from 13 villages came.[1]

The pattern of missionary activity was again quickly established, but with significant changes from Tippera, which will be analysed later. Medical dispensaries were set up at Agartala (1939), Darchawi (1942), Jampui (1944), Kulai (1956), and at Huchapara (1958). In 1949 a cottage hospital for 35 patients was built at Agartala staffed by a doctor, nurses and trained leprosy workers financed by grants from the Mission to Lepers.

Similarly with education. At first the tribals were slow to respond to the offer of schools, but by 1947 the Mission had established 35 village schools and by the early 1960's there were over 100. Because of the improved supply of Government schools the number has declined to around 25 in recent years. A boarding school - "St Paul's" - was set up in Agartala in 1941 to provide further professional and technical education for children of tribal Christians. By 1970 it catered for 170 pupils from 20 tribes.[2]

The Mission not only continued its policy of providing material relief in times of floods and famines but also set up a number of special funds, including the Rural Reconstruction Fund to help establish the tribal economy on a more permanent and secure basis. As with Tippera, all these socio-economic services went hand in hand with the preaching and teaching of Christianity.

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1. Beilby, P. 57.

ii. The Socio-Economic Features of Tippera.

The villages of India have often been described in terms of the "village republic" model. They were believed to be virtually independent of the outside world, being economically and socially self sufficient. Such a model has been largely discredited in many parts of India and particularly in Tippera.[1]

Because of the frequent floods the peasants of Tippera had to build their houses on whatever high ground was available. This resulted in villages more elongated than compact and often without a recognized centre. R. Glasse has written of the Matlab Thana in Tippera that "the positioning of the houses is of such continuity, that it is often difficult to know where one village finishes and the other begins."[2] Such a situation has been intensified by the high population density and the resulting shortage of land. In 1921 Tippera's population density was 972 per square mile and was exceeded in Bengal only by Howrah and Dacca. In these circumstances it would be impossible for villages to remain economically and socially self sufficient.

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1. As early as 1876 W.W. Hunter recorded that "village communities, in the sense in which the words may be applied in certain parts of India, do not now exist in Tipperah." A Statistical Accont of Bengal, volume 6, Pp 384-385, quoted in R.W. Nicholas, "Vaisnavism and Islam in Rural Bengal." Bengal Regional Identity (ed. D. Kopf), P. 106.
2. R. Glasse, "la société" musulmani dans le Pakistan rural

The resulting extra village links were further encouraged by the small size of the villages, making village endogamy impractical, and for the Muslims by the process whereby their mosques were sited. They were not built for a pre-existing village congregation, but when and where a wealthy enough family, who subscribed the cost, decided.[1] Consequently they were often situated away from any particular village, forcing the peasants to leave their village precincts and to mix with fellow worshippers from other villages. The regular Hindu fairs and festivals must have performed a similar function for the Hindus.

The complex interlocking Hindu caste system with the multiplicity of sub-castes each with its respective duties and privileges was largely absent in East Bengal, and in particular in Tippera. Single castes especially the Namasudras tend to predominate over large expanses of territory. Among these castes there were few occupational differences; according to the Tippera Gazetteer 79 per cent of the people were dependent on agriculture.[2] Apparently the social structure was more flexible in East Bengal and there was room for "considerable mobility by single families and small groups."[3]

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1. See P.J. Bertocci, "Patterns of Social Organisation in Rural East Bengal, " Bengal East and West, (ed. A. Lipski), P. 126.
2. J.E. Webster, Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers : Tippera, P. 55.
3. J. Gallagher, "Congress in Decline : Bengal 1930 to 1939" Modern Asian Studies, Volume 7, part 3, July 1973, P. 560.

The resulting caste or class structure, including the majority Muslims, was unusually egalitarian, at least of all groups below the zamindars.

Furthermore it appears that the people were quite well off by peasant standards. J.E. Webster considered that they were "well off in comparison with those in most parts of India and there seems no doubt that their condition has improved in recent years."[1] It is probable that there were no or few "depressed" castes in Tippera. The Rev. J. Takle speaking of the despised Chamars, remarked that "they are not in the same class as the 'untouchables' and 'pariahs' of South India for there are none such in Bengal."[2] When the Namasudras and Rajbonsis applied for "depressed" status in the early 1930's they were severely critised in some quarters. The newspaper Advance concluded its criticism with a flat statement that "there does not exist in Bengal any caste or castes which may perpetually come under the definition of depressed."[3]

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1. Tippera Gazetteer, P. 43.
2. N.Z. Baptist, Jan. 1935, P. 19.
3. Advance, 22 Jan. 1933. Quoted by J. Gallagher in "Congress in Decline : Bengal, 1930 to 1939," P. 619.

iii. The Muslims.

Unlike many of their co-religionists of North and West Bengal, the Muslims of Tippera were very strict in their religious beliefs and practices. The 1910 Tippera Gazetteer described them as 'all Sunnis and very strict followers of the Prophet. Some who call themselves Farazi ... are calvinistic in their denunciation of music and everything even distinctly approaching idolatry."[1] The Farazi or Fara'idi movement was founded by Haji Shariat-ulla in 1818 as a protest movement against the syncretistic and pagan practices characteristic of most Bengali Muslims at the time. He preached a return to the simple habits and the pure montheism of the Koran, denouncing all local cults, customs and ceremonies which had no basis in the Koran or the prophetic tradition. Thus all Fara'idis were forbidden to participate in Hindu rites and worship or the praying to saints and prophets. Instead they were to make an individual repentance for past sins and a promise to live a more godly life in the future.

Of greater appeal to the Muslim peasants was Shariat-ulla's declaration that India was to be Dar-ul-harb (enemy country), where the waging of war against the "infidels" was a religious command. Shariat-ulla's son Didu Miyan, who took over the leadership of the movement from 1838, emphasised this declaration, capturing the imagination of the masses by his spectacular successes against Hindu zamindars.

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1. Tippera Gazetteer, P. 28.

M.A. Khan points out that the Fara'idi movement spread most extensively in those rural areas where the Hindu zamindars held sway over the Muslim peasantry, i.e., in the districts of Bakarganj, Faraidpur, Dacca, Mymensingh and Tippera.[1]

Didu Miyan was particularly successful in Tippera, where as a result of his extensive cross country tours of the interior, "the flood of the Fara'idi movement swept over Tippera district."[2] Chandpur town becamge a stronghold for the movement and "in a short time the entire population of the subdivision became staunch adherents of the great leader."[3] The Sadar subdivision was similarly converted but in the Brahmanbaria subdivision the Fara'idis probably got more supporters than actual disciples.

The movement has retained its strength in Tippera through to the present day, largely through the adoption of a distinctive dress and the establishment of a close knit hierarchical community system. Fara'idis had to wrap the loin cloth round the loins without crossing it between the legs. This avoided any resemblance to a Christian's trousers and set them apart from their Hindu neighbours.

The establishment of a hierarchy of authorized agents or Khalifahs had the dual intention of supervising the members and of providing protection for the peasants from their Hindu zamindars. Fara'idi settlements were divided into small village units of 300 to 500 families.

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1. M.A. Khan, History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906. P. XXXV.
2. Ibid P. 136.
3. Ibid P. 131.

A prominent member was chosen as Khalifah and was given considerable religious and social power. He was to teach the doctrines, enforce the religious duties, oversee the morale, administer justice in consultation with village elders, and maintain an elementary school for the children. In return he was to receive one fortieth of the people's produce.

Ten or more of these village units made up a _gird_, or circle, which was presided over by a Superintendent Khalifah. He in turn was subordinate to the _Ustad_, the head of the movement, whose authority was supreme and binding in all matters.

iv. The Hindus.

The Hindu population of Tippera was not as united nor as coherent in their religious beliefs and practices as were the Muslims. J.E. Webster, in the rather brief Tippera Gazetteer describes them as "mostly Vaishmabs", i.e. vaishnavites, especially the Namasudras and the Kaibaittas, the two largest castes.[1] It is probable, however, that he has failed to recognize the popularity of Siva and Sakta worship among the upper castes, and also the presence of a 'folk' or 'village' religion i.e. the worship of numerous local gods and goddesses alongside the duties of orthodox Hinduism. At least this is the impression gained from the isolated references in the official New Zealand Baptist writings. H.H. Driver believed that the favourite Hindu god was "Kali (the Black One), the wife of Shiva, the third person in the Hindu Triad."[2] Takle in his booklet The Bible in 'Baria describes an idol of Bhyrub, which is another title for Siva.[3] It is possible therefore, that the Sakta-Tantric belief, normally more popular among the upper castes than its rival Vaishnavite worship, predominated in Brahmanbaria and Chandpur townships.

It is also possible that the Vaishnavites were not as strict in their allegiance to Krishna and in their abhorence to blood sacrifices.

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1. Tippera Gazetteer, P. 25.

2. Driver, P. 22.

3. J. Takle, The Bible in 'Baria, P. 23.

Takle mentions sacrifices being made to the goddess Kali in a Vaishnavite village of Kusba.[1] A New Zealand Baptist convert, Ramani Badya, in giving an account of his conversion, compared the sacrifice of the sinless Jesus with the village sacrifices of a freshly washed goat, which was apparently a common practice in this Namasudra village of Serampore.[2]

Hinduism in Tippera was therefore probably far more complex and localized than what Webster recorded. Furthermore Vaishnavism in Bengal had been influenced by a sixteenth century reformer, Chaitanya, whom many worship as an incarnation of Krishna. The essence of Chaitanya Vaishnavism was a belief in the superiority of the path of devotion (bhakti) accompanied by emotion and mysticism over the path of knowledge (jnana). Devotion was to be given to Krishna alone, and an unquestioning faith in the divinity of Chaitanya and in his miracles was demanded. Salvation was open to all however, and even a Sudra could be a "Guru" (religious leader). But the egalitarian element was not emphasized, and although Chaitanya Vaishnavism helped to relax the rigours of the caste system in Bengal, it was marked by a comparative indifference to social problems and iniquities.

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1. Ibid, P. 28.

2. N.Z. Baptist, April 1954, P. 86.

v. The Tippera Response.

By 1929 the New Zealand Baptist Missionaries could report that "It is not often we meet a man who says he has never heard of Jesus. Again and again when we are showing books to an individual, he will indicate that he has one or two in his house ... we are sure that the knowledge of Jesus is more widespread in our district than in the great majority of 'occupied' areas."[1] But despite this thoroughness[2], and despite the extent and variety of missionary activity, results, in the form of definite conversions to Christianity in Tippera district, were bitterly disappointing. The missionaries had to wait till 1896 for the first converts from Hinduism and till 1901 for the first converts from Islam. They were not able to establish a Bengali church till 1902, and throughout the succeeding years converts seldom numbered more than one or two each year. By 1923 the combined total of the two churches totalled 65 of whom only 21 were direct converts, the rest were Christians from other districts.[3] This lack of success distressed and perplexed the missionaries and their supporters in New Zealand.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, Dec. 1929, P. 367.
2. The missionaries kept diaries noting any who showed interest. Miss E. Beckingsale mentioned that in 1926, she met two Hindu widows she had noted down in 1914. N.Z. Baptist, Nov. 1926, P. 313.
3. N.Z. Baptist, Oct. 1923, P. 204.

The missionary W.F. White wrote in the 1913/14 Report that "It seems as if the Bengali character is incapable of being spiritually influenced, and all the efforts of the past years have been in vain. The problem is a great one, and we know not how to solve it."[1] Nevertheless the missionaries remained forever optimistic. Takle in the same report, concluded that "still we know our labour is not in vain. The Word of God shall not return to Him void. The harvest must come."[2] But their longed for harvest in Tippera never did come.

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The socio-economic features of Tippera outlined in Section ii may well have presented extraordinary difficulties for the New Zealand Baptist missionaries. It would appear that the people most likely to be converted to Christianity in India, either as individuals or as part of a group movement, would be those with a strong sense of grievance against the social and economic order. J.W. Pickett argues that at least 85 per cent of Protestant Christians and probably 60 per cent of Roman Catholic Christians in India were converts from the "depressed" classes.[3] He identifies a sense of restiveness or grievance against the social order as an essential element in the development of mass movements towards Christianity in his closely researched work <u>Christian Mass Movements in India</u>.[4]

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1. <u>Year Book</u>, 1913/14, P. 64.
2. <u>Year Book</u>, 1913/14, P. 71.
3. J.W. Pickett, <u>Christ's Way to India's Heart</u>, P. 13.
4. J.W. Pickett, <u>Christian Mass Movements in India</u>, P. 43.

This sense of social or economic grievance was probably largely lacking in Tippera. The majority of the population were Muslims who at least theoretically, were casteless. The peasantry were considered to be well off in comparison with the rest of India and there were no or few depressed castes. Because of the predominance of single castes over large areas, and the lack of occupational differences the economic and social structure of Tippera was far more egalitarian than in most parts of India. For those individuals and small groups who were discontented or restive there was apparently adequate opportunity for social mobility within the structure. It would therefore appear that there was little need for Christianity either as an alternative to sanskritization or as a vehicle for westernization and presumed prosperity.[1]

What socio-economic grievance there was, was directed against the Hindu zamindars. The egalitarian Fara'-idi movement exploited it and was thus able to make wholesale conversions among the Muslim peasantry. But the anti-zamindar grievance was not restricted to Muslims; after 1920 the Hindu Namasudras made "common cause with their Muslim fellow tenants"[2] against the zamindars. But the New Zealand Baptist missionaries were neither emotionally nor politically equipped to utilize this grievance by giving it a Christian slant. Socially and religiously they were far more at home with the educated upper classes.

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1. See M.N. Srinivas, Social Changes in Modern India.
2. J. Gallagher, "Congress in Decline : Bengal 1930 to 1939", Modern Asian Studies, Volume 7, July 1973, P. 598.

The spread out pattern of settlement and the resulting extra-village links also may have had some significance for the New Zealand missionaries. The absence of compact self sufficient villages with community centres would minimize the possibility of group discussion and conversion. It could also hinder the success of missionary preaching and services, such as village schools. On the other hand, the possibilities of individuals becoming Christians, without the same degree of ostracism and persecution, which invariably resulted in the close knit multi-caste villages of South India, could have been greater. But this may have been offset by the greater awareness of the larger community of fellow believers. This would encourage the potential convert's fear of isolation; as a Christian he would feel like a small drop of water in the vast sea of Hindus and Muslims.

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Despite their optimism, the New Zealand missionaries must have realized early on that it would be difficult to win converts from the two religious faiths already entrenched in Tippera. Christian missions working amongst Muslims had been notably unsuccessful. This was particularly the case in Bengal where most of the Christians were converts from low caste Hinduism or tribal animism. And the Muslims of Tippera were to prove an even more difficult proposition than most of their fellow believers. The influence of Fara'idi movement with its puritanic revialism and its tightly-controlled society limited Muslim-Christian contact and communication.

It might be thought that the similarities between Chaitanya Vaishnavism and some aspects of evangelical Christianity would have helped the missionaries to form some sort of contact and empathy with the Vaishnavites. On the other hand these superficial similarities could leave the Vaishnavites with the impression that Christ was simply another name for Krishna. E. Daniel Potts, writing of the British Baptists in Bengal, argues that they failed in their primary goal of winning converts "partly because Hinduism and Christianity rested their claims on superficially much the same grounds : revelation supported by miracles, the accounts of which were handed down in books and oral tradition."[1]

The New Zealand missionaries, convinced of their own rightness, were not prepared to adapt their beliefs to suit the religious situation in Tippera. When it got down to fundamental concepts the Hindus as well as the Muslims were to find that evangelical Christianity was incompatible with their own religion.

The major stumbling block was of course the person and work of Christ. The missionaries proclaimed Him to be without qualification and without compromise, the unique Son of God. Only through Christ was salvation to be obtained. Such absolute and exclusive claims were naturally enough unacceptable to the equally exclusive Muslims and to the more eclectic Hindus.

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1. E.D. Potts, British Baptist Missionaries in India. 1793-1837, P. 208.

Similarly with the Bible. The missionaries viewed it without reserve as the literal word of God to man. Because the Hindu and Muslim scriptures contradicted the Bible, they were to be denounced as counterfeits, probably inspired by the Devil himself. The refusal of the Muslims and the Hindus to view the Bible with similar respect cut the ground from underneath the missionary's feet, for the New Zealand Baptists used the Bible as the source and authority for all their religious ideas.

The missionaries were also frustrated in their attempts to convince their hearers of the gravity of sin. W.F. White wrote in 1912 that "the Bengali character is marked by a total absence of right conceptions of sin and the need of an Intercessor and Saviour."[1] Takle believed that "our great work as missionaries to the people is first of all to awaken the conscience to see sin aright."[2] The Baptists regarded sin as man's deliberate rejection of the Holy will and love of a righteous God. The prevailing Hindu idea was that sin was due to spiritual ignorance rather than a rebellious will; it was more a metaphysical than a moral concept. According to Takle the Muslims believed that sin was a violation of the arbitary will of God, but that the sins themselves were graded - if one could avoid the seven "great" sins, which ranged from idolatory to disobedience of parents, God would "blot out" the rest. Takle regarded this concept as being "repulsive". It is blasphemy. It misrepresents God. It degrades His character as Holiness."[3]

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1. Year Book, 1912, P. 71.
2. Takle, J., "Popular Islam in Bengal and how to approach it," The Muslim World, 1914, P. 382.
3. Ibid, P. 382.

Although the more literate upper class Hindu and Muslim was eager to discuss and argue theology with the missionaries, it is unlikely that the illiterate peasants were. Their primary interest in religion, according to a bulletin of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society on The Gospel and Village religion in South India, would have been in the immediate material benefits which they could have obtained from the gods. There was that element of magic, of manipulating, or using the Divine for one's earthly benefit, a feature present in all religions including Christianity. The villager would approach the god or goddess with a specific request, such as the gift of a child or the healing of a disease, believing that if the correct technique was used the goddess would be obliged to grant him his request. He would rarely ask for moksha, or final deliverance from earthly existence, but something more immediate and concrete.

The New Zealand Baptists were well aware of the importance of using immediate material benefits such as medical treatment and education as inducements, but in Tippera they did not limit these benefits to converts. Consequently there was no direct link in the peasant's mind between these material benefits and the worship of the Christian's God. And dispite their extensive use of socio-economic services, the missionaries were essentially other-worldly in their attitude towards religion. Salvation was not simply the Divine forgiveness of sin, but the rescue of an immortal soul from the awesome punishment of eternal damnation. Therefore the missionaries emphasized the importance of the future life over this fleeting earthly existence. In doing this, they failed to meet the real religious desires of the average village peasant.

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In such a difficult socio-economic and religious situation as Tippera, Christian missionaries needed to have a keen understanding of and empathy for the people and their religions. This was not really the case with many of the New Zealand missionaries. Their confidence in the superiority of their own beliefs led them to display a good deal of arrogance at times. For many years there appeared a short preface to the Report of the Society entitled "The People and their religions". It read - "About 70 percent of the people are Muslims and their religion is nothing but ignorant bigotry ... the Hindus of the district, led by ignorant and immoral priests, worship all the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, and practice, in connection with their worship and sacrifices, abominations unutterably vile".[1] H.H. Driver, secretary of the Society for its first 17 years, in an official history of the Society in 1927, shows the supreme confidence typical of the Baptists at this time : - "We have but to compare our sacred Book with the sacred books of the Hindus, to see its infinite superiority. The Puranas - the sacred books with which the common people are most fmiliar - are full of obsenities, and absurdities, and have only debased the minds and defiled the lives of those who have read them; while our Scriptures, with their pure and lofty morality have refined and enabled all who have yielded to their influence".[2]

The missionaries made little attempt to identify themselves with the customs and causes of the people.

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1. Year Book, 1905, P. 73.

2. Driver, P. 11.

They continued to wear their European clothes complete with white starched collars and ties,[1] to enjoy their European foods and furniture, and to associate with what other Europeans there were. Although the Mission was careful to remain neutral towards the Independence movement, the missionaries were very much emotionally pro-British. Takle regarded the British as "a just and gracious government," [2] and when he was invited to give the Presidential address at the 1915 Annual Assembly of the New Zealand Baptist Union, he had as his subject "The Inspiration of the Imperiam." H.H. Driver as "convinced that the British raj has been of incalculable benefit to the Indian Empire."[3] This admiration of the British government led them to being suspected of being Government agents, or of being in the pay of the British.[4]

The New Zealand missionary, as with most western missionaries in India, did not fit the Indian concept of a "man of religion".

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1. The problem whether to wear European or Indian clothes is a complex one. E. Daniel Potts mentions the case of William Buckingham who donned Bengali dress while on excursion in Jessore, but was refused hospitality when the villages learned of his missionary status. When he reverted to his customary European clothing he was treated with all the deference due to a Sahib. British Baptist Missionaries in India, P. 221.
2. Takle, The Bible in 'Baria, P. 64.
3. Driver, P. 18.
4. Year Book, 1906, P. 89.

Their Hindu or Muslim counterparts were usually dedicated to lives of poverty, self abignation and dependence upon God and the generosity of the people. The Christian missionaries meanwhile received regular salaries, which though low by European standards were high by Indian standards.[1] He attended frequent retreats, councils and conferences, had periodic health rests in the cooler parts of Indian and returned home every four or five years for furloughs. It is little wonder that Indians took more readily to the self sacrificing monks and nuns of the Roman Catholic orders and the Indian Christian "holy men" such as Sadhu Sundar Singh.

The Rev. John Takle is an interesting case study of the early New Zealand Baptist missionaries. Early on in his missionary career, which extended from 1895 to 1924, he realized the necessity to specialize in the study of Islam and soon became a recognized expert among the missionaries involved with Muslims.[2] In 1908 it was reported that he was an examiner in Islam at Serampore College, one of the most notable theological colleges in India. In 1911 he addressed the Lucknow Conference of missionaries to Muslims on "The Muslim Advance in India".

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1. In 1932 it was reported that it cost £15 per annum to support a Bengali Biblewoman, £30 for a Bengali evangelist or compounder, and £162 for a European missionary. <u>N.Z. Baptist</u>, Oct. 1932, P. 317.
2. His name is included among the ten missionaries Samuel M. Zwemer describes as "India's glorious heritage" of outstanding missionaries among the Muslims. S.M. Zwemer, <u>The Cross Above the Crescent</u>, P. 135.

Largely as a result of his advocacy at the conference, the "Missionaries to Muslims League" was formed; he was for some time its secretary and later its Vice-President. At the request of the Indian Y.M.C.A. he prepared a text book for missionary recruits and English civil servants on Islam entitled <u>The Faith of the Crescent</u>. In conjunction with the Rev. W. Goldsack of the South Australian Mission, he edited and published a Bengal Koran, with a commentary from a Christian point of view, in Bengali and Arabic. Two books which he wrote for Muslims - <u>The Straight Path</u> and <u>The Inward Way</u> - were later translated and published in Arabic and Persian-Urdu for use in Egypt and the Punjab. He was also involved in Brahmanbaria's public affairs serving on the High School Board, the Hospital Board, and the Municipal Board, of which he was Chairman for some time. His standing in the community was such that during the 1907 communal friction over the Partition of Bengal, Muslim leaders came to him seeking advice.

Takle was by far the most knowledgeable and distinguished of the early New Zealand Baptist missionaries, but he was still very much a man of his times and of his environment. Many of the criticisms levelled at the missionaries generally can be applied to him - such as the exclusive theology, the arrogance towards Hindu and Muslim concepts, the excessive westernization, and the inappropriate tactics. Its significance that his books on Islam were proscribed when Pakistan became a separate nation.[1]

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1. <u>N.Z. Baptist</u>, Nov. 1960, P. 291.

The New Zealand missionaries lack of identification with the people of Tippera could be seen most obviously in the excessively western styled mission buildings and the type of church services. The first house built on the Brahmanbaria mission compound of bamboo and grass thatch was described as "typical of the locality" but "by no means a satisfactory residence for Europeans."[1] The replacement masonary house and Church cost the Society £1,000. The land itself had been bought for only £10. The Society recognized that these "buildings are not adapted for Indian use", that they "would be an embarrassment to the Indian Mission workers" but justified them as "necessary to European life in this climate".[2] This concern for the health of the European workers can be understood in view of the Society's early experiences, but by constructing European-style houses, the missionaries identified themselves with the wealthy classes and the foreign rulers.

The churches were similarly styled. The Chandpur Church built in 1910 was described as "solidly built of brick, with a heavy tiled gabled roof, and its spire can be seen far away ... there will be an asbestos-cement ceiling, a polished red cement floor, cut to imitate tiling, a small marble platform, fluted green glass windows, and furnishings of polished teak wood".[3]

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1. Simpson, P. 63.

2. <u>N.Z. Baptist</u>, Oct. 1923, P. 203.

3. <u>Year Book</u>, 1910, P. 70.

Neither were the church services substantially modified to suit the temperament and aesthetic tastes of the Bengalis. It has often been claimed that ritualism and symbolism have the advantages of lifting the Indian peasant above the humdrum of his arduous existence and of involving his emotions as well as his reason. Hindu worship recognizes this appeal, and according to Dr R.D. Immanuel, it "exercises the whole self-mind-body, the rhythmic sense and the emotions. It includes the social and personal, the rhythmic and ceremonial, the sensual and the supra-sensual".[1] In contrast Baptist services, with their virtual absence of rituals, symbols, drama, days of fasting or feasting, would appear lifeless and wooden.

* * *

Further causes of the unresponsiveness of the people of Tippera to Christianity, may be found in the type of tactics used by the New Zealand missionaries.

As with most Protestant missions in India, the New Zealand Baptists sought the conversion of the people as individuals rather than encouraging a group decision. This policy has been criticised as being both unrealistic and unfair.[2]

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1. R.D. Immanuel, The Influence of Hinduism on Indian Christians, quoted in E. Asirvatham, Christianity in the Indian Crucible, P. 161.
2. See J.W. Pickett, Christian Mass Movements in India, Christ's Way to India's Heart, and Pickett, Warnshuis, Singh, McGavran, Church Growth and Group Conversion.

The village Indian is very much part of a group - family, caste, village or religious group - and to expect him to make an independent decision regarding his religion without the guidance and approval of his group, was to outrage his sense of loyalty and propriety. If he did, he would most likely be ostracized and possibly persecuted. He would then be left dependent on kindly but foreign missionaries who would seek to isolate him from his previous contacts for his own protection. This was the experience of D.A. Chowdhury, a Muslim convert.[1] After being baptised he was sent 500 miles to Calcutta. After that it took him "ten years to prove the bona fides of my intention to my Muslim friends and I have been put out of touch with my own people for the past twenty years."[2]

From the missionary's point of view the results of such a policy were also unsatisfactory. The conversion of an individual out of a group caused great consternation and antagonism, thus hindering future opportunities. For example in 1910 the Mission won from the Court, custody over a young Muslim girl convert. The Muslims were infuriated and a mob seized the girl from the missionaries. To avoid similar incidents the Mission secretly transferred three other girl converts to another mission station. The end result was the closing of five of the Mission's schools - four Muslim and one Hindu - as the consequence of a general boycott.[3]

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1. Not a New Zealand Baptist convert.
2. D.A. Chowdhury, "The Bengal Church and the Convert", The Muslim World, 1939, P. 344.
3. Year Book, 1910, P. 72.

In many parts of India, the converts whom the missionaries succeeded in winning this way, became dependent spiritually, socially and economically on the missionaries. As such they were rendered useless as potential witnesses among their own people. The churches which were formed were little more than conglomerations of individuals from various families, castes, social and religious groups. They were often held together only by the cement of foreign personnel and money. They had no community interest nor any influence on the community.

To a large extent this description is true of the converts of the New Zealand missionaries. The missionaries believed that they had no alternative; they had to isolate their converts for fear of persecution. J.W. Pickett points out, however, that all of the ten mass movements he analysed "began through the conversion of individuals who refused to be separated from their caste fellows and went among them as witnesses for Christ".[1] An example is the Chuhra movement in the Punjab. The United Presbyterian Mission began work in August 1855 concentrating on the upper castes. Results were disappointing; in the first nineteen years the highest annual increase was only nineteen. By the early 1870's they turned to the low caste Chuhras and encouraged the converts to remain living with their group. By 1881 there were over 500 Chuhra Christians. Pickett argues that the key point of the movement was when a Chuhra convert named Ditt "by a valiant fight turned group opposition, that would have expelled him, into group approval that carried all the Chuhras of his village into a confession of the Christian faith.

After the decision of that first village, groups of Chuhras in other villages became interested, and year after year, increasing numbers of them, acting together, entered the Christian fold."[1]

Another feature of the Mission's tactics was to concentrate on the literate upper classes. This policy was due to a number of factors. The siting of the Mission headquarters in the two main towns of the subdivisions where most of the wealthier educated classes resided was the primary reason. But the missionaries themselves obviously preferred to approach and mix with the upper classes who would be closer to their social and economic standards than the rural peasant. Miss E. Beckingsale recorded with pride that when she retired in 1934, the "wife of a leading lawyer held a farewell party in my honour"[2] to which certain ladies of Brahmanbaria town were invited. The missionaries' preference for using reason and argument to communicate their Christian faith necessitated an educated and therefore upper class audience. Takle wrote that he preferred to concentrate on "the educated men and students who knew English",[3] and whenever he travelled among the villages he "tried to see and converse with the better class first".[4]

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1. Ibid, P. 23.
2. N.Z. Baptist, Oct. 1935, P. 315.
3. N.Z. Baptist, Dec. 1934, P. 382.
4. Ibid, P. 383.

He did not hold a high opinion of "the average low class Muslim" who, he wrote, "is an undesirable creature, to be always avoided ... never known to control his temper in a discussion ... is so bigoted that he tries to dispense with Bengali, his mother tongue."[1]

This preference for working among the upper classes was not peculiar to the New Zealand Baptists. It has been characteristic of most Protestant missionaries in India, especially those in Bengal. Led by Alexander Duff in the early nineteenth century they hoped to convert the wealthy and influential Hindu youths of Calcutta. By 1850 thirty of the seventy mission stations were in and around Calcutta, with the rest distributed in districts close by.[2] In terms of actual converts this concentration on the upper classes was a failure. Duff himself managed to produce only 33 converts from his 18 years of missionary education work.[3] The upper class Hindus were quite prepared to accept the missionary's offer of English education, but when any of their number was converted, they became openly hostile.[4] In contrast the lower class Hindus were more receptive to Christianity. It has already been pointed out that the vast majority of Christian converts in Bengal and in most of India have been from the lower classes. The missionary concentration on converting the upper classes rather than the lower classes was obviously misplaced.

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1. Takle, "Islam in Bengal", The Muslim World, 1914, P. 14.
2. M.M. Ali, The Bengali Reactions to Christian Missionary Activities, 1833-1857, Pp. 10 and 205-207.
3. S. Neil, A History of Christian Missions, P. 275.
4. Ali, Pp. 69-70.

A third feature of the tactics of the New Zealand Baptist missionaries which may help to explain the paucity of their converts was their policy of extensive but superficial itineration throughout the district. Brahmanbaria and Chandpur townships were picked as their headquarters "in order to reach as many as possible of the crowded thousands of our districts".[1] At least one representative from all the recognized villages of the two districts had come to the Mission headquarters for medical treatment, by the opening years of the twentieth century. The missionaries were proud of the fact that they could "visit 87 villages, 54 for the first time, in only 58 days".[2]

The results of such a policy were inevitable. In 1929 the missionaries reported that "we are sure that the knowledge of Jesus is more widespread in our district than in the great majority of 'occupied' areas". (i.e. areas in which there were Christian missionaries working). But they continued on to ask themselves, and their supporters, the question - "what do the people of this district know of Jesus?" Their sad answer was - "This is about the sum total : 'There was a religious teacher named Jesus, the English regard Him highly'".[3] It would appear that the missionaries needed to have spent far longer periods than their normal one to two days in a particular village. Perhaps a permanent shift in the missionary headquarters and residences, from Brahmanbaria and Chandpur to a strategic village, would have advanced the missionary cause most of all.

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1. Driver, P. 27.
2. Driver, P. 58.
3. <u>N.Z. Baptist</u>, Dec. 1929, P. 367.

Takle records that when the Mission opened a special outstation in Duttkhala, a central Namasudra village, the peasants were delighted.[1] But this move was only half hearted in that the outstation was staffed entirely by Bengalis. The Society was understandably anxious that the health of the missionaries should not be jeopardised by living in sub-European standards, but some flexibility in this regard would have enlarged their appeal to the villagers. D.A. Chowdhury argued that the missionary's life of isolation was a contributing factor to lack of Muslim converts in Bengal. He concluded that "if the missionaries are here to save the lives of Muslims, then they cannot save their own".[2]

It could be argued that the use of Bengali teachers and evangelists avoided the identification of Christianity with the Europeans. It would appear, however, that the Bengalis were frequently even less receptive to their fellow Indian Christians than they were to the Europeans who were protected by their relationship with the rulers. It was considered bad enough for an Indian to renounce his native religion and become a Christian, but to enter missionary service and attempt to convince his compatriots to do likewise was even worse.

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1. Takle, The Bible in 'Baria, P. 73.
2. Chowdhury, "The Bengal Church and the Convert", The Muslim World, 1939, P. 346.

Most of the Bengalis whom the New Zealand Baptists employed were not from Tippera, but from the district of Barisal,[1] where there had been a mass movement of low caste Hindus in the early nineteenth century.[2] Most of them were now second and third generation Christians. In 1923 of the seven Bengali preachers employed by the Mission, only one was a direct convert, the rest were sons of Christian parents.[4] They were therefore strangers to Tippera and probably out of touch with village life and the thinking of the Hindus and Muslims. Furthermore, many of them did not come up to the standard which the Mission expected of them. Most of the talented ones preferred town work,[4] some were dismissed,[5] and others were inflicted with what Miss E. Beckingsale described as the "inherited sins and weaknesses of character and ... the degenerating influence of heathen surroundings."[6]

Another aspect of the New Zealand Baptists' strategy to win converts was the large amount of educational and medical work done. School teaching has always been popular among missionaries. The work was more regular, better supervised, and the children believed to be more impressionable.

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1. See Year Book, 1907, P. 92 and N.Z. Baptist, April 1935, P. 114.
2. Ali, The Bengali Reaction to Christian Missionary Activities, P. 149.
3. N.Z. Baptist, Oct. 1923, P. 205.
4. Ibid, P. 205.
5. See Year Book, 1905, P. 90 and 1910, P. 72.
6. Year Book, 1905, P. 82.

But the schools of the New Zealand Mission were not particularly successful. The village schools were frequently poorly attended. In 1905 the total roll at the four schools for Chamars was 72, average attendance only 34.[1] The Namasudras were considered ripe for a mass movement, so a school was opened in 1908 at Duttkhala, but it was eventually closed in 1926 after a continued poor attendance. Often there was a hostile atmosphere that prevented any effective contact and communication. Miss E. Beckingsale complained of having "to teach the rudiments of learning and manners to wild disobedient, unruly children, who seemed absolutely without brains or powers of concentration, or any conception of discipline or obedience".[2] The mission compound schools for the literate upper classes were also of limited value. Any attempt to convert the pupils, who had been allowed to attend only for the valued English lessons, quickly aroused the hostility of their parents careful of their religious standing in the community.

The medical work had similar problems. Although the Mission made every effort to identify the medical treatment with the Christianity message, many patients believed that the missionaries were in reality Government agents, or at least in the pay of the Government.[4]

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1. Year Book, 1905, P. 82.
2. Year Book, 1908, P. 99.
3. See Takle, The Bible in 'Baria, Pp. 41-44.
4. Year Book, 1906, P. 89.

Alternatively it was believed that the missionaries were primarily interested in accumulating merit,[1] and thus it was really they, as patients, who were doing the missionaries a favour. Because the missionary medical treatment tended to be used hand in hand with the patients' own native treatment, the Mission was seldom given the full credit.

* * *

Although it is dangerous to attribute general characteristics to a particular people, it has been the experience of missionaries and historians alike, that the Bengali is an emotional and excitable person. J.E. Webster recorded in the Tippera Gazetteer that "It is said that the Tippera peasant is excitable and prone to sudden fits of fury".[2] This emotional tendancy is present in Bengali religion. Raychaudhuri remarked "that the Vaishnavite movement, with the emphasis on devotion and the softer sentiments, accentuated the emotional temper of the Bengali character".[3] And Lal Bahari Day, a notable convert to Christianity, mentioned in his Bengal Peasant Life, first published in 1874, that "the madder a Vaishnava is, the holier he is deemed by the people."[4] Takle recognized this emotional trait. He wrote in the Muslim World that "As the Namasudras are fervently inclined to Bhahti, so the average low class Muslim will turn to a mystical conception of intercourse with God."[5]

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1. Year Book, 1906, P. 89.
2. Tippera Gazetteer, P. 72.
3. T. Raychaudhuri, Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir, P. 138.
4. LB. Day, Bengal Peasant Life, ~~(ed. Saha, M.)~~ P. 158.
5. Takle, Popular Islam in Bengal ... "The Muslim World, 1914, P. 388.

One of the most popular Bengali Muslim booklets dealt with the union of the soul with God. Such an experience "sends these people into ecstacies and the emotions out of bounds".[1]

The New Zealand Baptists were not equipped to meet this central religious need of the Bengalis, however, and perhaps that was the major cause of their lack of success in Tippera. The New Zealand missionaries consistently appealed to the Bengali's reason rather than to his emotion, his mind rather than his heart. They believed it was necessary to convince their hearers by reason and argument that Christianity was the superior religion and should therefore be accepted. To become and continue being a Christian, one had to unquestionably accept certain theological concepts such as the incarnation, virgin birth and atonement. Such doctrines as the gravity of sin, the future judgement, the authority of the Bible, rather than the role and activity of the Holy Spirit, were emphasized by the missionaries. The Hindus, at least, born and bred in a "mystic" atmosphere, would probably have understood the doctrine of the Holy Spirit more easily. Perhaps a pentecostal form of Christianity, with its emphasis on emotion and experience, would have been more successful than that rational approach of the New Zealand Baptists.

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1. Takle, "Popular Islam in Bengal ...", P. 387.

vi. The Tribal Response.

The New Zealand Baptist missionaries were far more successful in winning converts from the tribal animists of hill Tripura than they ever were from the Bengali Muslims and Hindus of Tippera. In 1971 there were 5,442 Church members, 166 churches and a Christian community of over 10,000 in Tripura. The corresponding figures for Tippera were 125 members, 2 churches and a Christian community of 235.[1]

The statistics do not tell the full story, however. In 1943 the New Zealand mission took over responsibility for the Jampui district of Tripura from the North East India General Mission and over 1,000 Lushai Christians joined the New Zealand Baptist-inspired Tripura Baptist Christian Union. The Lushai Christians were well organised with churches, Sunday Schools, day schools, village choirs and even a small medical dispensary staffed by a trained Lushai compounder. They were also active in spreading the faith beyond their own tribe. When 130 Riangs were baptised in one day in April 1947, the missionary, the Rev. Harry Jones, confessed that "it was a reaping to which I had contributed very little, for it was my first contact with the tribe".[2]

Although much of the spade work had been done by the North East India General Mission and the Lushai Christians, the New Zealand Baptists must take much of the credit for the continued steady growth of the Tripura Church.

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1. Year Book, 1971/72, P. 119.

2. New Zealand Baptist, March 1947, P. 63.

The Rev. B.H. Smith has analysed the growth rate taking into account the initial number of Lushai Christians and the immigration of some tribes outside of Tripura.[1] The figures show an approximate growth rate of over seven per cent per annum. At such a rate the Church should double itself in just over ten years. This compares favourably with the population increase for the Assam area which between 1951 and 1961 was 33 per cent. Church membership is not a simple process. All converts must pass a probationary period of normally six months and give up certain tribal habits including the drinking of the popular rice beer, before they are baptised and received into the Church.

Just as significant as this steady growth rate was the development of the Church into a united independent and indigenous body. As early as 1947 the Tripura Baptist Christian Union which was distinct from and independent of the New Zealand Mission was given full control of all tribal workers and the financial estimates. In 1951 it took over the Bible School. In 1954 the important Rural Reconstruction Fund Committee was to be appointed by the Annual Assembly of the Union and in that year only three of the twelve members were missionaries. The remainder of the Mission's departments including the medical and educational work was handed over by 1957 to the Budget Committee which had equal representation of missionaries and tribals. By 1962 the missionaries themselves were made responsible to the Union. The Rev. Gordon Jones was re-appointed as a Pastor and an assistant to the Rev. P. Lalhula, the senior district Pastor of the Kailasahar area.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, Feb. 1963, P. 40.

The tribals are now fully responsible for financing the work and are aided only by a small annual grant from the Mission. Because of the Society's policy and the Indian Government's plan of gradually excluding foreign missionaries, there were only three New Zealand missionaries left in Tripura by the time of the latest Year Book.[1]

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1. _Year Book_, 1972/73, P. 121.

vii. Socio-Economic Features of Tripura.

In contrast to the river dissected plain land of East Bengal, Tripura consists mostly of jungle-clad ranges with limited flatland to the south-east. Communication has always been difficult and as a result the hill tribals have been able to develop and maintain their own separate social and religious characteristics.

Their societies are based on family ties and blood relationships and are marked by a large degree of equality which originated in their subsistence economy which did not allow for any accumulation of wealth. They have an intense loyalty for their tribe and its customs and institutions. The loyalty is focused on the chief who symbolised the unity of the group. The people themselves are described as simple, strong and self-reliant, and full of the joy of living.[1] Their life in the jhum fields has always been hard, but they find pleasure and release in their music, dancing, games and beer, particularly when a tribal festival is organised.

But the idea of the tribal as the cheerful care-free noble Savage is essentially a myth. Inter-tribal warfare, accompanied by headhunting, kidnapping and slavery was common up to the present century. Poverty and disease has remained widespread.

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1. See the complete issue of Religion and Society, Vol. viii. No. 3, Oct. 1961; V. Elwin, A Philosophy for Nefa; S. Bhattacharya, "The Tribal Textiles of Tripura", Art in Industry, (Ed. K.K. Ganguli), Vol. vii No. 3, 1963; and R. Burling, Hill Farms and Padi Fields.

Long after the New Zealand missionaries went into the area, they spoke of the extreme poverty of the people and their need of medical help".[1] "Profound anemias and retardation were surprisingly common, the result of long continued intestinal infections, malaria, and Kala-azar. Leprosy was distressingly common."[2] The tribals have been particularly affected by the economic upheaval resulting from the influx of refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh since the early years of the World War II. Between 1941 and 1961 the population more than doubled, growing from 513,000 to 1,142,005.[3] There have been severe rice shortages, and high food prices which have come on top of periodic floods and famines. Returns from shifting cultivation have been declining and there is a lack of alternative employment.[4] In 1963 the missionaries reported that the tribals had been in "a state of famine for the last five to six years".[5] In 1966 the Rev. Lalhuala Darling wrote that "food crises have become an almost permanent feature of the life of Tripura since independence."[6]

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1. Ambassador's Report, (a popular report of the N.Z. Baptist Missionary Society in 1949), P. 10.
2. Ibid, P. 9.
3. S.C. Bhattacharyya, This is Tripura, P. 19.
4. Tea plantations employ only 2.8 per cent of the total labour force. There are no commercially exploitable minerals and no fuels in Tripura. Techno Economic Survey of Tripura, Aug. 1961, Pp. 110-114.
5. N.Z. Baptist, Feb. 1963, P. 41.
6. N.Z. Baptist, Sept. 1966, P. 238.

Relations between the tribal people who live in the hill area of Tripura and the Bengalis who live on the plains have been frequently bitter. The tribals were the original inhabitants of Tripura but were driven back to the hills by the Bengali newcomers, who have since controlled the government and business of the State. The tribal sees the Bengali as the bullying official who attempts to prohibit his custom of shifting cultivation and tries to make him settle in one place, or as the moneylender who exploits his thriftlessness by charging extortionate interest rates, or as the bazaar merchant who cheats him of his produce. The tribals resent this economic dominance and fear any cultural or religious conquest on the part of the Bengalis.

In these circumstances Christianity, or for that matter communism which has large tribal support in Tripura, can appear as an alternative, a means of defence against the encroachments of the Bengalis. Robbins Burling in a chapter on the Gara tribals makes this point. He writes that some Garos "saw in Christianity a means of moral defence against the plains people ... Christianity has seemed to offer an alternative (to the threat of cultural conquest)...[1]

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1. Burling, Pp. 51 - 52.

viii. Missionary Methods in Tripura.

The New Zealand Baptists continued their extensive medical, educational and relief work into Tripura, but with a major change of emphasis. Instead of seeing these services as inducements for people to become Christians, the missionaries now used them primarily to nourish those who were already Christians, hoping to prevent reversions back to tribal beliefs and habits. This change of emphasis is illustrated especially in the composition of medical patients. In 1945, of the 4,302 patients who were treated at the Mission's tribal dispensaries, 3,725 were Christians.[1]

The Mission was similarly selective in the placement of village schools. At first they had to visit a village many times before permission to establish a school was granted,[2] but by the mid 40's, when the initial hostility had been overcome, the Mission was inundated with requests for teachers. In 1947 they had 35 schools with requests for 56 more. Mission policy was now to appoint teachers only when there were at least a few Christians already living in the village. The teacher-evangelist, as he was called, was to fulfill a multipurpose role. He would teach the children three to four hours a day, six days a week, conduct adult classes in the evening and administer elementary medical aid. He was also to lead the Christians in worship and teaching, and encourage them in prayer and witnessing.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, Jan. 1946, P. 16.

2. N.Z. Baptist, March, 1939, P. 86.

In 1941 the St Paul's Boarding School was built at Agartala to provide the children of Christian parents with higher academic and technical education. The Higher Education Circulating Loan Fund was set up in 1954 to assist Christian students who wanted to attend high school or university.

This "Christians first" policy is also apparent in the Mission's relief funds. The Rural Reconstruction Fund set up in the early 1940's was originally an attempt on the part of the missionaries to counteract the refusal of Hindu money-lenders to give loans to Christians. The Fund provides for loans at nominal interest rates for purchasing or repurchasing land, tools, animals or seeds. The missionaries also felt the pressure of the promises held out by the Communists. In the early 1950's when the Communist appeal was at its height, the Mission saw the Rural Reconstruction Fund as "one way we can offset the Communist promises of food, land, work and control".[1] Loans were not for non-Christians, and were seldom granted to recent converts. The Mission did not ignore the general need, however. They were active in obtaining grants and assistance from organisations such as the Indian National Council of Churches, CORSO in New Zealand, the Society of Friends, Oxfam and the New Zealand Baptist Union to help meet the medical and food needs of all tribals, Christians and non-Christians. In 1947, when there was an acute shortage of rice, the Mission persuaded the Tripura government to provide aircraft to drop emergency rice which had been bought by the Mission.

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1. Opportunity, (a popular report for the N.Z. Baptist Missionary Society for 1952), P. 8.

The change in emphasis in the use of Mission's humanitarian services, was of course only made possible by the prior presence of a large number of Christians in Tripura. And it was probably a wise move. It no doubt helped to prevent Christians from reverting to their former tribal habits especially in times of sickness and famine. It also helped to identify conversion to Christianity with certain material benefits. It is likely that the Christian community was healthier, better educated and more thrifty.

* * *

Because of the hilly terrain, the heavy rain, and the dense bamboo jungle the missionaries were forced to forget their extensive but superficial itinerating policy of Tippera. It was no longer practical to live at a central mission head-quarters and make regular excursions around the district. Instead they went to live amongst the tribals, identifying with them and provided more adequate medical and religious help. For example the Rev. Harry and Mrs Jones settled in the village of Joypara where there were only two tribal Christians. They kept one end of their bamboo and thatch house open for any visitors. Up to 30 tribals would stay overnight.

In contrast to what they did in Tippera, the missionaries tried to identify their buildings with those typical of the environment. St Paul's Boarding School for tribals, built in Agartala, the political and educational capital of the State and the centre of the "foreign" Bengalis, was made as typically tribal as possible. The buildings were made out of bamboo and thatch, included verandahs and were left without built in walls. The course offered included such practical subjects as poultry farming, bee keeping and pig farming.

Similarly with church services, Miss H.M. Drew wrote that in the Agartala church no one wore ties, hats, or stockings. Shoes were removed at the door and the congregation sat on bamboo mats.[1] This process of indigenization was climaxed by the indigenization of power which has already been described.

* * *

The New Zealand missionaries were keen to involve the tribals as much as possible in the running of the Church and the schools. Early on the missionaries evolved a hierarchical system of workers utilizing honorary and part time as well as full time workers. M.J. Eade wrote in 1949 that "when this work first began some ten years ago, we made a close survey of methods adopted among similar groups in other responsive fields. We sensed that the teacher-evangelist, as the shepherd of the local flock, aided by periodical visits by a District Pastor, was the key method".[2] Deacons were honorary workers with the authority to conduct communion services. Evangelists were part time workers expected to put in at least 80 days in preaching and teaching. Above these workers were the District Pastors, who were expected to spend 120 days doing pastoral work in the district.

To be effective, these tribal workers needed more theological and academic education. The Mission was aware of the need and from 1945 to 1949 held short term theological courses at Agartala. In 1950 a permanent Bible School was established with residential and lecturing facilities.

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1. The New Zealand Baptist Missionary Digest, 1962, (Ed. R. Bullen), P. 19.
2. Ambassadors' Report, P. 16.

To enlarge its scope, a Mobile Bible School was set up in 1965, which holds courses of varying lengths to suit the needs and opportunities of the villages. Tribal workers were encouraged to seek further training. For example the present General Secretary of the Tripura Baptist Christian Union, the Rev. Lalhuala Darlong, was sent to the Theological College at Jorkat run by the American Baptists. The Rev. Lawma Darlong, the head of the Mobile Bible School, has just completed a year at the New Zealand Baptist Theological College in Auckland.

The tribals were also expected to assist in the establishment and running of the village schools. They had to provide the building, the worker's house, sometimes his food, and also to serve on school committees.

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CHRISTCHURCH, N.Z.

ix. The Religious Appeal of Christianity to the Tribals.

Perhaps the major reason for the comparative large response for Tripura tribals to Christianity was the religious appeal of Christianity. Tribal religions are by no means "primitive" or "inferior". Tribals have progressed beyond the merely material and temporal estimate of life seeing spiritual realities behind the life of the everyday, climaxing in a general belief in a Supreme Creator God, who is just, benevolent and good. Their concepts and practices are backed up by an elaborate mythology comparable to the Hebraic and Indian traditions. Dr Verrier Elwin writes that these "tribal Puranas" show "a strong sense of history, a pride in the descent of the race from a great ancestor, the record of heroic deeds and, most interestingly, traces of a belief in the value of supreme self sacrifice for the good of mankind".[1] Tribal moral law consists of generally accepted ethical norms such as high degree of honesty and co-operation, and the customary laws of right conduct in the observance of religious rites and ceremonies. The people have little sense of sinning against a holy God, however. "Sin" is more of a social crime - the breaking of ethical norms or the religious taboos which may bring the entire community into danger.

But the tribals are plagued by their fear of spirits who are normally capricious, present everywhere, and need to be propitiated. Disease is attributed to the "bite" of these spirits and each spirit requires its own special ritual for the disease to be driven away.

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1. V. Elwin, P. 212.

Robbins Burling describes the process for the Garos. "A new altar is always built, the form of which depends on the spirit at fault, and anything from an egg to a cow may be offered to the spirit in the hope of driving him away ... Sometimes it takes longer and a series of sacrifices may be necessary". But Burling concludes that the "Garos know that their defence against these evil spirits is limited".[1] Nevertheless the tribals believe that they have no alternative but to continue offering their sacrifices at all the important stages of the agricultural cycle, or when disease or misfortune strikes.

The missionaries were aware of these tribal fears and adapted their presentation of Christianity to meet the tribal needs. As the Rev. Gordon Jones wrote, "What the tribal listens to is the good news of deliverance from captivity, his captivity to the fear of the Spirits".[2] In Tippera the New Zealand Baptists had tried to break down belief in the native religions, hoping to fill the vacuum with Christianity. In Tripura they presented Christianity not as the destroyer but as the fulfilment of tribal religions. Christ was pictured as the conqueror of these evil spirits, the one who could get the tribals free. An example of the missionary approach was given in the New Zealand Baptist in 1965. It was the sermon of a Darlong tribal, encouraged by the Rev. Gordon Jones, preaching to Tripuras. "Then he spoke of God as the great ruler in Heaven. One of his ministers named Satan, rebelled and was turned out with his followers. 'And do you know where they are today?

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1. Burling, P. 50.
2. N.Z. Baptist, July 1967, P. 12.

They live in the mis-shapen tree, in that pool in the stream ... they are the spirits that do us so much harm, that make our lives a misery. But we've got good news! You can escape from slavery to spirits! ... We can cultivate any hillside we choose without fear of the spirit that lurks in the hollow' ..."[1]

This adaptation of Christianity to suit tribal desires was a reflection of the greater flexibility of the "new generation" of New Zealand Baptist missionaries. It is doubtful whether they actually believed in the evil spirits themselves. But they saw no hypocrisy involved in proclaiming Christ to be the conqueror of spirits. The Rev. Gordon Jones argued that "if a missionary whose ideas are conditioned by the Western scientific attitude of mind, was to come among the animists proclaiming that evil spirits were merely a superstitious delusion, he would forfeit the confidence of the people ... the evangelist has to start where the people are".[2] If the tribals believed in evil spirits and needed the conviction that there was someone more powerful who could conquor those feared spirits on their behalf, then that was good enough for the missionaries.

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1. N.Z. Baptist, Aug. 1965, P. 208.
2. N.Z. Baptist, July, 1967, P. 12.

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District
TIPPERA

Scale 1 inch = 8 Miles.

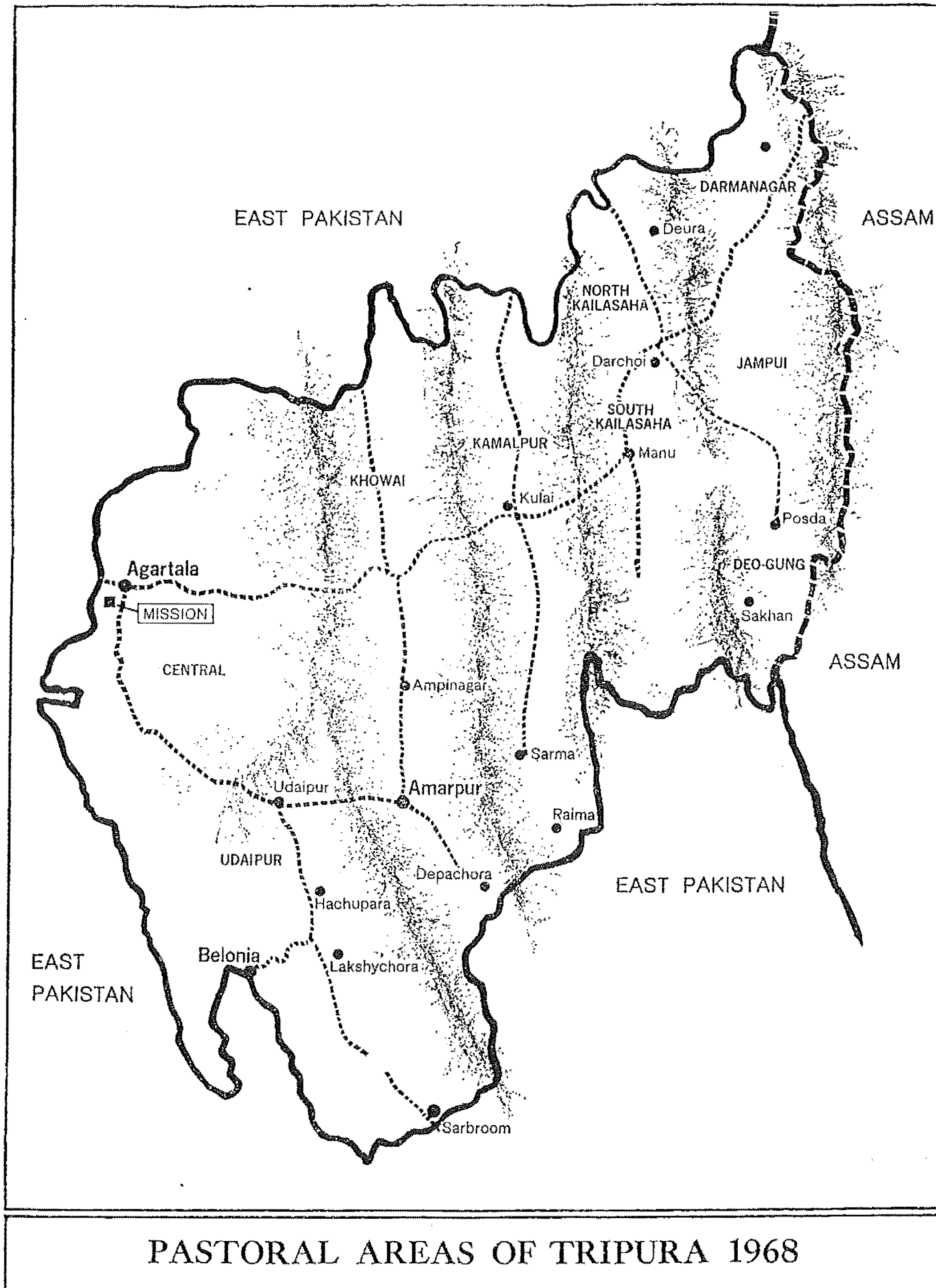
REFERENCE

CHIEF TOWN	COMILLAH
SUB DIVISION	CHANDPUR
THANA	LAKSAM P.S.
OUT POST	BANCHARAMPUR O.P.
TOWN OR VILLAGE	DURGAPUR
DIST BOARD BUNGALOW	D.B.B.
PUBLIC WORKS BUNGALOW	P.W.B.
DIST BOUNDARY	
SUB DIVISION BOUNDARY	
THANA BOUNDARY	
1ST CLASS ROAD	
2ND CLASS ROAD	
OTHER ROAD	
RAILWAY	
RAILWAY UNDER CONSR	
RIVER	

MYMENSINGH
SYLHET
DACCA
HILL TIPPERA
NOAKHALI
FARIDPUR

SURMA R.
CHATALPAR
FANDAUK
NASIRNAGAR
ITAKHOLA
ORUAIL
MASLANDPUR
CHUNTA
HARINBER
AJABPUR
KALIKACHHA
SARAIL
MANTOLA STN
BHAIRAB BAZAR
ASHUGANJ
CHANDURIA
CHARTALA
CHANDURIA
BALAPARA
LALPUR
BRAHMANBARIA P.S. O.P.
MUKUNDAPUR STN
GOKARNA
BIDYAKOT
TITAS R.
DURGAPUR
P.S. NABINAGAR D.B.B
AKHAURA
MANIKNAGAR
ATKAPARA D.B.B.
AGARTALA
MEGHNA R.
SYAMNAGAR
SAMASHPUR
BINAUTE
HYDERABAD
SRIKAIL
BANCHARAMPUR O.P.
D.B.B.
KASBA P.S.
CHUNARCHAR
KUTTEER BAZAR
BURIGANGA R.
KAMALSAGAR
RAMCHANDRAPUR
CHANDLA
BAYEK
SRIMADDI
PROJAPOTI
LAGAISH
NAYANPUR
MURADNAGAR P.S.
COMPANYGANJ D.B.B.
BATAKANDI
JAHAPUR
GUMTI R.
BIDHURI
ISLAMPUR
HARIPUR
DHALESWARI R.
PANCHPUKHURIA
JAFARGANJ D.B.B.
RAJAPUR
DAUDKANDI P.S. P.W.B.
RAIPURA
ELLIOTGANJ P.W.B.
GUMTI R.
CHANDINA P.S. P.W.B.
COMILLAH P.S.
SHATNAL
SACHAR
BUDHANDA
JHALAM
KALAPARA
BHITINOLORADI
JOREKARAN
P.W.B.
LALMAI
DATIAPARA
MATLAB P.S.
PILGIRI
SARIPPUR
PADMA R.
NURULAPUR
MUDAFARGUNGE D.B.B.
CHAUDDAGRAM P.S.
STN
SAHATOLI
D.B.B. HAJIGANJ P.S.
BHINGRA
LAKSHAM P.S. D.B.B.
P.W.B.
BAIDYA BAZAR
STN
DAKATIA R.
CHITOSHI ROAD
DAULATGANJ
CHANDPUR P.S. P.W.B.
D.B.
NARSINGPUR
MUCHEORA
CHITOSHI
NANGAL KOT
FARIDGANJ D.B.B
NURINGPUR
DURGAPUR
JAGANNATH
MEGHNA R.
RUPSA
NATHER PETUA
GUNABATI
TO CHITTAGONG
RAIPUR

Appendix 3 : Map of Tripura.



PASTORAL AREAS OF TRIPURA 1968

Supplement to the "N.Z. Baptist," October, 1968.