



Stephen HISLOP and other pioneer christian missionaries of central India

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Abstract

In order to comprehend the role of Christian missionaries in Vidarbha, we must first grasp the region's geography and then its political situation. Various Gond Rajas controlled Central India during the 15th and 16th centuries. The first Christian missionary came to Nagpur during the reign of Bakht Buland, the city's founder, and an attempt to establish Christianity among the masses. Fr. Faria wanted to build a Church in Nagpur but could not succeed. The Nagpur region was conquered by the Marathas and the Bhosles in 1740. The Bhosle rule continued till 1853 when it was annexed by the British. By the end of the 18th century, Christian could be found mostly as merchants or soldiers in the Maratha army as Portuguese and French officers. Goan Priests from Golconda and Poona came all the way to Nagpur to minister the need of Indian and European soldiers. They build a chapel at Takli in the outskirts of Nagpur. The first priest of Missionary of St. Francis de Sales (MSFS) Fr. Joseph Lavoret arrived in Kamptee in 1846. Rev. Stephen Hislop a Scottish missionary arrived in Nagpur in 1845 and the establishment of Anglo Vernacular School. A keen geologist he contributed to the discovered the coalfield in Chanda and the Pench Valley. Was also fluent in Marathi, Hindi and also studied the Gond language and prepared a vocabulary of eleven unwritten dialects of the aboriginal tribes. He drowned in Bori River only four days short of his 46th birthday and was buried on September 5th in Nagpur.

Keywords: Christian missionaries, FARIA, MSFS, Nagpur, stephen hislop

Introduction

As far as the role of the Christian missionaries in Vidarbha is concerned, we must first of all understand the geography and the then political condition of this region. The following information throws sufficient light on the geography and political condition of this region. Central India, during the 15th and 16th Centuries, was ruled by various Gond Rajas in Various Kingdoms carved from what is now Madhya Pradesh and Eastern Maharashtra (Vidarbha). During the 17th Century, the Gond Kingdom of Deogad, near Chhindwara, rose to prominence. It was founded by Raja Jatha who extended his rules as far as the present-day Nagpur. He was succeeded by his son, Koka Sah followed by Bakht Sah, better known as Bakht Buland. He was the founder of Nagpur city, which he made his capital (Purandare, 2002).

It was at the time of Bakht Buland, the founder of Nagpur City, that the first Christian missionary came to Nagpur and an attempt to introduce Christianity was made. In the year 1679, Fr. Philip de Faria came from Patna to Nagpur, and he was kindly received by Bakht Buland. He converted about 55 people (Maclagen, 1990).

Fr. Faria wanted to build a Church and to achieve this object; he lived in severest poverty and wore cloths of a Sanyasi. Due to weak heart and severe illness he went to Agra in 1679. He spent a few months of rest in Agra, and then he returned to Nagpur. Fr. Joao Leitao, Superior of the Patna mission, at the beginning of 1685, decided to go from Agra to Patna. He also wanted to visit Fr. Faria in Nagpur. He started his journey from Agra but he was detained for 3 months, by rebellion at Patna. He received a permit from the Governor of Patna and left the city in the dress of a sanyasi but was at once arrested as a spy and brought back to Patna. The Governor cancelled his permit and fined Rs. 300/- and placed him in prison for 2 days. While Fr. Leitao was still waiting in Patna, orders were received from Goa for the abandonment of the Mission. Fr. Faria returned back to Agra and nothing further was heard of the Nagpur Mission (Faria, 1681). The Nagpur region, in 1740 was conquered by the Marathas and the Bhosles and so, the Maratha ruler became the Rajahs of Nagpur. The British signed a treaty of alliance with the Raja of Nagpur on 27 May 1816, after the defeat of Appa Sahib at the Battle of Sitabuldi. After this treaty the British began a military camp at Sitabuldi, Nagpur with 2000 soldiers.

The Bhosle rule continued till 1853 when the whole region was taken over by the British. Vidarbha, which had been part of the Nizam Dominions, was annexed by the British in 1853. By the end of the 18th century, Christian could be found mostly as merchants or soldiers in the Maratha army as Portuguese and French officers with the Peshwas, Scindias and the Bhosles. In 1794, a priest from Poona was in Charge of the Christians in the Nizam's army. Goan Priests from Golconda and Poona came all the way to Nagpur to minister the need of Indian and European soldiers. They build a chapel at Takli in the outskirts of Nagpur. The priests of the Goan jurisdiction appear to have visited Nagpur around the year 1820. One of them was buried in Nagpur (Moget, 1990). In 1821 a British Garrison was established in Kamptee, 20 km away from Nagpur. A Goan Priest use to visit it and a chapel was built beyond the Ghora Bazar of Kamptee. A plot was obtained from the British authorities in

Kamptee which became the church compound, on which they built a house, used by the Irish and French Priest. The year 1846 is very important in the history of Vidarbha. The first priest of Missionary of St. Francis de Sales (MSFS) Fr. Joseph Lavoret arrived in Kamptee on August 19th, 1846. Mr. Murphy the Irish Chaplain and Fr. Emmanuel a Tamil Priest were already there (*The Salesian*, 1905). Kamptee was a beautiful place and there was a strong camp of Irish and English soldiers most of them were Protestant, only 450 are Catholic. The MSFS later built a number of churches and educational institution in Vidarbha and many social work organizations were set up by them (Moget, 1990).

Another important land mark was the foundation of another important educational institution, the Hislop College which was established on 2nd May 1846 in the memory of Scottish missionary, Stephen Hislop. This institution for the first time adopted open door policy and provided education to all those who desired it without any bond of cast and creed.

The span of Hislop College may be divided into three periods:

The first periods began with the arrival of the Rev. Stephen Hislop in Nagpur in 1845 and the establishment of Anglo Vernacular School. The second period with the emergence of a college in 1883 named after Stephen Hislop. The third period began with the Foreign Mission Church of Scotland (Free Scottish Church) transferred the entire control and management of the college into India (Hislop College Magazine, 1983).

Stephen Hislop was born on September 8, 1817 in Duns, Berwickshire; His father was a member of the most evangelical branch of the Church in Scotland. His mother though devoted to her family was yet a reserved woman and austere than her husband. Stephen Hislop was first educated in a private school in Duns and then at the Parish School. Later, he went to the university and studied in both Edinburgh and Glasgow. In Edinburgh, he cultivated those scientific habits which helped him to study the people and geology of Central India. Later on, when he began to study theology he came under the influence of Dr. Chalmers, the strongest religious personality in Scotland at that time. As a student Stephen Hislop carried off some of the highest honors in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. During summer months Hislop used to serve as a tutor to boys in the homes of Border gentry. During his student day Stephen Hislop came in close contact with Dr. Henry Duncan, the minister of Ruthwell. The crucial religious influence on young Stephen Hislop life was that of young preacher William Burns who afterward became the first Presbyterian missionary in China. It was this influence that made religion a living force in Hislop's life. Stephen Hislop was very much impressed and influenced by the life and work of Alexander Duff and Dr. Wilson, the two Scottish missionaries who had pioneered educational work in Calcutta and Bombay, respectively. Hislop followed Duff and Wilson tradition of fulfilling his missionary vocation through teaching.

Stephen Hislop founded his first school in Shukrawari on May 2, 1846, in less than fifteen months after his arrival. By this time, he learnt Marathi. The school started with some 30 students, a few even from the Scheduled Casts. This open-door policy of Stephen Hislop was not liked by some upper caste people and also by the Bhosale family. But Hislop was determined to provide education to all who desired it.

According to the report of Sir Richard Jenkins the British Resident of Nagpur: in 1826 there were only 323 pupils and 56 teachers traditional Pathshalas. The condition of school in rural areas was very much worse. A peasant who could sign his name was rare. The teachers in the schools started by Hislop were mostly Scottish. Subsequently teachers were imported from Pune. More Anglo-Vernacular schools were started in Nagpur and the neighboring district of Bhandara and Chhindwara by Hislop. By 1851 the total enrolment in all these schools was 345 boys and 48 girls. In 1856 steps were taken to construct a school building. A land was brought on the bank of Jumma Talao for which Miss Barclay of Edinburgh donated Rs. 12,234/- and local people through subscription collected Rs. 4,264/-. The total building when completed costs Rs. 22,000/-.

By 1887 the accommodation afforded by this building seemed too small and therefore it was pulled down and a very spacious building in the Mahal area was constructed. About the school it is recorded that "The only reputed school at Nagpur was the one founded by Reverend Stephen Hislop in 1846."

In "A History of Nagpur University" it is stated that Stephen Hislop was a remarkable man. The result of his researches in geological history of Central India contributed to the development of the coalfield in Chanda and the Pench Valley. Stephen Hislop was also a linguist; he knows Marathi, Hindi and also studied the Gond language and prepared a vocabulary of eleven unwritten dialects of the aboriginal tribes (Shabbir, 2005).

In course of time, he classified the fossils he had collected and assigned them to the geological periods to which he believed they belonged. In 1853, he published the result of his research on "The Geology of the Nagpur State" it was published in the Royal Asiatic Society Journal. Stephen Hislop's pioneering work in the collection and classification of fossils was of enduring value.

Stephen Hislop was intrigued by some strange mounds that he found about twenty miles to the west of Nagpur. After observing these structures, he postulated that there must have been some race other than the Gonds and Dravidian, inhabiting this region the pre-historic era. Later, he found fragments of pottery and flint arrow heads and strange iron vessel that may have been designed to preserve human ashes. The last days of his life were spent in showing to his friend Sir Richard Temple strange Coins and Stone Circles and explaining to him what he believed that these things belong to pre-historic people (Shabbir, 2005).

T. S. Gardiner writes about him "Hislop had certainly found Nagpur and its neighborhood immensely interesting. But even then, any place in the world would be interesting to a man with a mind like his". Hislop was an evangelist more than anything else. Thus, he made it regular practice to undertake long tours every winter

so he might preach the gospel to the people in the villages. In tours, he practically visited every village on the route but in no place did he halt for more than two days (Hislop College Magazine, 1983).

On the morning of September 3, 1863, Stephen Hislop left on horseback to inspect the mounds and some stone circles near Takealghat a place about twenty miles from Nagpur. On 4th September he stayed on to inspect a school he had started. In order to get back to the Travelers Bungalow at Booti Bori, he had to cross a river which is normally a shallow stream. That fateful day there was however, a lot of water in this river and as a result Stephen Hislop was swept away as he tried to cross it on horseback. When at about 8 O' Clock, his horse galloped up riderless to Bori Bungalow, his friend Richard Temple sent out a search party immediately. In about three hours' time, Hislop's body was found still clutching the turf on the bank (Shabbir, 2005). Thus, Stephen Hislop died only four days short of his 46th birthday and was buried on September 5th in Nagpur. Rev. J.G. Cooper labored to convert the school started by Hislop into a college with merely with the extra grant-in-aid of Rs. 100. The institute was rightly named Hislop College (Shabbir, 2005).

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